

Coven 13

The MODERN Magazine of Weird Tales

Witchcraft & **SORCERY**

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A Novelet of
Oriental Magic

DRAGON'S DAUGHTER

by E. HOFFMAN PRICE

HUNGRY GHOSTS

BY DAVID A. ENGLISH

TOMORROW'S MASK

by EMIL PETAJA

RETAILERS: SEE PAGE 24
FOR RETAIL DISPLAY
ALLOWANCE PLAN



ROBERT E.
HOWARD

AUGUST
DERLETH

ROSS
ROCKLYNNE

EDMUND
SHIRLAN

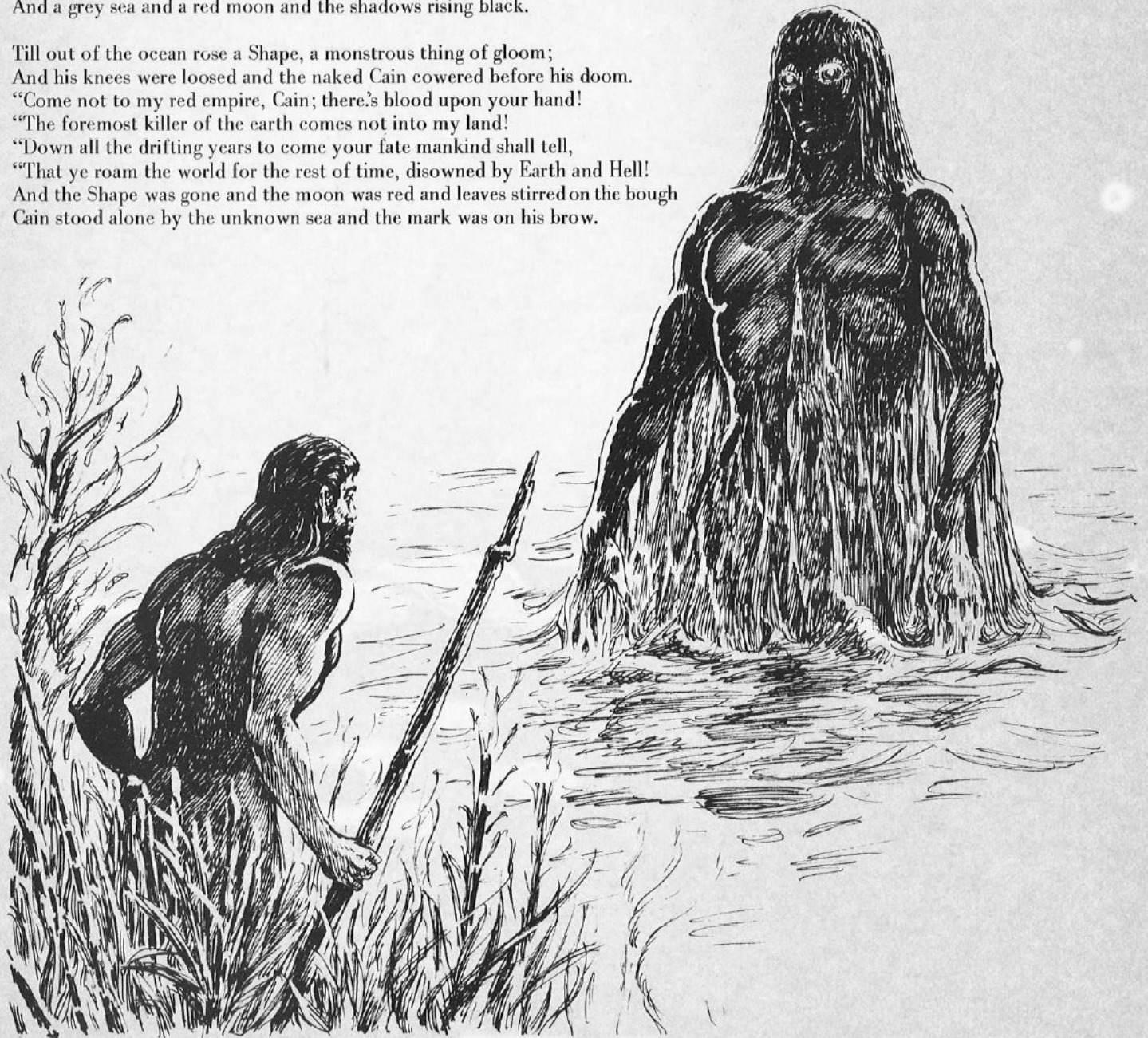
FLIGHT

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A jackal laughed from a thicket still, the stars were haggard pale;
Cain wiped the sweat from his pallid brow and hurried down the trail.
The shadows closed behind, before; vines hidden tripped his feet.
The trees rose stark in the pitiless dark and he heard his own pulse beat.
No footfall harried the forest ways, no sound save his own breath,
But he clutched his spear and his own red fear rose in his soul like death.
Till at last he came to an unknown way his foot had never trod,
But now he fled from the silent dead and the wrathful face of God.

Red mountains loomed on every hand, silent as Time's first dawn,
Red ashes shifted about his feet as the slayer hastened on.
He passed through a valley strange and dim, like a nightmare place of sin
Littered with bones of ghastly things who ruled ere the time of men.
He heard the rustle of ghostly wings, but never halted he
Until he stood, by a haunted wood, on the shore of a nameless sea.
He halted, listened; naught was there save the Silence at his back
And a grey sea and a red moon and the shadows rising black.

Till out of the ocean rose a Shape, a monstrous thing of gloom;
And his knees were loosed and the naked Cain covered before his doom.
"Come not to my red empire, Cain; there's blood upon your hand!"
"The foremost killer of the earth comes not into my land!"
"Down all the drifting years to come your fate mankind shall tell,
"That ye roam the world for the rest of time, disowned by Earth and Hell!"
And the Shape was gone and the moon was red and leaves stirred on the bough
Cain stood alone by the unknown sea and the mark was on his brow.



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CONTENTS

novel:

DRAGON'S DAUGHTER

by E. Hoffmann Price 4

To save face, Li Fong fled to the monastery of Tai Ching, master magician, and to the Place of the Everlasting Now, home of the Dragon's Daughter. But he could not avoid his karma, the sum total of all his lives.

short stories

- MOTHER LOVE by Brian Lumley 18
GHOST LAKE by August Derleth 20
SILVERHEELS by Glen Cook 26
TOMORROW'S MASK by Emil Petaja 34
CIRCE'S LAUGHTER by Carleton Grindle 44
FIRE MASTER by Edmund Shirlan 49
HUNGRY GHOSTS by David A. English 54

department of pointed tales

1. A DRAGON SAGA by Saliitha Grey 32
2. THE LORN OF TOUCHER by Ross Rocklynne 32

verse

- FLIGHT by Robert E. Howard opposite
A GARLAND OF THREE ROSES FROM ATLANTIS
by Donald Sidney-Frayer 2

features

- FROM THE COVEN by the Editor 3
WITCHWAYS by R. Edwards Jennings 25
JADE PAGODA (Spider Bite) by E. Hoffmann Price 41
THE GRIMOIRE 46
READER'S EYRIE 62
READER'S POLL BALLOT 62-63
SUPERDRAGON by Saliitha Grey inside back cover
COMING NEXT ISSUE inside back cover

art

Cover: Steve Fritz (Dragon's Daughter)
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A Garland of Three Roses from Atlantis

by Donald Sidney-Fryer

"O EBON COLORED ROSE"

Translated from the Atlantean of Prince Atlantarion.

"Ces Fleurs malades".
Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, dedication.

"... Ebon blooms that swell in ghastly woods. . ."
Robert E. Howard, *Which Will Scarcely Be Understood*.

"Not such as earth out of her fruitful womb
Throws forth to men, sweet and well-savored,
But direful deadly black, both leaf and bloom,
Fit to adorn the dead, and deck the dreary tomb."
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, II: VII: LI.

ROSE VERDASTRE

Translated from the Atlantean of Athallarion.

"... And so they laid the queen to rest
in her own garden-close . . ."

By the Prince Atlantarion,
from the *Minor Chronicles of Atlantis*.

We wandered where the greenish roses grow
Close-gathered in the garden of a queen
Dead long ago from jealous love and woe:
Her jealous heart hath bred those roses green
And yellow-green whose phosphorescent sheen
Relumes the phosphors of her sepulchre:
Dire thorns, enormous and verdazurine,
Nourished from roots that subtly disinter,
Revive the piercing spites and jealousies that were:

The roses' fleshlike faces, velvet-soft, assume
Weird glamors gangrenous, whilst they administer
An overwhelming tide of strangely lush perfume:

We turned, our heart replete with jealous love and woe,
And wandered on from where those greenish roses grow.

Decoration by Denis Tiani

The rose blooms ebon in these longsome latter years,
These long, too long, autumnal afternoons and nights.
Her darkling petals sparkle not with dew but tears . . .
The dearling dew of lovers' dusk no more delights
Her languid leaves, nor traces errant loving flights
Upon her face, but in that same dew's sparkling stead
Burn bitter salty tears with pallid paling lights,
The paling mournful lamps of dying loves and dead,
Whose flames with oils of grief, and shame,
and wan distress, are fed . . .

Like night-black vipers that we overlate beware,
The darkling thorns lurk low, close to the rose's bed,
And sullenly distill the venom called Despair . . .

And when the mournful lamps shall dim,
shall fail, shall utterly leave no light,
Then shall the ebon rose be lost,
lost in the cosmic waste of Night.

Song

Translated from the Atlantean of Athallarion.

O ebon-colored rose,
How much too darkly do you bloom!
Abysmal night bestows,
As from some vast, unlighted tomb,
Its utter black, its utter gloom,
Upon your stem, your foliage, and your face,
Your face wherefrom pours forth perfume,
A dark perfume . . . of pure and perfect grace . . .
O aura fit for him that would have Death's embrace!

FROM THE COVEN

Fantasy is many things. One of the proofs of this is the fact that almost every writer of fantasy is noted for his own particular brand of fantasy tale. We have, for example, the sort of story H.P. Lovecraft wrote. Plenty of writers have imitated Lovecraft—among them Robert Bloch, Fritz Leiber, August Derleth, Frank Belknap Long, Robert E. Howard and Clark Ashton Smith. Yet there are distinctly different sorts of fantasy hallmarked as the sort of story Bloch is noted for, or Leiber or Derleth or Howard or Long or Smith. And even they have their imitators. Howard is almost as frequently imitated as Lovecraft. One of his most famous followers is L. Sprague de Camp—who is famous for his own type of fantasy fiction as well.

We emphasize supernatural horror in our stories, but *Witchcraft & SORCERY* has room for other types of fantasy as well. For the supernatural may occur anywhere at any time; in a crumbling gothic mansion or a bright and modern office building. In a far land or on your neighborhood street.

This issue we travel to ancient China for "Dragon's Daughter"—an outstanding novelet that marks the return to fantasy writing of one of the field's real greats, E. Hoffman Price. "Tomorrow's Mask," by Emil Petaja, takes place in St. Paul, Minnesota and introduces us to a rather different witch. Glen Cook takes us to ancient Norway in his superb short story "Silverheels."

On the macabre level we have the contemporary psychological grue of "Hungry Ghosts"—a story we expect will establish David A. English as a major fantasist. "Fire Master," on the other hand, is action-adventure; Edmund Shirlan calls it "contemporary

heroic fantasy." "Ghost Lake" is contemporary also but gives us a quiet Northwoods setting. It marks, by the way, August Derleth's first macabre story aside from Lovecraftian tales in too many years. "Mother Love," by noted British writer Brian Lumley takes place in a tomorrow we hope never comes—but therein lies the terror of this tale.

That's a lot of travel both in space and time. But each story is different from the others in this issue. The connecting qualities are imagination and vision. Two things you can't find within narrow, imposed limits. The result is variety. Variety of experience and intensification—we believe—of reading pleasure.

Last issue we explained how we had decided at the last minute to change from COVEN 13's old, small format, to the larger *Witchcraft & SORCERY* size. The changeover was fairly smooth but we did have one mistake. The copy for the Reader's Poll Coupon last issue was the copy for the digest magazine and failed to list some of the stories and artists we added when we gained the extra room our large size afforded us. To those who sent us a listing on plain paper or included those stories on the coupon's margins, thanks. If you sent us the coupon and did not include the omitted stories and artists, we'll hold the balloting open another month to give you time to send an amended ballot. (Or, if you haven't sent your ballot yet—there's still time.) We apologize to the writers and artists omitted and assure you that the omission was unintentional.

—Gerald W. Page



DRAGON'S DAUGHTER

by E. Hoffmann Price

Illustrated by Stephen E. Fabian

"You are Dragon Shadow, Dancing Phoenix, Sing Song Girl, all at once,
and who cares because that is quite impossible?"

CHAPTER 1

The sing-song girl's fingers danced and rippled. Her left hand crept along the neck of the lute, advancing, retreating. The strings laughed and sang; they wailed, and sighed and murmured. As Li Fong savoured her loveliness, he recalled what a poet had said, a thousand years ago, about the girl next door . . . too tall, if an inch were added to her height . . . too short, if half that much were taken away . . . another puff of powder and she'd be too pale . . . another touch of rouge would be too much . . .

Still the voice of the lute, she handed it to him. Its four strings were stretched over ivory frets. The body, shaped like a pear split lengthwise, was of teak. The sounding board was of wutun wood, all inlaid with mother of pearl.

"Tajen, you play?"

As he plucked the strings, Li Fong recited lines snatched at random from Po Chu Yi's poem in honor of the lute:

*"... Loud as the crash of pelting rain
Soft as the murmur of whispered words
Frail as the patter of pearls
Poured on a plate of jade . . ."*

Li Fong gestured. Before he could fairly say, "Another cup!" she was pouring from the bronze jug. And he said, "You sang of the Uttermost West, of the Mountain of the Gods, and the Dragon Lords. Sing more! Tell more!"

So the evening carried on, as such evenings will. Nothing was

over-looked. Not even that hour of whispered planning, after his promise to buy up her contract and take her home to be his concubine.

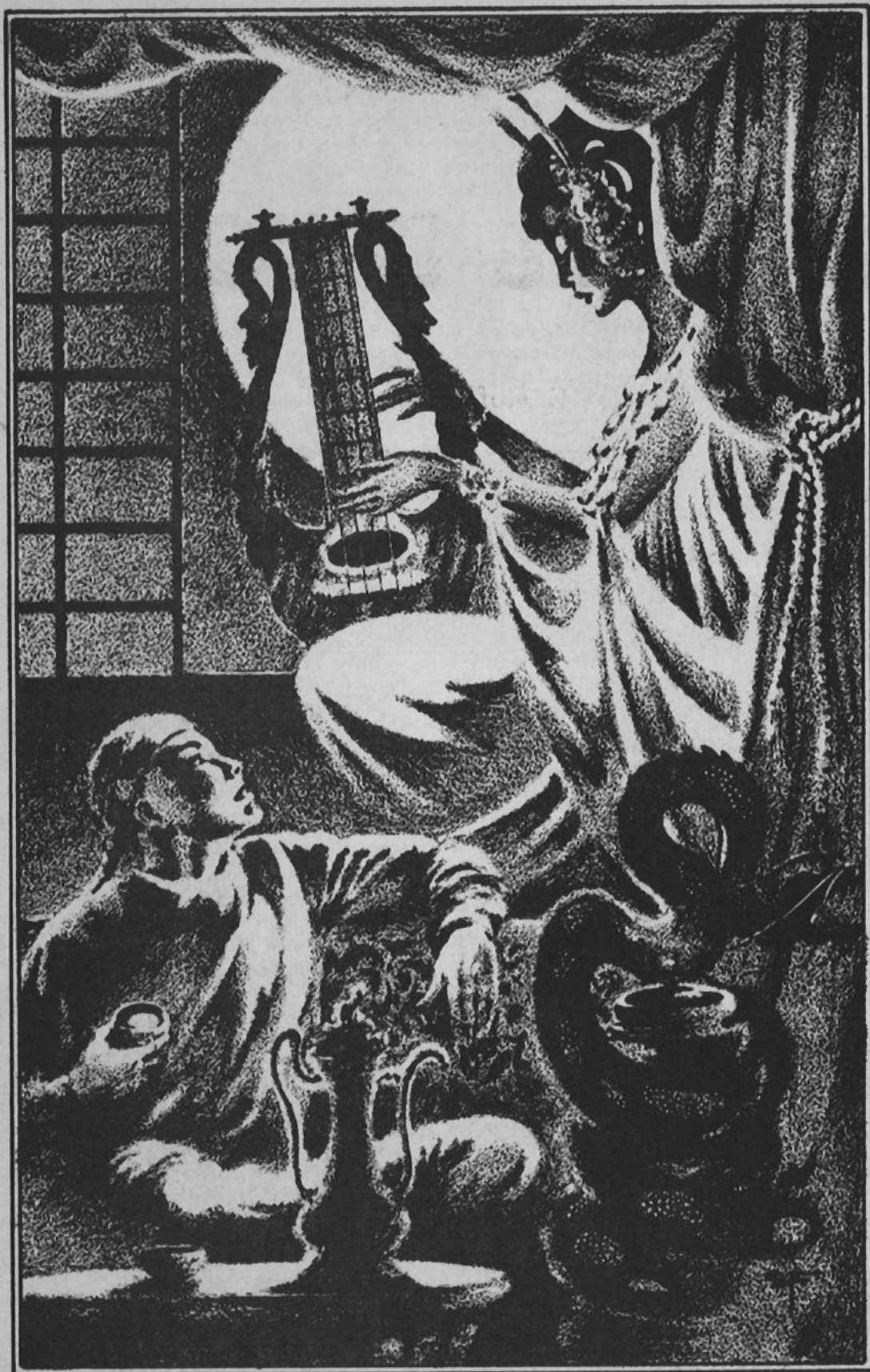
Nothing for Li Fong to do but pass the examinations, and be appointed to a post in the Imperial Civil Service. And, of course, give presents to various eunuchs and other important persons at the court of the Son of Heaven.

Another jug of wine would not cut too deeply into the gold reserved for such gifts, nor into the silver for living expenses and tuition, the final cramming before the examination.

When Hwa Lan realized that Li Fong actually meant what he was saying, she countered, whimsically, "There is a better way for us, Old Master! We'll go to the Taoist magicians and learn their art. Then we'll ride the wind, we'll go to the Mountain of the Gods, and we'll kowtow to the Dragon Lords—we'll plead for their help! Otherwise—*aiieeyah!* How unpleased your Venerable Father will be when you start with a sing-song girl—when he's most certainly got a wife picked out for you!"

Hwa Lan was practical. Li Fong and the wine were not. So, she sang of the Dragon Lady who lived in the Great Desert . . . or, atop the Mountain.

At dawn, Li Fong awakened with the city. Considering how massively drunk he had been before Hwa Lan crumpled across her lute and toppled into bed, he felt fine. Seeing her lying there, beyond the half drawn curtains of her alcove, he wondered what had happened. She'd been sparing enough, and had been urging him to drink less wine.



Something odd about her breathing. Hwa Lan still wore her jade hair pins. She still wore everything.

The bronze jar was empty. On the table was a small porcelain jug. Two matching cups. One empty. He reached for the other. He recognized the smell of that drug from Hindustan.

He had been so drunk that he had escaped being doped. And, so drunk that robbing him had required no fancy work whatever. Instead of gray silk tunic and black trousers, and embroidered boots and embroidered cap, he wore coolie clothes, ragged and grimy.

He was sure that Hwa Lan had had no part in this.

Storming through the wine shop, demanding his clothes and his money had landed him in jail. He did not look like the sort of person who would be admitted as a patron.

That was the wrong day to be in jail. A recruiting party took charge of every prisoner who could walk, gave the jailer a present, and collected a bounty of one silver *tael* per new soldier, when the detachment arrived at the military commander's *yamen*.

That is how it had started.

The Son of Heaven required a lot of soldiers to fight the Uighur Turki barbarian of the Uttermost West. And now, well over two thousand miles from that fatal wine shop, Li Fong was seeing the glamour-lands of which Hwa Lan had sung. Six months of long marching and short rations brought out the difference between song and fact . . .

The mountains, even from a great distance, loomed up as monstrous fantasies. More and more, they brought to mind Hwa Lan's music and words. He persisted in his belief, in what he had come to regard as knowledge, that Hwa Lan had played no part in robbing him. His other fixed belief, a growing conviction, no more rational than the first, was that someone spoke to him, usually during his sleep, but at times by day, as he plodded, hour after hour, licking the wind blown *loess* dust from his lips, squinting through the yellow haze and at the sky-glare until waking and sleeping became ever more alike. Finally, he could not tell one from the other.

Li Fong never ate all his ration of parched barley or beans. Always, he saved a bit, building up a supply. This added to his burden, but it lightened his spirit. Prompted by his invisible counsellors, who persistently asserted that Hwa Lan had seen great adventure and ultimate victory for him, Li Fong was making plans.

And the camel freighters were interesting fellows. They told of buried cities . . . of sands which spoke at night . . . and of the Gods who lived on several of the high mountain peaks.

One night Li Fong stole a camel. This was a smooth escape, without a moment of suspense. Since no one could possibly be so insane as to desert, the sentries were far from vigilant. So, he put the army behind him and looked up at the stars he had come to know, during those long nights of sleeping on hard earth.

"The Sieve now sparkles to the South

And mostly ill drops through.

Slowly, the Dipper tips and spills

But pours no good for you . . ."

The fact of it was that he recited those pessimistic lines to tone down the exultation which dizzied him.

Wind driven sand whispered and rustled, a dry, thin sound. Flying creatures grazed his face as they swerved. Some were feathered, some were furry, and as to others, he had unpleasant surmises.

The bats betokened a ruin, somewhere. But, how far . . . Outbound bats, not homeward faring . . . not at this hour . . .

Shortly before dawn, he came upon masonry rising a few feet above the drifted sand. There were stunted poplars. Li Fong halted at the ruin. He found a moist spot, as he had anticipated. He scraped and dug with his sword. Soon a brackish pool accumulated in the basin. After drinking, he crawled to the lee of the cornice of a deeply buried building. The drift was a softness such as he had not known for many a week.

Blazing sun awakened Li Fong.

Hobbling a camel so that the beast would remain hobbled was not one of Li Fong's skills. He was alone and afoot.

Li Fong shouldered his gear and made for the mountains.

By night, the mountains wore coronets of stars, and crowns of snow. By day, mirage made them dance and weave. Several times, when hunger and thirst and weariness would have kept him from getting up when he lurched and fell, voices urged him on. He found water, and grubbed roots. He ate the seeds from pods. Once, he found the eggs of a wild bird. Several times, he sword-speared a lizard. When he quit the desert and could distinguish trees on the mountain's upper slopes, Li Fong still had a handful of parched barley in his pack.

Li Fong propped himself upright, with staff of acacia. He tilted his head far back, and stared until finally he could believe that what he saw, so far up, was summit and snow cap, not clouds.

"Omito fu! The Mountain of the Gods!"

Water now, and pine nuts. Sometimes at the rim of a pool, he found lily roots. The air became thin and crisp. Mists billowed.

With flint and steel, he would make fire of an evening. Sometimes there were herbs which he simmered, making soup. He had long forgotten hunger, since he could not recall when he had last eaten other than famine-fare.

So, that sunset, with its slanting lances of red and gold reaching through the branches, when he saw a strange bird approaching him, he regarded it as beauty, rather than as food walking to his fire.

No doubt at all that he could throw the staff and clip the approaching fowl, but this possibility did not interest him.

The bird came without fear. In its gold-flecked eyes was a glint as of intelligence as well as curiosity. Tawny-buff and gold, white and scarlet plumage, with a triple crest and metallic gleaming beak, it seemed to be the origin of all the pheasant-kind, all the more so since the color scheme shifted until no variety had been omitted. This, however, was much larger than any pheasant, although to judge size was absurd. The trees, the escarpments which swooped skyward—all about Li Fong was gigantic. Nevertheless, the bird must be larger than a peacock.

It paced somewhat like a quail, flashing quick paces, yet progressing deliberately, always level, as though skimming the surface. This was a curious, a cadenced pacing.

The bird halted, regarding him, the haggard, the sun-seared, the ragged, and the dried-out. The beautiful and the devastated regarded each other, with interest ever increasing and compelling.

The lances of sunlight shifted.

A vast shadow enveloped Li Fong and the iridescent bird. The shadow was that of wings, tremendously outreaching. This was not the shadow of any cloud. The bird's eyes gleamed pointedly. The wings flickered. The tail fanned, the feet moved, a pacing



which brought the bird no nearer Li Fong. It was as though this creature perceived, and knew something which Li Fong did not.

Then he understood. He recalled Old Master Wong, the calligrapher, who would close his eyes and with a single unbroken motion, brush never quitting the paper, shape four characters, the final ending in an exquisite long prolongation stroke.

"Soaring Dragon: Dancing Phoenix."

He spoke the words aloud.

There was a blur of gold and red and apricot and persimmon. The shadow shifted and wheeled. Glancing up, Li Fong caught the glint of scales, the gleam of claws. Looking back, he saw neither shadow nor bird.

He saw only a black-robed man who wore a Taoist hat. The man's white beard trailed to his waist. His face had scarcely a line, yet if he had declared himself to be a thousand years old, Li Fong could have believed him. The eyes half-glinted with humor, yet were half-stern, and entirely penetrating beyond the glance of ordinary men.

Once and a second time, Li Fong touched his forehead to the pine needles. Before he could kowtow a third time, the man helped him to his feet.

"Perhaps you should stay here—perhaps it is better for you to go far from here. But first, you will rest and eat. It is very interesting that you thought of *Soaring Dragon: Dancing Phoenix*, instead of roasted fowl."

CHAPTER II.

Li Fong followed the *tao shih* along a path which presently led to a monastery of brick and masonry. It nestled cozily on a shelf

of rock which seemed to have an overlay of soil sufficient for a small group of monks, provided they were not hearty eaters.

As though sensing Li Fong's thought, the *tao shih* paused at the entrance. "What you do not know about farming, I will show you. I am Tai Ching, disciple of Master Ko Hung."

Li Fong put his palms together, bowed three times, gave his own name, and begged leave to abstain from stating his surname.

Master Ko Hung's life had ended three centuries ago. Whether Tai Ching meant that he had actually been one of the alchemist-magician's pupils, or merely that he had devoted his life to studying the *Pao P'o Tzu*, the Master's final book, was an open question. In any event, Tai Ching undoubtedly knew, from long ago, all the reasons which might make a man wish to conceal his surname.

Li Fong followed the *tao shih* across a well kept courtyard. He paused long enough to scrape a bit of barley from his haversack, and put the grains on the altar of the shrine, just beyond the entrance. Having paid his respect to the Gods, the Immortals, and the Buddhas, he resumed his way, until Tai Ching gestured to an alcove in which spring water accumulated in a wall-basin.

"You may wash. Then follow food-smell to the refectory."

Presently, Li Fong joined the *tao shih* at the low table shared the bowl of millet porridge and a platter of greens.

"Long ago," Tai Ching said, "I made my peace with all living creatures. I eat none of my friends and neighbors. There is only this famine fare."

Presently, he brought a pot of herb soup.

Finally, Tai Ching said, "When you are ready to go your way, I will give you food to last until you reach the Silk Road. Or, stay and work in the small field. When not working, you may study,

and learn according to your talents. Scholars have many reasons for leaving home and taking up the sword. Sometimes a man returns, and again, it is better that a man do not return.

"One more thing before you sleep. When I am not seen, you will not seek me. When I am in my study, you will not ask permission to enter. Otherwise, go about as you please. Nothing is hidden."

In the morning, slanting sun reached into the dormitory and awakened Li Fong. With no more self-intent than a puppet-show marionette, he roamed about. On the natural terrace, he noticed several patches of buckwheat, and scrawny little Turkish melons, peppers, and seasoning herbs. Quail regarded him without alarm.

"Why not stay here?" he cogitated. "Far away and out of sight Father will not be embarrassed by my stupidity. He will merely be grieved, thinking I was killed and robbed. Lucky, not being in jail long enough for name to be entered in the magistrate's books."

Back in the monastery, Li Fong ate cold porridge and drank cold herb soup. Presently, he resumed his prowling, and soon found the Great Book Room.

After bowing to the image of the God of Learning, he stepped to the writing table. The ink-slab was still moist, and for the first time in many a week, he breathed the camphor-scent of ink. There was a packet of fifty yarrow stalks, and the *Book of Change*, the *I Ching*, foundation of all wisdom, and all divination. He would have been amazed had this fundamental book been lacking.

What caught his eye and held his attention, then, was the opened volume near the *I Ching*. He turned the according-pleated strip, fold after fold . . . *pass through fire without being burned . . . through water without being wet . . .* He turned several pages. *"...to ride the wind . . . see all, yet not be seen . . . become a Dragon and yet keep the form of a man . . ."*

Only one chapter was missing: the monograph on making or finding sufficient treasure to permit him to return home, and with honor.

"You don't need any such a writing," a woman said. "Listen, and be patient."

Startled, he glanced about. He caught a flash of shimmering color, the gold of brocade. There was the frail tinkle of jade, and a breath of perfume. When he faced where the woman should have been, he saw only books on shelves.

Shivering, Li Fong decided that he was not afraid. Startled, yes. Perplexed, yes. But afraid—not at all!

When he heard softly whispering footfalls, Li Fong was relieved that it was only Tai Ching who entered the Great Book Room.

"Something interests you?"

Li Fong bowed. "My interest is in what you are about to say."

The priest touched the cover of the *I Ching*, with its sixty four hexagrams which symbolized the fundamental Laws of Change. "I have consulted the Oracle. To teach you the elements of magic, so that you could be a helper, would not be an error. You might be useful here, as well as in the field."

The study of magic and philosophy, together with his duties in the garden and in the buckwheat patch, made Li Fong's life as that of a soldier or of a coolie. His outdoor duties included moving rocks about, to build retaining walls, and then collecting and dumping basket after basket of earth, to make a terrace—just in case, some day, there were many students, and more gardens would be needed . . .

And, hour after hour, chanting sutras. Hour after hour, intoning mantrams, or sitting on the floor, facing the wall. There were the rhythmic inhalation-exhalations, and there were exercises in not-breathing. Then, as a variant, all these exercises were repeated as he paced the perimeter of the combination meditation hall-dormitory, where twenty students could find ample space, or even forty . . .

From time to time, Tai Ching came to observe the novice for a moment. At long intervals, he would offer a suggestion. During the conferences in the *tao shih's* study, there were cryptic and seemingly pointless questions. Whatever answers Li Fong might give, he could never guess whether he was establishing himself as a hopeless blockhead, or, as a probationer in magic and alchemy.

No praise. No blame. Nothing. Except, the ever present bag of groats and parched beans; four pairs of cord sandals, and a stout staff—just in case Li Fong felt that he had had enough of it all.

One evening, Tai Ching set a mat beside Li Fong's place. The Master seated himself. He had a small drum. He tapped it with finger tips, and knuckles, and with the heel of his hand. At times, with cupped palm, he made curious concussions which sometimes were a popping sound, and sometimes, a breathing. The old familiar verses, the often repeated mantrams became different from being patterned to accord with the moods, the rhythms of that small drum.

To accord with the drum voice, Li Fong changed the depth and the cadence of his breathing. He became light-headed. His pulse began to play curious tricks, as it got in step with the drum. Suddenly, he could no longer feel the tiles beneath him. He was without weight.

He was now above floor level. This queer feeling was beyond belief until he was looking eye to eye at the figure of an Immortal on the altar. Amazement broke the rhythm of his breathing. He toppled, sprawled, entangled in his mat, as he thumped to the floor.

The drum ceased. The *tao shih* stood beside him as he clawed himself clear. He said, sarcastically, "As you begin to suspect, you were several feet off the floor. When you learn how to keep your mind on what you are doing, I'll teach you the next step. How would you like to bumble this way when you're a thousand feet off the ground?"

He quit the hall.

Problems came with Li Fong's experiments in levitation. Unpleasant creatures began to collect about him, in a circle. They were somewhat human, somewhat reptilian, and entirely contradictory in their proportions, their coloring, and their locomotion as they ambled about the hall. Without any order or system, individuals would pause, gesture, jeer, and threaten. Sometimes he could understand their obscene mutterings. Often, their language was foreign. These apparitions were never extremely noisy. Nonetheless, Li Fong wondered why Tai Ching never came to inquire about the muttering, gibbering, yelping, and scrambling about.

Inquiring seemed to be not quite the sensible thing to do . . .

And, there was activity in the garden. But he did not glance up from his work when the shadow of great wings hovered about him. Again, he caught a glimpse, from the corner of his eye, of gold-flame-tawny-white plumage. He did not let his glance waver.

He suspected at times that the *tao shih* was testing him with diverse illusions.

Another afternoon, with sun quite low, a twisting little breeze stirred the dust into small spirals which caught up dry leaves.

There was a breath of perfume somewhat like Hwa Lan's, yet, different.

"... Soaring Dragon ... Dancing Phoenix ..."

It was as though someone had spoken, except that there had been no sound for the ear to pick up. He straightened, drew a breath. Outdoors as well as within, the entire area seemed bedevilled.

Then came what was speech, beyond any doubt, a voice.

"When he tells you to walk—walk, and keep walking. No fear. You won't fall. I promise you."

The voice cut off abruptly, in a tinkle of jade.

Li Fong finally learned to strike and caress the little drum and at the same time, chant in accord: so that with his mat, he would rise to altar level, and higher. He was curious rather than dismayed when, after pausing for the images to regard him, he drifted toward the end of the hall. His course curved until, finally, he came back to his meditation spot. There, he settled slowly to the floor.

The *tao shih* said, "You didn't know where you were going."

"Yes, I did not know," Li Fong answered.

"Stand on feet," Tai Ching commanded. "Follow me."

Taking the drum, he led the way. *Tummmmm—tumpa—tummm—tum—tupa—tuppa-tum*—and the droning chant which Li Fong repeated until he could feel, inwardly, the vibration of his voice, and of the drumming, and of the *tao shih's* chanting.

The standard routine, except—

The floor now slanted slightly upgrade. Presently, he suspected that he no longer trod the pavement at all. And then he was following Tai Ching out and over the buckwheat patch. The mountain slope fell further and further away. He was pacing now, with the tips of tall trees at waist-height ... knee-height ... ankle height ...

Far out, the desert shimmered and danced. It seemed that in the glare and the glamour he glimpsed the ruin where his camel had left him stranded. One recruit would not, positively not, go to Hotien ...

Without warning qualm or twinge of apprehension, giddiness and terror closed in and took command of Li Fong. He began to sink. His eyes were now level with the *tao shih's* feet. Little devils leered, jeered, mocked. Below, rocks began to loom up. He sank faster, faster, a dozen paces or more.

"Sing, man, sing your mantram," a woman said. "You won't fall."

She was over-optimistic. Not falling, not really, but sinking, and ever more rapidly.

"Sing!" she repeated.

"Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi, SVAHA!"

The mocking devils thinned, faded in sun glare.

He felt a touch at his elbow.

"Chant with the master," she said.

He found his voice. His wits returned. He caught the beat, the rhythm. He maintained elevation, but could not rise. He was nearly a tree's height lower than his guide as they circled back.

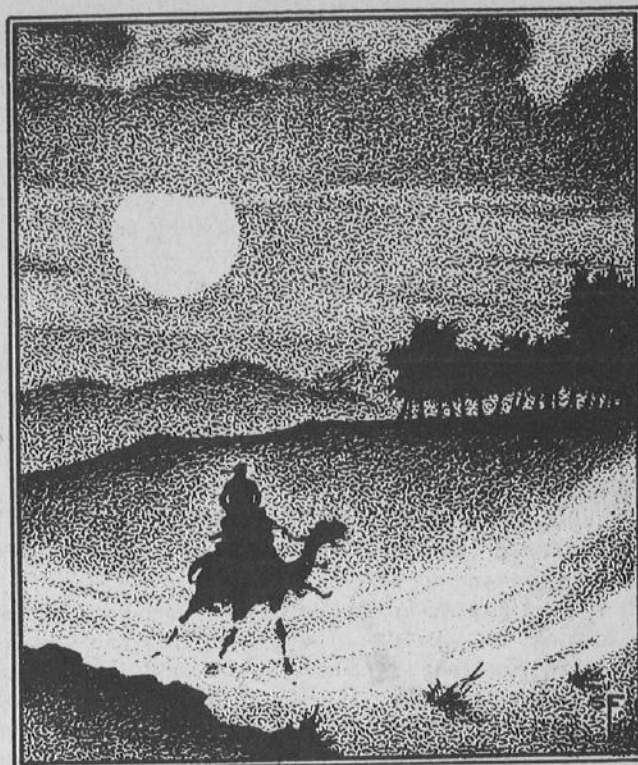
Li Fong stumbled and rolled when he stubbed his toes against the rocky mountainside. Tai Ching called from the monastery entrance. "I told you to keep your mind on what you were doing!"

"Devils and spirits—so I intoned—"

"As if I didn't hear you!"

"You heard?"

"You were bellowing like a buffalo."



"What sounds, Master?"

"The mantram I taught you."

"That's all that helped? You didn't—"

"I saw you gain control, so why interfere? A good scare—just what you need to learn wind-walking. Now, fire-walking—waver for the flicker of an eyelash, and you're finished!"

When he finally stretched out on his mat, Li Fong lay awake for a long time, pondering his adventure. The *tao shih* had been aware of his probationer's plight, and had been ready to help, in the event of total failure. On the other hand, he had neither heard nor otherwise perceived the woman-presence.

CHAPTER III.

Li Fong became accustomed to long hours divided between meditation hall and garden. He required less rest, slept lightly, and found it more and more difficult to distinguish between waking and sleep.

One night, a blade of moonlight reached through a wall slot. The brightness aroused him, and then he heard the tinkle of jade, and savoured perfume. He said, aloud, "I was afraid that a mantram had driven you away."

The Presence became ever more immediate, more compelling. Li Fong sat up. After a moment, he knelt. From the corner of his eye, he sensed motion in the darkness. And then she stepped into the moon patch. She was slender, silken-gleaming, and because of her stately headgear, the woman seemed quite tall. Medallions of jade and linked clusters of rubies and sapphires depended from a headdress shaped of kingfisher breast-feathers, and heightened with sprays of peacock plumage.

"No mantram can ever drive me away."

Jade hair pins gleamed as she nodded, gestured reassuringly, and stood there, half-smiling and splendid. Li Fong put his palms together and bowed.

"This beggar is Li Fong, surname forfeited. New name, not yet conferred. Homeless One, quitting the Red Earth."

"This ill-favoured hag may be called Mei Ling," she said, bowing.

"Your presence has made my days golden," he countered, in words which were a play on her name. "In my heart I have thanked you many times for voice without visible presence."

"Soaring Dragon—Dancing Phoenix."

"You really were there, then?"

Mei Ling smiled. "Perhaps as the Dragon's Shadow?"

"Dragon's Shadow?" he echoed; the implications dazed him.

"How far will you follow me?"

"It would be polite for me to consult Master Tai Ching."

"You can go a great distance without ever leaving this place."

"What should I tell the Master, when I return?"

"Whatever he asks, tell the truth."

Mei Ling beckoned, inviting him into the moon-patch. He moved, hesitated, halted. She said, "Where we are going, coolie's dress and silken tunic are alike."

He stepped into moonlight and into the fragrance which Mei Ling exhaled. She was at once tangible as Hwa Lan, and also, entirely mist-and-moon glamour. Awe and apprehension combined to numb his wits. He glanced along the shaft of light.

Mei Ling shook her head. "Leave that to Master Tai Ching. You and I go another way." Her smile was sweet, most amiable, and also, cryptic, baffling. "I asked how far you would follow me. That was a mode of speaking. Really, you will, you must lead, far as you dare."

"I—lead—where?" he groped.

She pointed into the darkness, toward the further end of the hall.

"But—but that's solid mountain—"

"Straight on, head-on!" From beside Li Fong, she stepped back, and behind him, laying a hand on his shoulder. The finger

tips rippled, as though on the strings of a lute. "Unless you lead, how can you follow and go into my home?"

This went further than the wildest Taoist paradox . . .

Power trickled from her finger tips and spread into his body, invading his veins. Breathing into his ear, Mei Ling said, "If a leader waits to know where he goes, he will never start."

Borrowed fire made him step forward, and with assurance. A pace, another, and yet another, until he could discern the chiselled heart-rock of the great mountain: a solid, unbroken wall.

Mei Ling moved in such close harmony that there were fleeting contacts of her body, sinuous and rippling. She whispered something which he could not understand. Then came an instant like that interval between wakefulness and sleeping. He should have come up against unyielding stone. Instead, he merged with the heart-rock.

Li Fong knew, though not through any way which he could call "seeing," that the rock was a void peppered with particles of blurred, indefinite shape, and of indecisive position. He himself was equally nebulous, an emptiness in which wandered indefinite shapes. Here and there, pulsing discs made pinwheels of fire.

As he moved, the luminous gray space became ever brighter, and less hazy, until from indefinite emptiness he came into the solid, the shaped. And Mei Ling caught his hand as they stepped into and emerged from wind-driven mist, to enter an area of gardens, of pavilions—a tiny lake, with high arched bridge—trailing willows—peach trees burdened with ripe fruit. He looked about him.

Mei Ling said, "There is neither indoors nor outdoors, neither heaven overhead nor tiled roof. We're not inclosed by walls or by horizon." Dazzling, glowing, she paused, her smile blossoming, as the gradual unfolding of petals. "You experience now what Master Tai Ching has been trying to demonstrate. By wind-walking, for instance."

"Mountain of the Gods—Home of the Dragon Lords—"

"Not bad," Mei Ling admitted, "but any name limits, it restricts, it separates—and that is *maya*, the Great Illusion."

They entered a small villa. Li Fong had the feeling that the corridors and inner courts were settling down and reshaping, to take steady form. Although he saw no servants, it seemed that an entire staff had just quit the place.

As he went with Mei Ling into a cozy reception room, she said, "I arranged everything before I went to find you. The wine hasn't had time to get cool. Do sit down and let me pour a cup."

Li Fong wondered whether, in an empire of dreams, he was repeating his experience with Hwa Lan, or whether he would awaken and learn that he had never been robbed nor jailed nor marched across the desert.

As she tuned her lute, he recited, ". . . Soft as the murmur of whispered words, frail as the patter of pearls . . ."

She smiled fondly, and carried on, ". . . dripping on a plate of jade . . ."

Mei Ling accepted the cup he poured, and set aside the lute.

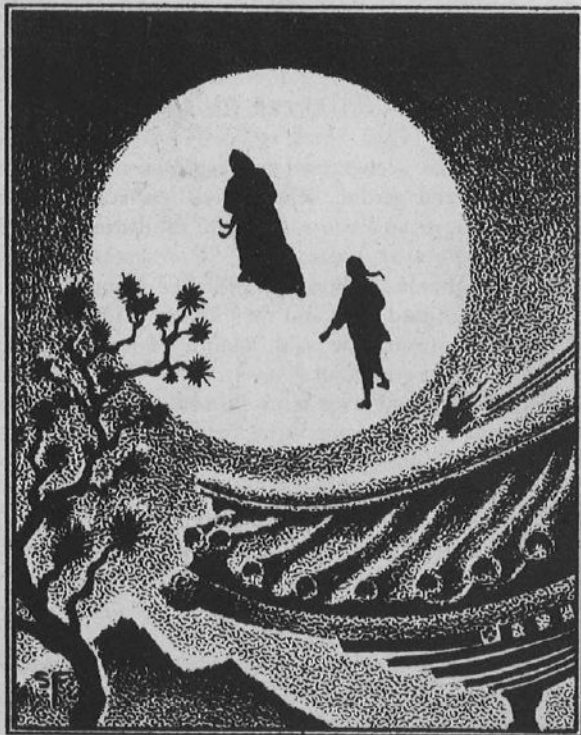
He said, "Wine game riddle: Dancing Phoenix, or Dragon's Shadow?"

"Wrong question!" she retorted. "Penalty—empty one cup!"

"Wrong answer!" he cut back. "Penalty—drain one cup!"

Simple compromise: each drank, and Mei Ling poured again from the bronze jar. Then, "The next riddle for you."

"I listen."



"Watch, too," she suggested.

Her words were needless. He could never have done other than watch when, with both arms, and as though making ritual gestures, Mei Ling unfastened her tall and stately head-gear. She raised it clear of her gleaming black hair, and twisted sinuously to set it on a tabouret, well away from a table set with trays of *dim sum*, and bowls of loquats and apricots and peaches.

"Riddle: *Dragon's Shadow*—or, *Dancing Phoenix*?"

"Both."

She laughed, mocking him in sweet malice. "*Aiiieeyah!* How stupid, how silly! Correct answer, *Soochow Sing-Song Girl*. Drink one cup!"

Mei Ling coaxed the lute into full voice, and sang,

"A lutist from Omei Mountain

With a single touch of the strings

Brought back memory of a long ago meeting

By the nine-stage pagoda at the Lion Bridge.

Now I sit in sorrow nine stages deep

Facing a broken mirror—"

"Sing-Song Girl, when Master Tai Ching teaches me the secrets of alchemy, I'll make gold by the cart-load, and buy your contract!"

She smiled at him through the dancing flicker of candle flames that stifled behind pinnacles of wax. She snuffed a flame or two, and once more with both arms made the stylized gestures of a sculptured goddess, and flexed her silk-sheathed body. Her finger tips caressed brocaded curtains for a moment, then flicked them aside, to reveal a shadowed and cushioned alcove.

"Even in this place where Time is not," Mei Ling said, "learning to make gold would take quite too long." She stood now, a curtain half concealing her; and she beckoned. "There may be no contract to buy. There may also be a contract cost which you would never meet."

On his feet, he had Mei Ling in his arms as she reached over his shoulders and drew the curtains together behind him. "Where Time is not, it is always now," he said, and tried at once to kiss her, to trace the elegant curve of her body, and to unfasten the loops which secured her gown.

Mei Ling laughed softly. "Even with help, you couldn't possibly tend to all that at once," she said, and deftly plucked the first loop free.

Another candle expired, leaving its lonely companion to stand watch, and coax reflections from the brocaded curtain of the alcove.

CHAPTER IV

"And now," Mei Ling murmured, "what am I—Dragon's Shadow, Dancing Phoenix, or Sing-Song Girl?"

"We began as *yang* and *yin*," he answered, "and now, with nothing left to desire, quietly waking-sleep, we still are *yang* and *yin*. You are Dragon Shadow, Dancing Phoenix, Sing Song Girl, all at once, and who cares because that is quite impossible?"

She looked up through half-parted lashes. "You're not really certain. You still wonder whether a mantram would make me vanish."

He sat up, took her by the shoulders, viewed Mei Ling from arm's length, and sighed. "You didn't ask me. You told me. But my wonderings are not quite as you think. Phoenix and

Dragon—*yin* and *yang*—Moon and Sun—you and I, we held each other so closely that there was only one and no longer two of us. Something strange happened to us and we cannot be quite what we once were."

Her eyes narrowed ever so little. She almost smiled. "This is interesting, Li Fong. I'm not your first woman. But, I am different, you tell me. Another wine-riddle? Or do you tell me without prize or penalty?"

"No wine game, now. Maybe I can tell you. If you insist."

"I do insist. Maybe you'll guess, maybe learn why."

"This goes beyond words."

"Try. Even if wrong, your penalty could be a reward."

"You and I—*yin* and *yang*—but finally, we were balanced, neither female nor male."

"Yes . . ." Not assent, but breathless urging.

"*Yin* became *yang*, Phoenix became Dragon. A moment of each being the other, while the entireness remained unchanged."

"Li Fong, you really do know. When I was completely Phoenix, I had to have my moment as Dragon—what else could I become? For I had to change—that is the Law. When the Sun reaches the Meridian, midnight begins—remember?"

"All that, *aieeyah*, of course. But you are not like other women. There is something different. You're trying to talk it away from me, but you can't!"

"I am so real that a mantram can't make me vanish. I so intensely female that I reverse and become Fire and Dragon. And my momentary opposite nature is stronger than your ordinary nature! Drink a cup, Li Fong—that is your penalty, before you drive me mad, drive us mad!"

She twisted, flipped herself, in a golden arc, landing poised on her toes. Balanced, Mei Ling whipped the brocaded gown about her, and parted the alcove curtains. Li Fong followed her to the table. Fresh lights had been set out. Incense fumed anew. The refilled wine jug was hot from its bath of water.

"*Aiiieeyah*, Li Fong, how stubborn, how persistent! Very well, I'll tell you. My body is no different from the body of an earth-born woman, but *I* am different. I am fire, Dragon, and Immortal. And until now, never a woman you have known except she was earth, and mortal. You learned this in the only way, at the only moment when it was possible to know the difference."

She filled the cups.

Li Fong raised his, no more than half way, pausing to regard her.

"You said I could not lose. That penalty could be reward. Well, now, Dragon Lady, Jade Lady, Woman of All Women, now that I am right, tell me about the reward that could be a penalty."

"Another lesson with that *tao shih*, and you'd be impossible! Tell me your thoughts on the matter."

"Since I am totally mortal, the more you are my reward, the greater is my penalty."

"For me, also. But think how much each would have lost, if you had not learned my inner and true nature."

Li Fong laughed happily. "Cannot win. Cannot lose. As long as we stay here, where it is always now, I am immortal."

She looked at him over the rim of her cup. "Old Master, you've not been wasting your time. Next time you see Master Tai Ching, kowtow three times. Tell me—have you really truly forsaken the Red Earth?"

"Master Tai Ching asked for nothing of the sort."

"Odd, wasn't it, how you crawled up out of the desert, and in spite of being starved and dying, you remembered the Soaring Dragon and the Dancing Phoenix. I've told you what I am—now tell me who and what you really are."

So he told her, and their wine became cold as she listened.

"Father would be sad," he concluded, "thinking I had been robbed and killed, but he would be ashamed and embarrassed if he learned the facts. So, better for me to disappear from the Red Earth. He will adopt Younger Uncle's son, my cousin Shiu Shen. Younger Uncle died last year."

"That girl, Hwa Lan? What of her?"

"I do not know her as I know you. Nevertheless, I say again, I know she was honest."

Mei Ling smiled. "You have no fear of mockery. That is very good. It would be so easy to blame a sing-song girl, or a flower-boat girl for whatever your stupidity brought. Now, this matter of being mortal. The Way of Fire is the only way to me."

"The Way to you?"

"Yes. This tiny world of mine is real, but only relatively so, not absolutely real. To be here with you, I must have my reality partly veiled. For you to be here with me, your reality has to be, has been somewhat increased."

"*Aiieeyah!*" He pounced to his feet. He caught Mei Ling by the arms, looked at her as though seeing her for the first time. "Now I know—what happened to us—during a strange moment—"

"That moment will never leave you. But the Way of Fire cannot make you immortal. The most you can do is to risk the next step, and go with me into the next stage of NOW-NESS."

He glanced about, as though seeking a gateway.

She said, "While you work in the garden, I'll shape the next now."

Her voice was a dismissal. Li Fong asked, "How find you again?"

"I have never been away from you. So, after this meeting, could we be further apart? But your earth-habit, too wise ever to be sure of a female creature, is it not?"

"The Way of Fire may burn that out of me."

Mei Ling turned to a lacquered cabinet. From it she took an embroidered pouch, opened and thrust into it several jewels which she gathered from the drawer. "Sapphire and rubies," she said, "to keep the gold company," and thrust the treasure into his hand. "This will remind you that no mantram can ever make me vanish—that there is reality between us."

Mei Ling nudged him toward the brocaded curtains. "Many ways into our little world, and many a way out of it. Breathe deeply as you leave—exhale a reminder of me, into your world."

Li Fong's merging with the boundary was as incomprehensible in departure as it had been when he entered.

He walked in cold moonlight, near the pool in the monastery garden. He had an embroidered pouch, amazingly heavy for its size. Sweetness lingered in his nostrils. When he licked his lips, the cosmetic taste assured him that this was no hallucination. Whatever treasure a sleepwalker might have found in his prowlings, a smudge of lipstick was impossible.

Li Fong looked up. What he still termed, in his mind, "last night," had been lighted by a full moon. Now the frail sliver of a new moon was rising.

He was still grappling with his perplexity when Master Tai Ching emerged from the dark entrance of the monastery.

"The people of the Red Earth enjoy Moon watching," the *tao*

shih remarked. He listened to Li Fong's none too coherent queries and statements, then resumed, "That is the new Moon, and you did surely quit this place under a full Moon. That you still fancy that you left 'last night' is illusion. Harmless, of course, yet, error."

"I apologize for rudeness. I intended nothing of the sort."

Li Fong would have kowtowed, but Tai Ching prevented him.

"Please desist. I am neither your father nor your teacher."

"Venerable Sir, I deserve this dismissal."

"This is not the sort which you have in mind," Tai Ching said. "This is recognition. Your return with the perfume of the Dancing Phoenix tells me that you have taken a step along the Way of Fire. She will lead you as far as you dare go."

"Venerable Sir, there is more than I understand."

"The Dragon Lady will clarify."

"But the Way of Fire—is there a point of no return?"

"In this respect, and I know not how much more, your experience has gone further than mine. If you vanish, and I do not see you again, I must conclude that there is such a point."

"Meanwhile, you are welcome to stay here. I cannot accept any of the gold in that purse. Each day, you must work to earn your food."

The *tao shih* bowed, and left Li Fong to examine, by the candlelight of the shrine, the rubies and sapphires from the land of the southern savages, the Indian *mohurs*, and the *staters* stamped with the head of Flavius Claudius Julianus, Emperor of the Western Barbarians... and gold coined by earlier monarchs...

CHAPTER V.

Whether because of fancy, or out of necessity, Mei Ling waited until the full moon to seek Li Fong. This time, she led the way into her world of everlasting now.

"Sing-Song Girl, or Dancing Phoenix?" he quipped, as she made her way into the reception room.

"We'll be all things, all at once, Old Master. And you've brought the gold and the trinkets back with you—you knew, surely, that I offered them as a gift, and not a proving that you and I had met?"

"Your gift raised questions."

"Wine game riddles, with penalties?"

Her brows rose, and her smile matched the sweet mockery of her voice. He shook his head. "While you're still all stately, with your tall headgear, tell me things, before my understanding begins to dance and go wild, or falls on its face. Master Tai Ching says that he can teach me nothing about the Way of Fire."

"*Aiieeyah!* So, he knows?"

"He knew, before I spoke."

The spray of peacock plumes swayed as Mei Ling nodded. "So, you don't know whether to study in the monastery, or to come here and take the Way?"

"Yes."

"Those who quit the Red Earth before they are truly ready sometimes have their regrets."

"They cannot return?"

"You mean, whether you could not return." Without waiting for assent, Mei Ling continued, "Was it more difficult to enter, this time, than the first?"

"It was easier."

"Then?"

"I didn't find my own way. You came to guide me."

She smiled tantalizingly. "You're not sure but what I might through forgetfulness, indifference, leave you tramping the dust of the Red Earth, no longer belonging there, but not able to return to the Land of Fire."

"Jade Lady, this is not bargaining," he protested. "This is not distrust of you."

"All you want is to know what you're about to do?"

"Of course."

"Fire," she flashed back at him, "is knowing without reason! Without thought. Without clod-like intellect!"

He got to his feet. "Dragon Lady, I bow three times. I am a clod of the earth."

"With one tiny spark which knows! Tell me, Li Fong, why is all this?"

He slapped the embroidered purse to the table.

"With this, I could repay my father for all that I cost him, just to benefit a thief. There is sufficient more to buy land, so that he could establish the family, before he dies. I am sure he has already adopted my cousin, Shiu Shen, to pay funeral respects when the time comes. And it is said that the seven generations just past are ennobled, when a son quits the Red Earth."

"*Aiiieeyah!* Inimitable Li Fong! Becoming half-immortal, and sleeping with me to the weariness, in a world without day or night or time, this will make seven generations of ancestors happy?" She sighed, shook her head, but could not keep her eyes from mocking him. "That would make them envious—unhappy!"

"Penalty! Drink one cup! Only the male ancestors would be envious."

"You learn, you learn," she conceded, and moved to the doorway. "See, how lovely-strange the lake!"



Pulsing fire towered without limit. The golden ruddy column became greenish and then clear blue. It expanded until the coping of the tiny lake was in the purple heart. Mei Ling's lips moved. She made an invocatory gesture. The color changed, until it became—to say *white* would have been an absurdity, yet to have called it colorless, nonsense equally devoid of meaning.

Wave after wave of heat billowed against Li Fong, yet his garment did not scorch or smoulder, nor did hair or eyelashes curl or smoke. Mei Ling ceased intoning the mantram which came to him, clean out, resonant as a war drum, and also, no more than a whisper. She shaped a final mudra.

And, "*Svaha!*"

The pagoda of white-colorless fire stabilized.

Li Fong flipped off his sandals.

"This is the test?"

She nodded. The plume-sprays wavered.

He turned his back to the silent strange flame whose immeasurable heat did not consume.

"Do you lead—do I lead—or do I go alone?"

She regarded him with eyes inscrutable, dark and deep as the gulfs between stars. Whether challenge—warning—or benediction, he could not tell. When, finally, she said, "Li Fong, this is no wine game," he knew that he was on his own. He had neither an ally, nor any second chance.

Deliberately, he took off her headdress. He unfastened the loops of her tunic, and plucked it, so that it crumpled about her ankles. He nudged Mei Ling, and she stepped clear of the garment.

"Dragon Lady, you knew that I knew where your fire is." He did not glance back, since behind him there was only a tiny lake, and no tower of elemental flame. "Nice riddle. No penalty."

"Nice tunic," she said, smiling, and retrieved garment and headgear. Then, as she went with Li Fong, "You know where the fire is, and you know its Way. No penalty."

Darkness and brilliance came and went. When they awakened, Mei Ling would serve rice and bean curd with mushrooms, or steamed bamboo shoots and crisp water chestnuts. And always, after breakfast, the Great Book Room invited Li Fong. Learning the Way of Fire had been only the beginning of study.

Sometimes, she would bring tea and a tray of *dim sum* to the library, and hear him expound what he thought he had learned. Often, she would set him right, and they would laugh, and add to the score of penalties to be assessed at the next pouring of wine.

"Old Master," Mei Ling finally wondered, "I am still far from sure how you learned the Way of Fire."

He set down his tea cup. "Dragon Lady, there was no fear of passing through the flame. Why this was so, I cannot say. I knew simply that the attempt would have been no test at all."

"*Aiiieeyah!* Elegant, spontaneous liar! The way you did take, not too long after we quit the garden—that was an ordeal?"

She snapped her fan shut.

"That is not what I said. Do not make as though to slice my head off with the edge of that fan. The first time I entered the land of here and now, you asked me things, and I answered. After many wrong replies, with penalties to match, I had learned more than I'd realized, at the time. So, it came about as it did."

"And we were speaking, you remember, before I faced the flame? Speaking of those who quit the Red Earth, and of those who return to it, and what might happen to them?"

Mei Ling sighed, spread her fan, made a slow gesture with it.

"I remember, and I have been thinking. There is the Great Law, the all-containing Tao, which has its own order. Neither Gods nor Dragons can evade. At times, they cannot even foresee, and in their own way, they are helpless as any man of the Red Earth. Least of all could they help you upset your karma, the sum total of all the lives you have ever lived."

"You have in mind, for instance—"

"Once it was your fate to be robbed. Once, you were taken out of jail to fight the barbarians in Hotien. What you did not escape, you may meet it again, and be snared. And what you did escape, it may trap you this time, without recourse."

Li Fong hefted the purse of gold. "Maybe I'd not lose this. But there might be an army I could not desert."

She recited, "... *not one battle famous in history
Sent all its fighters back again . . .*"

"So, I should forget my obligation to my father, and stay here in the everlasting now?"

"No! That is not the way of the Dragon. I will teach you mantram and mudra to use against whatever assaults, whatever traps you. This is not outwitting karma—you will gain only a postponement of it. The enchantment I will teach you is deadly beyond all imagining. I will not tell you its nature. If I did, you might shrink when the time came, fearing that what you set in motion would include you, and destroy you."

She fixed him with eyes dark and smouldering. He endured her gaze as he digested her words. Finally he said, "When postponed karma is finally paid, the interest is heavy. But I accept that, too."

"There is more, Li Fong. This enchantment can be used only once, so it should be reserved for uttermost need, and that can be a hard choice. Worse yet, that half-immortality you have won through the Way of Fire will be forfeited. The Great Law accepts no gifts, and it gives no bounties."

Darkness closed in on Li Fong. Darkness and oppression extinguished all the glow which had built up within him. And when Mei Ling saw the inner blackness come to the surface, she said, a hand on his arm, "Li Fong, it is so simple to avoid all risk. Let me ride the wind, and give this treasure to your father. I will speak your message, and return surely. In this I cannot fail."

"Teach me mantram and mudra," Li Fong said. "I must do my own duty. No Dragon can do this for me."

CHAPTER VI

Li Fong followed the Silk Road eastward. Better, he reasoned, to tramp the Red Earth than ride the wind. In the end, Mei Ling had agreed with him. If he came home with the Dragon Shadow hovering over him, he would be a stranger, not entirely real.

Along the way, he sold his sword, to buy food and shoes. Ragged and dirty, he would not interest bandits. He had only to evade recruiting parties.

As he neared his native village, he learned that the harvest had been poor; and the further he went, the more he realized that his homecoming with gold would be a blessing.

Finally, one evening, he came to the old familiar settlement. He caught the savor of dumplings frying over coals, and the aroma of meat spiced, skewered, and broiling. He followed the appetizing odors to their source, a portable grille, sitting in the alleyway between two shops.

Li Fong ate, and he drank some tea. Finally, after a good suspense build-up, he broke his surly-faced silence.

"Know where Old Man Kim lives?"

The peddler pointed in the general direction. "Know him?"
"Met his son in the army."

"Which army?"

"Fighting in Hotien."

"So Old Man Kim's boy didn't get killed and robbed."

"Aiiieeyah! Might as well have been, so far from home."

"Wounded or sick?"

"Not too badly, but moving slow. So I said I'd give news he was on the way."

"Cousin Shiu Shen won't be happy."

"How come?"

"Old Man Kim adopted him. Now you tell me, Li Fong is coming home, so Shiu Shen won't be Number One heir. Li Fong will be sore, with a Number Two heir. Old Man Kim will give you a happiness present, but nobody else will be glad."

"I forgot people gave happiness presents," Li Fong grumbled, and took a few cash from his string. "Well, here's some for you, in case I don't see you again."

The advance dividend brightened the peddler. "Maybe the bond-servant, the new one, will be glad."

"Servant?"

"Could be a slave, don't know. I hear the old man took her as part payment on a debt. Anyway, she doesn't like Shiu Shen at all."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing. Nice fellow. She's just a fussy bitch and don't want to sleep with him, and the old man thinks that's funny, and sort of takes her part."

That was just like the old man . . .

"What she like?" Li Fong resumed.

"Might be nice, with decent clothes." He eyed the stranger. "Bandits making much trouble?"

"Not the way I came. I was busy dodging army recruiting. Been having much trouble with them?"



"Anyone your age better get out of sight by sunrise."

Li Fong decided against waiting for the peddler to alert tomorrow's market crowd, so that one of the servants would go home with a rumor about Li Fong's survival. After all, when you've reached a certain age, there are no real shocks or surprises. You have had it.

So this was the Red Earth. Quicker he fulfilled his obligation and got back to Mei Ling, the happier he'd be, and riding the wind would not be fast enough . . . depressing mess . . .

There was a group not far ahead of him, coolies squatting on the ground, gabbling with another peddler: he featured sausages, judging by the pungent smell. When a yard or so from the palaver, Li Fong paused, and knelt, making a pretext of easing his shoulder by getting out from under the carrying pole from which his two packs of clothing and travel gear were balanced. And, he fumbled with the fastenings of his sandals.

As far as gossip went, or rumors of recruiting parties, this was a waste of time. However, Li Fong did get an unexpected dividend and it jarred him. What he heard was a casual reference to the year-name. Now, and for the first time, he realized that more than six years had elapsed since his mishap in the wine shop. This was hard to believe. It would have been wholly incredible, had he not recalled how amazingly long had been the interval between his first entering Mei Ling's world, and his return to the monastery.

In a nearby shop, he verified the date. He bought paper, borrowed a brush, and ground some ink. He brushed three columns, rinsed the brush, and laid out some *cash*. The shopkeeper declined the money.

"The moment you dipped that brush, I knew you were a scholar. I cannot let you pay for a trifle. *Omitofu!* Devils rule these times."

Li Fong folded his writing, and went his way.

There was a new gate keeper at the old home. This helped a lot.

"Where's old man Wu?"

"Died couple years ago. Who are you?"

"Got a message for the Master," Li Fong said, and spread out the sheet of calligraphy.

The gate keeper plucked a brand from the gatehouse hearth, took a look, recognized the fine, formal characters, and reached for the paper. Li Fong drew it back. He dug up a *tael* of silver and said, "This is more than the master would give you—especially if the news is bad."

"How bad?"

"Read it and see."

"Do you think I can?"

"Neither can I," said Li Fong. "But I think it's about the son who disappeared several years ago. Look here, it's late and they tell me it's a good idea to keep out of sight. Spread me a mat in a corner of the court, and you get another *tael*."

"Where's the ounce?"

"Here it is. And you might hustle up a bowl of rice."

"A few cash for one of the maids, and maybe I can."

In a few minutes, Li Fong had a mat spread in the court where he had capered about as a child. Presently, a woman with a candle-lantern stepped from an inner doorway. She balanced a tray on her head. Seeing him in his corner, she set down the light and came forward with tea, a bowl of rice, and some vegetables. Without a word, she went back to her lantern, stood there until

he picked up the chopsticks. Seeing that nothing else was required, she quit the court.

Li Fong had no chance to deliver his message. At the first alarm, early that morning, he bolted for cover. The splintering of wood, the yell of the gatekeeper, the screeching of servants, and the chattering of villagers gave him all he needed to know.

Bandits, making a sweep of the village, were closing in on the house of its most important citizen.

Addition after addition, expansion after expansion, had left many an obscure corner, many a hidden catch-all space, often very nearly like a room within a room. Li Fong had to get out of sight. He would be mistaken for the advance agent of the bandits, and killed by an unusually courageous servant. To declare himself, on the other hand, would be a disaster. He'd be seized, either as a hostage, or for ransom. Worst of all, the Dragon treasure was in jeopardy.

Invaders poured into the main court, and faster than servants and farm hands could escape through exits.

From concealment, Li Fong saw his father come out to confront the raiders. The old man wore a gray silk robe, and a black skull-cap. Li Fong could now believe that he had been away six years or more. However firm of purpose, his father was thin, frail, and shaky.

The bandit chief and two henchmen stepped forward from among their men. They went through all the forms of politeness. The old man parleyed: there was the usual bartering, proposal, rejection, and offer in compromise. He beckoned finally to an elderly servant, and gave an order.

The confidential servant quickly returned with heavy bags of silver.

"Where's the rest?" the chief demanded.

"Two bad seasons in a row. You know that. And the tax collector got here ahead of you."

"Sometimes he does and sometimes we intercept him." The bandit ruefully added, "This one had too many soldiers to guard him. Now, there must be more than this to divide among my men—you see how many I have—these are hard times!—soon I'd have no band." He grinned, rubbed his neck. "Nor even a head."

"But this is all."

The chief beckoned. A squad of burly fellows with bamboo sticks and lengths of cord came forward. No command was spoken. This was a well-organized party, with all details ordered in advance.

They lashed the old man's wrists, neatly trussed him to the spirit screen, and set to work beating him. If they overdid things and beat him to death, there was the confidential servant, who knew all that the master knew. And he would not be blamed for his ready capitulation. He'd reveal every treasure cache in the villa.

Simple.

Efficient . . .

Li Fong came from hiding. "This is not necessary," he said to the chief. "This man is my father."

"You are dressed like his heir."

The beating ceased. This was interesting.

"I am an army deserter. Like many of you." He dipped into his grimy jacket and brought out the purse. "I bring ransom from Hotien, from the dog-fornicating Turks." He poured gold and rubies and sapphires on the paving. "You and I, civilized persons, can agree on this."

The chief watched one of his men collect the gleaming loot.

"The army didn't capture Hotien, but wherever you got all this, you did very well."

"You accept my present?"

"*Aaiieeyah!* This is generous." He spoke to the strong-arm squad. They released the old man. He gestured to the others, and they filed from the court. He paused long enough to bow, and to say, "Next year, I promise you, I will not loot your house."

CHAPTER VII

Li Fong knelt before his father, and three times touched his forehead to the tiles. The old man extended his hand, and Li Fong arose.



"Son, this is all beyond believing. One of the servants told me a strange story last night. I did not believe her."

"What I have to tell you is also beyond belief."

"No, don't tell me a thing until you've eaten, until you've bathed, until you've rested. You look starved. Yes, and let your cousin get you something to wear. Drink a few bowls of wine."

"Father—"

"Do as I tell you."

The old man stalked out of the courtyard. He looked younger already. He was steadier on his feet.

Li Fong eyed his cousin Shiu Shen. Greetings were fraternal, but less than ebullient.

"No doubt father adopted you. Relax. I am not here to push you out. I'm very likely to go back to where I came from."

"Those jewels—that gold—man, where did you get the stuff?"

Li Fong smiled. "Cousin Shiu Shen, that is as surprising as this business of a maid not wanting to sleep with a fellow as good looking as you are. Now, the food and wine—"

Before that was well started, there came wails of misery from outside, the voice of crushing dismay. House servants were coming back. Villagers followed. Some pointed at Li Fong, and cried, "He can help us. He dealt with the bandits—great bags of gold—"

Li Fong caught his cousin's arm. "What's all this?" And he got it: the bandits were going to loot the granaries, and, worst of all, take the seed grain, too. Those who could not migrate to a province which had a good crop would stay and starve.

"Those turtle-fornicators," Li Fong said, bitterly. "I talked to them, as one deserter to another!"

He darted to the gate house.

Cousin Shiu Shen caught his arm. "Don't be a fool! They might have taken your gold and still beaten Father to death."

"Better flog him to death than starve him!" He shook off Shiu Shen's grasp. "I am telling those sons of female devils a thing or two, and they'll never forget it."

He shouldered his way through the milling pack of farmers, servants, villagers, "Quit your screaming! Where is all this going on?" They pointed to granaries built after Li Fong left town.

They followed him, but at a distance. This relieved some of his apprehension.

The bandits were well organized. They had a wagon train. They had a caravan of pack animals. By putting enough grain in storage, they could sell it, later, at famine prices: it would be as

approach. The sun dimmed, as though beclouded. The three bandits noted these phenomena. They ceased their talk about the strange actions of the demented villager, and looked up, valuable as gold. Since the Son of Heaven had sent so many armies into Turkestan, into Manchuria, into Mongolia, there was no one to maintain order.

Li Fong approached the chief and his two assistants. They regarded him with interest.

"Honorable Sir," he began, "Distinguished Lords—possibly I could induce you to desist. Many will starve."

"They should keep and eat their buffalos," the chief said.

"Some do not have Your Excellency's foresight," Li Fong patiently pointed out. "I respectfully suggest that you take no more than half."

"Please elaborate?"

"Leave all the seed grain. If you take all that's in the granary, the starving will eat the seed grain now. Then comes total famine."

"Accurate observation," the chief conceded. He hefted a familiar brocaded purse, jingled it. "What inducement do you offer?"

Li Fong kowtowed. "The purse in Your Honor's hand is all that I had. I beg of you, let these people live. Come back two seasons hence. There will be more for you to take. This is the way of civilized folk."

"You are persuasive. But my men and I are doing dangerous work. We are not inclined to consider the future. Tomorrow, each may be secured to a stout frame, and sliced a slow thousand cuts. Or, one of us may be sitting on the Dragon Throne."

"You are amiable, appealing, quick-witted, a man of character. Sir, I respectfully suggest that you join us. I promise we will spare your village."

Li Fong got up from his knees. He brushed dust and chaff from his forehead. "I have been away six years. My father would not be pleased if I left, to become a bandit."

He retreated three paces, and bowed.

He retreated another three paces, and bowed again.

He retreated a third time, a like distance, and said, "Sir, I beg leave to depart. Thank you for hearing me."

The courteous chieftain bowed.

Li Fong, glancing about as he withdrew somewhat further, noted those who had followed him. He gestured, and hoped that they would retreat. He hoped that Mei Ling had not exaggerated...

There was one who, instead of joining in the retreat, was approaching him. She wore the dress of a peasant, and her complexion was that of a farm woman—but there was no way to disguise Mei Ling.

"Dragon Lady, you came to help me?"

"That is forbidden. I am here to wish you well. And to see you do what must be done. Without fear, without anger, without pity."

Li Fong raised his arms. Never before had he combined the sound, the cadence, and the gestures. The first staging had to be perfect: mantram words which had no meaning; the tone, which no untrained throat could shape; and the mudras, which only practiced hands could make.

The chief and his two henchmen were well away from those working at the granary. Curiously, and with a measure of interest, they regarded Li Fong, and his odd doings.

Apart from his own voice, Li Fong perceived other sounds: a curious whirring, a whispering as of a desert sandstorm's

A misty shape swooped down, circling the trio. The mist became a cloud. As the spirals tightened, the cloud became more dense. The three thus inclosed were startled. They eyed each other, perplexedly.

Li Fong's voice rose. His gestures became ever more stately. The bandits, now hemmed in, sought to rejoin their men. This they could not do. They began to strike and claw and lunge, but it was as though they hurled themselves against barriers of stone.

The spirals were dragon coils. Scales gleamed. Teeth glistened. Claws twinkled. The monstrous form began to glow. There was a tremendous roaring as a column of fire reached from earth to mid-heaven. The bandits busy at the granaries quit their wains and ran for the nearest horizon.

The fire subsided. The dragon coils faded, leaving ash, and molten gold. The rubies and sapphires had endured the heat.

Li Fong said, "Dragon Lady, if I'd known, I don't think I could have done this thing. My first, and my final magic. And that half-immortality you helped me win, I've lost that."

"But no bandit or tax collector will ever loot this village again," Mei Ling told him. "And, all you've lost was your fraction of immortality. We can ride the wind back to my home."

The people were recovering from their awe. Li Fong's father was hobbling along, the elderly servant following.

Li Fong sighed. "Dragon Lady, these are my own people, as they never were before. In your land of here and now, there'd be a few sleepings together and studyings together, and I'd come to the end of my mortal lifetime, before it fairly started."

"I didn't foresee this," Mei Ling said. "I saw only that there was a risk. And from this which has happened to us, you know that Dragon Folk also have their sadness." She pointed as the people came nearer. "See that one over there? In the dress of a servant? That one is your Hwa Lan."

Recognition grew. No cosmetics. No gleaming silks. No jewels. No lute. But, beyond any doubt, Hwa Lan, the sing-song girl.

"But—how—what—this is—"

"She is really as honest as you told me. I learned this, last night. In a little more than five years, she bought her contract. She told your father what had happened, and offered herself as a bond-maid to prove her good faith. He was free to keep her as a slave, or sell her to recoup some of his loss."

Mei Ling beckoned, and Hwa Lan came nearer. "Go, Li Fong—" She nudged him. "Always, the Dragon's Shadow protects you and her. Don't look back. I ride the wind alone, to my own land."

"Dancing Phoenix—"

Li Fong choked back the words. For a moment, he stood in a circle of aloneness, in the vacancy made by her departure. Then he stepped into the Red Earth, and faced Hwa Lan.

"Last night," she said, "you didn't recognize me, and no wonder! Each time we meet, I'm a slave."

He turned, and pointed to the scorched circle.

"I still don't know what happened," Li Fong said. "Wasn't lightning, but surely fire from Heaven. The strangest thing—the bandit chief and two of his men, burned to ashes. Now, when the gold they had is cool enough to pick up, I'll buy your contract, and we'll find you a new lute."

"And something to wear, and a bronze wine jug," she said, happily. "Just like it was when we met. And I'll sing of the Uttermost West, and the Mountain of the Gods—"

"Hwa Lan—Jade Lady—" He sighed, looked far away, and then shifted his glance to meet her glowing eyes. "Songs of the Red Earth are much better."

With a high-pitched whine the bullet took a long groove out of the rock wall to his right, showering him with sharp splinters. He flung himself awkwardly to the ground, feeling a splash of blood on his face where one of the hot, flying fragments had caught him. Simultaneous with the second crack of the rifle, another bullet kicked up dirt in his eyes with a *buzz* and a thud as it buried itself in the ground a few inches in front of his nose. He waited for a few seconds, blood pounding, before peering cautiously from his prone position along the narrow rock passage to where the girl stood—tattered denims moulding the fine shape of her wide-spread legs—squinting down the sights of her weapon . . . sights which were centered squarely on him!

"Lady, if you're planning to scare me you've done it already. If you're trying to kill me aim a little more carefully—I hate the thought of bleeding to death . . ." His voice carried to her, a hoarse, panting shout as she began to squeeze the trigger for the third shot. She eased her finger slowly out of the triggerguard to leave it lying there, a thought's distance away from sudden death.

"What are you after?" The way she said it—menacing, low so he could hardly hear—it was more than a question; it was a warning, and he knew he would have to answer carefully. Only sixty feet separated them and there was nowhere he could run. If she was any good at all with that rifle she could put a neat hole right through his head before he made five yards.

"Lady, I seen your fire-smoke earlier in the day, and I smelled your cooking a mile off. Smelled pretty good to a man who hasn't ate in three days—and when I did last eat it was a rat I was lucky enough to catch!" His panting came a little easier now. "But Lady, if you want me to move on . . . just you say the word and I'll be on my way. I'd be plenty obliged, though, if you'd allow me a bite to eat first."

"Get up," she ordered. As he climbed to his feet she stared at the stump where his right arm should have been. "You can't be a mutant—you're too old for that?"

He walked slowly, carefully up the defile, dusting himself off as he went towards the girl who was outlined, now, against the evening greens and browns of the small valley behind her. She had a nice set-up here, and she was alone—otherwise she wouldn't be toting that rifle herself. As he drew closer to her he saw the cave on the other side of the valley. Could hardly be more than a hundred yards across, that valley; more a saddle between the hills. Corn patch growing nicely . . . mutant strawberries . . . rabbits. She had real good legs . . .

—She saw where he was looking.

"Hold it right there." He came to a halt not ten feet away from her. "I asked you a *question*!" She swung the rifle to point it significantly at his middle.

"Mutant—? No, industrial accident, that's all—long before the war," he answered. "But I've been given the mutant treatment ever since. So has every cripple! Been kicked out of every town I ever went near for almost four years. It's no fun, Lady—'specially now they're *burnin'* mutants! Look, if you've any decency at all, you'll give me just a bite of what you've got cooking over there, and then I'll be on my way."

She thought about it, began to shake her head negatively, then changed her mind: "You're . . . welcome—but I'll warn you now, there's three unmarked graves in the corners of this valley. You try anything . . . I'll have no more corners left." She waved him past with the gun, taking a good look at him as he went. He was about thirty-five, forty perhaps. He'd probably put on age fast

War brought new horrors: mutants
and the men who hunt them.

Mother Love

by Brian Lumley

Illustration by Stephen E. Fabian

after the war. Feeling her eyes on his stump, he glanced back over his shoulder:

"Armless, I be—" he said in wry humor, gratified to see her relax a little. Then: "How come you're up here on your own? You've been here some years by the look of the place."

"I lived in the town on the coast back there, where the walls shine at night," she gestured vaguely behind her. "That place at the foot of the hills, just a heap of rubble now, you must have come through it to get up here. I was only eighteen then . . . when the war came. One of the first bombs landed in the sea, threw radioactive water all over the town. When my baby was born he was—*different*. The radiation . . ." She faltered, lost for words. "... My husband died quickly. What few people lived through it wanted to have my baby put . . . they wanted to kill him. Said it would be better for both of us. I ran off. I stole the rifle, shells, some seeds and one or two other odds and ends. Been here ever since. I get along fine . . ."

"You still got the mu—?" He knew it was a mistake before the words were out. The air seemed to go hard.

"Mister," she poked the barrel of the gun viciously between his shoulder-blades, "if you're a mutant-hunter you're as good as *dead*!" He staggered from the pressure of the rifle in his back, turning to face her, going suddenly white as he saw her finger tightening on the trigger.

"No . . .! No, just curious. Christ, I've been hunted myself—and it's obvious I *couldn't* be a mutant! What, me? A Mutant hunter? Why?—some places there's a bounty, sure—but out here in the middle of nowhere? I mean . . . do I look like a bounty hunter . . .?" He was pathetic.

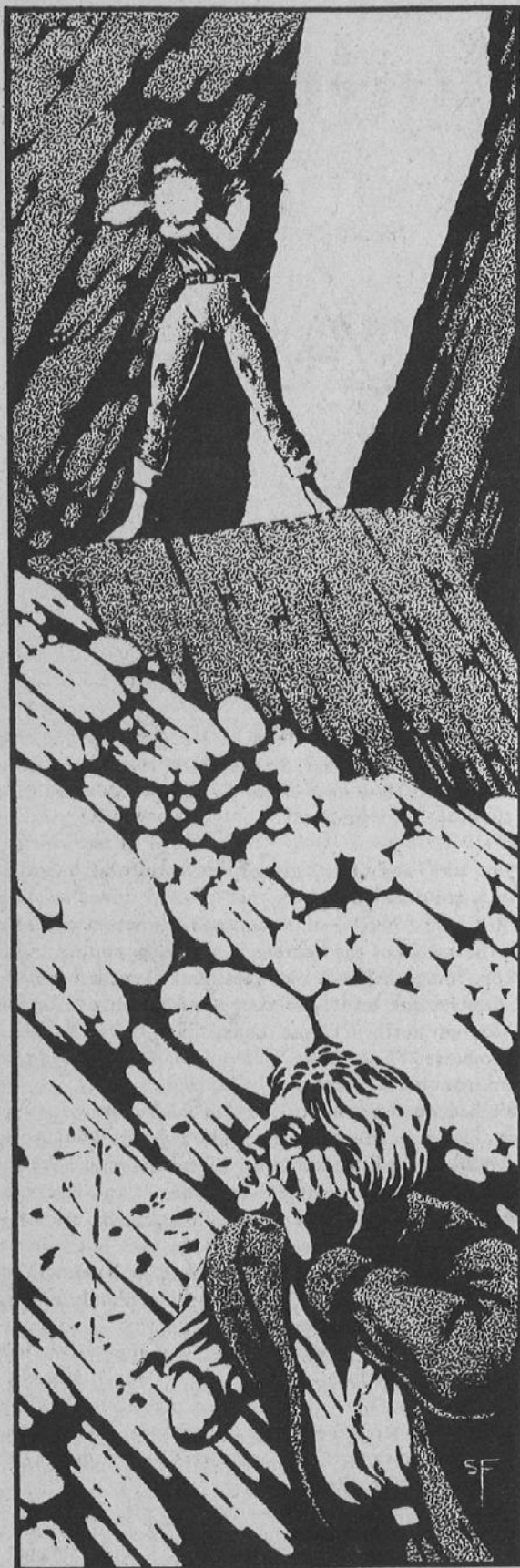
She relaxed again. "My baby . . . he . . . he *died*! No more questions." It was an order.

They had crossed the valley and the sun was starting to sink behind the hills. He peered eagerly into the pot hanging over the fire. The cave was a dark blot behind the glowing embers, with a home-made candle flickering at its back.

This was sure a good thing she'd got, he mused to himself, licking his lips.

She motioned with the rifle, indicating he should help himself from the pot. He took up a battered tin plate and heaped it with the thick, bubbling stew before dropping the heavy iron spoon back into the pot. Juicy rabbit bones protruded from the meat in the mess of stew on his plate. Without another word he started eating. It was good.

As he ate he looked the girl over again. She had a good face to match her figure. He could hardly keep from staring at the way her shirt swelled outwards with the pressure of the firm breasts beneath it. And it was that above all else—the way her shirt strained from her body—which finally decided his course of action.



He licked his lips and reached casually for the spoon again, crouching with the plate on his knees . . .

In a second he had straightened and the hot stuff was on her neck. Before she even had time to yelp from the shock he had brought her a savage, whip-lash, backhand blow across the face with the swing of a powerfully muscled left arm. As she spun sideways he nimbly grabbed the falling rifle out of mid-air and turned it on her. She started to scramble to her feet, a red welt already blossoming on her face.

"Stay put!" He held the rifle loosely in his hand, confident finger on the trigger, daring her to make a false move. "I'd shoot you in the legs," he said, grinning wolfishly, "so's not to spoil you completely. You wouldn't want to be spoiled *completely*, now would you?"

She cringed away from him on the ground. "You wouldn't . . . you—"

"Get up!" he snarled, the grin sliding from his face.

As she made to get to her feet he tossed the rifle behind him and slammed another roundly swinging blow to her face. She lurched backwards, falling, and before she could recover he stepped over her, planting his feet firmly, tearing the shirt from her supple body. "Thing was ready to bust anyway . . ." He licked his lips again as she screamed and tried to cover herself. "Shirt sure didn't tell no lie . . ." He grabbed her left wrist, twisting her arm up behind her back, forcing her to her feet. "Sweetheart, your feeding's good—now let's see what your loving's like; the Good Lord knows you've waited a long time!"

"Don't . . .! Don't do it. I fed you, I—"

"More fool you, sweetheart," he rasped, cutting her off, "but you may's well get used to me; I'm going to be here quite some time. You need a man about the place." He pushed her into the cave, noting that the candle at the rear stood beside a heavy black blanket, stretched luxuriously in a hollow on the floor.

The shadows moved in the dimness of the cave as he shoved her towards the sputtering candle. A few feet from the rear wall of rock she twisted under her own arm and pulled away from him. He laughed at the way her body moved as she tried to free herself. "No good getting all hot and bothered now, sweetheart—not with the bed all laid out for us . . ."

"It's not a bed!" she screamed, jerking her arm back in desperate resistance. The sweat of anticipation on his straining fingers let him down. Her hand suddenly slipped through his and he crashed backwards, off balance, onto the "bed."

There was instant, horrible movement beneath him.

"No . . .!" the girl screamed. "No!—that's not stew, Baby—it's a man!"

But Baby, who had no ears, took no notice.

The edges of the "bed" rose up in thickly glistening, black doughy flaps—like an inky, folding pancake—and flopped purposefully over the struggling man upon it. Subtly altered digestive juices squirted into his face and muscular hardness gripped him. He gave a shriek—just one—as the living envelope around him started to squeeze.

* * *

Hours later, when dawn was spreading like a pale stain over the horizon between the hills, the girl was still crying. Baby had taken a long time over his meal. He burped, ejecting the last bone and a few odd buttons. There wasn't even a back she could pat him on.

That day there was a new grave in the little valley in the hills. A very small one . . .

There was Something in the Lake. And the Something Killed

GHOST LAKE

by August Derleth

Illustrated by Denis Tiani

At the fork in the trail the Indian refused to go on. This was when it was evident that Taylor meant to take the north trail and not the west. The Indian had calmly gone past the fork, in the first place, expecting us to follow him into the west. Taylor had no intention of doing so.

"This way, this way," he said impatiently.

The guide simply turned and shook his head.

"What do you mean?" demanded Taylor belligerently.

The Indian pointed north. "Not go," he said, shaking his head again. He made a sign of evil. "Bad water," he went on, struggling with his English.

"Look here," Taylor said then, "we hired you to take us to the lake. We expect you to keep your bargain."

"Not bad water, not go," the Indian was emphatic. He waved to the north and lapsed into his own language. The lake we sought, he said—for I understood him, if Taylor did not—lay less than a day's journey almost due north. The trail led first to a small lake of "good water" but the "bad water" lay beyond that. There was not much of a trail; Indians avoided the lake; no one was taken there. The lake belonged to invisible beings none could see; they did not like men to come there. It was a place of evil.

I translated this for Taylor.

He flashed a scornful glance at the guide. "Wendigo?" he asked.

The Indian shook his head. What he said sounded like "Mujje-nepe."

Taylor turned to me. I shrugged. "What do we do now?" he asked. "Are you game to go on without him?"

"If you'll permit me my superstitions," I answered, "we'll go on. Just the same, it might be better to listen to him. He says not to go on the water, if we go there. Just to stay off the water."

Taylor snorted. "Hah!" he said. "Tom went there and didn't

come back. Nelia, too. They weren't to be found in the woods or anywhere near their gear. So they must have gone out on the lake and drowned. How do we stay off the water if we mean to look for them—or their bodies?"

* * * * *

The lake was beautiful and not too large, a body of placid water surrounded by pines that pressed down to the shore. We reached it just before sundown, and the water glowed and shone with the colors of the heavens in the west—copper and lemon and saffron, magenta and old rose and lavender, with the trees absolutely black on it, the kind of sunset only to be found in the Quetico or north. "Ghost Lake," the Indians called it; it had other names—"Lost Lake," "Dead Man's Lake," and others, all grown from native fears, real or fancied.

We had no time then to admire the beauty or solitude of the place. Evening came fast among the pines; it would soon be dark; we would have all we could do to make camp, have supper, and settle down for the night. So we got at it and it was dark before we had finished. The lake now lay black, with stars in its water. Loons called—not apparently from the lake but from some other water some distance away—and owls, and something made a steady, watery sound, a kind of washing sound, as if somewhere waves washed up along the shore.

Taylor was not communicative, any more than he had been ever since he introduced himself to me a week before in Kingman. A taciturn man, much given to his pipe, but disturbed with an agitation he concealed quite successfully for the most part.

"As I understand it, Mr. and Mrs. Gardner didn't come to this place together?" I asked at last.

He shook his head. "She came first. They had been separated. My fault," he said in a strained voice, so that I guessed that there had been something between the woman and himself. "It was a



reconciliation—or was intended to be. But you know something about this lake, and I've heard things. Why is it shunned?"

I shrugged. "I know little more than you do. It has a bad reputation. Like some of the river rapids. If too many lives are claimed by the rapids, they begin to have a bad reputation. That's understandable."

"But a lake!" protested Taylor, twisting his rugged face into a grimace of scorn.

"Very well," I said. "Not counting your friends—if that's what happened to them—this lake has claimed no less than seventeen lives in the memory of the natives."

"How do they know?"

"Oh, eventually the bodies have been cast up on shore."

"Well, people do drown. And primitive people live by superstitions. Civilized man has his share, too."

"There isn't a dwelling anywhere on the lake's shore. No invasion here, the way there is at other lakes. The Indians won't come near it. You saw how our guide reacted—nothing sensational, just stolid refusal to go close to it."

"It surely can't be compared to river rapids. It's quiet water."

"Is it?"

He cocked his head and listened to the washing sound of many waters.

"I didn't mean that, of course," he said. "Wind-driven waves washing on the shore. I meant disturbed . . ."

I broke in. "There isn't any wind."

I had noticed it almost immediately after I had first become aware of the water's sound. Though waves were most certainly washing up the bank, there was no wind to drive them. The night was still.

Taylor got up and went outside. I followed.

I came up behind him at the water's edge. The water rippled and stirred. Now a waning moon was rising, and the wan moonlight reflected from the lake's surface as far as the eye could see toward the dark line of trees opposite. The water from one shore to another was alive with movement, with ripples and little waves that came gently inshore. It was strange to see the ripples that drove the water in two feet over the land, washing in among the roots of the trees that reached waterward from the shore. There was no wind to make waves. The lake was agitated, rippling out from its center toward every shore, as if some great beast were stirring the water there. And the water seemed to come in farthest along the shore where we stood. Taylor stepped back a little.

"Damndest thing I ever saw," he said. "It's got to have some perfectly natural explanation."

"What is it?"

"There may be some settling of the lake bottom," he answered.

It was true, any considerable settling of the bottom would disturb the the water. I said nothing. I thought, though, that if there were that, we ought certainly to feel some tremor along the shore. There was nothing.

He seemed anxious to believe it. "Isn't that possible?"

"Yes," I said.

He turned and went back into the tent.

He hadn't said what he was looking for, coming here—not specifically. Some proof that his two friends were dead? Perhaps he needed to know particularly that she was gone, and meant to wait until her body, too, was cast up by the lake. He could indeed mean to skirt the lake in search of it.

I followed him and made ready, like him, to settle in for the night.

But I could not sleep. The lake fell silent, and gradually other sounds rose—the hooting of owls, the shuddersome cries of lynxes, the eerie laughter of loons, all rising from some distance—and the occasional voices of frogs, guttural, nearby.

Taylor, though, slept readily.

After two hours, I got up and went outside.

The lake loomed like something alive, an alert presence. It was placid now; not a ripple disturbed its surface, which, like a great mirror, reflected the stars. It gave the impression of opening to nether regions of space as the sky overhead—what could be seen of it above the lake—represented the vast star-spaces reaching far beyond sight into an eternity unplumbed by man—or any other living creature that might exist among the galaxies.

I stood in the starshine watching and listening. The sentient water, the dark, quiet trees towering along the shore all around, black against the moonlit sky, the reflection of the moon on the quiet water, like one watchful eye—all combined to stir a sense of uneasiness, a feeling of being observed, a conviction that the lake, like all else around it, *waited*. Uneasiness spread toward something akin to fear, an apprehension I could not define, a growing awareness of something incredibly old and evil, lying in wait to make itself manifest, for to the eye all was tranquil and serene.

I tried to shake myself free of a feeling that must have arisen from the residue of all the tales passed on about the lake, but I could not. The lake's brooding presence pressed in upon me more tangibly than the dark pine forest enclosing it; the voices of the distant birds—owl call, loon cry, lynx scream—the deep-throated songs of the frogs, like the strumming of some bass

instrument—all rose toward it and fell away with an odd effect, as if that body of water were a wall that repelled all sound; and indeed, no sound came from it—the birds and animals, even the frogs, did not give voice from its edge, but from some distance from the lake.

Then, as I stood there, a faint ripple of movement took place in the lake, a furling of water shoreward toward where I stood, as if a fish moved into the shallows there—and yet not quite the same, for this was no arrowed wave, as were it headed by a fish, but the general movement of the water, gently, insidiously. I watched, fascinated. It was a swelling, a surging of the water toward the shore.

I looked to either side. The moonlit darkness limited vision. I could not be sure, but it seemed to me that there was no concomitant movement of water on either side. Could it have been that the water was reaching toward the place where I stood *because* I stood there? But this was surely no more than a fever of the imagination.

I backed away, up the bank—a slight incline away from the edge of the water. Almost imperceptibly the water retreated, pulling back, and in seconds was calm again.

Disturbed, I returned to the tent, and lay, restless still, for some time before I slept, after a fashion.

When I woke in the morning I saw that Taylor had gotten up before me. He, at least, had slept untroubled. He had breakfast ready; the pleasant smell of bacon pervaded the woods, mingling with the pungence of the pines and the aroma of coffee. He had done more. I saw with a faint stirring of alarm that he had inflated the boat.

"You're going out on the lake?" I asked.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" he said, grinning. "Why not?"



Why not, indeed? In the morning sunlight the lake lay still, its water calm and cobalt, framed by the deep green pines and the shadowed darkness beneath them, where no ray of sunlight reached. Overhead the sky showed cerulean, cloudless. In the west the waning moon shone, a pale ghost of what it had been last night. The woods were alive with sounds—the rustling and stirrings of animals, the matins of birds.

"I don't know," I said. By daylight I could not give voice to the vague uneasiness I had felt by dark.

"You're not afraid?"

I smiled at his challenge, but said nothing.

"Then we'll go out."

"What are you looking for out there?" I asked then.

"Some evidence."

"A body," I put it bluntly.

He nodded curtly. "We can move along the shore—that'll be a lot easier than tramping through the woods."

I granted that, though the woods were more open than most and there was comparatively little underbrush; but what there was grew up along the lake's edge, making a search of the water line needlessly more difficult than it would be from out on the water.

So after breakfast we went out, paddling not far from the shore, and beginning the skirting of the lake. Whatever I expected, nothing happened, and presently I paddled with more energy, and joined in the melancholy search Taylor made so earnestly, craning to look up every inlet. I could only guess at the intensity of his relationship with Mrs. Gardner, for nothing of it escaped him beyond his initial admission of what he called a "close friendship," leaving me only to guess at the degree of intimacy implied. It hardly mattered. They had been close, all right, or else he would hardly have come all this way up into Canada to look for her body.

The sun's warmth, the still air, the far cries of birds combined to lull us. Heat shimmered from the open water. Apart from the grim search Taylor conducted, the morning was idyllic. Superstitions about the lake's reputation faded, receded, seemed ridiculous, as every night's fears always look by day. We moved steadily along the edge of the lake.

Taylor's search was futile. The shore inland invited in many places. Perhaps some day cabins would be put up here. And yet—I did not quite believe in such habitation; that it would come about seemed remote, not only because of the distance from any settlement. "Lost Lake" struck me as the most appropriate of the names given to this dark water.

We had got almost around the lake when the water began to stir. No other word could apply to it—for it was like a great animal that, resting, had awakened and begun to stretch, to flex its muscles. It was not ripples, not waves, but a sudden swelling. The surface of the water broke, became disturbed, agitated.

I looked up quickly. The pines stood motionless. There was no wind.

Of a sudden, alarm mushroomed up in me almost uncontrollably. I bent violently to the paddle.

"Head for shore!" I shouted.

Taylor looked at me agape. My shout echoed from the far shore.

Then an erupting swell almost upset the boat.

Taylor caught my alarm, and began to paddle furiously.

While we had been passing around the lake, we had floated

along with ease; but now, suddenly, terribly, it was as if we were in a sea of syrup, fighting a violent current. The water held us tenaciously, as if reluctant to loose its grip upon the frail craft in which we sat.

It seemed an eternity before we touched the shore. I leapt from the boat, Taylor after me. We bent and pulled the boat up on the shore, and, standing upright, looked back at the lake.

The water was tranquil, glasslike in its smoothness.

Beads of perspiration gleamed from Taylor's face as well as mine. Both of us were breathing hard.

Taylor snorted. "You rattled me," he said accusingly.

"You felt it, too," I charged. "You know you did."

"You rattled me," he said again. "You panicked."

I could see then that he didn't want to believe.

We carried the boat back through the woods to our camp. Not a word passed between us.

* * * * *

That afternoon we had visitors. Henry Germain, a tall, sturdy archaeologist in his middle sixties, came in from the north with his party. He seemed surprised to find us camped at the lake. I observed that there was not an Indian in his party; but presumably he knew the region well enough that he needed no guide.

We sat around over coffee and Taylor deliberately brought the conversation around to the legends of the lake.

Germain nodded brusquely. "Oh, I've heard all those stories. The Indians have attached legends to just about every lake and hill in the area. It's integral to their culture. You'll run into the same thing among Indians wherever they are—Sioux, Mohican, Aroostook, Apache—you name them."

"Are they true?"

Germain fixed a hard eye on Taylor. "What's truth?"

Taylor was impatient. "I mean, is there anything to them?"

"If you mean have people drowned here, yes. Bodies have sometimes been recovered. But not, after each drowning, the Indians tell us, until the lake has a new victim." He smiled. "It's all according to some plan, presumably. But," and here he sobered, "I never take even the wildest legend too lightly. Somewhere there's a grain of indisputable truth. If you keep searching long enough you may find it."

Taylor shrugged. "All that abstract talk."

"Well, truth's an abstract, isn't it? What's true for you needn't be true for me or for anyone else. The sun rises and sets—that's an absolute truth unless we get into semantics. Absolute truths are the same to everyone."

"And a lake that kills people?" broke in Taylor. "What kind of truth is that?"

Germain gave him a long, calculating look. "My field is archaeology, Mr. Taylor," he said.

In half an hour Germain and his party were gone, back down the little-used Indian trail along which Taylor and I had come. Taylor was in a black mood, and the lake, as a subject of conversation, was tabu. He made poor company. I couldn't understand why he should be so sour and withdrawn; he had convinced himself I had panicked him, and I wasn't inclined to argue with him. He could believe what he liked.

I turned in early to get some of the sleep I had missed the night before.

I woke at dawn. Taylor was gone.

I got into my trousers and went outside. Taylor was down at the lake. He had the boat into the water.

I went down to where he was bent over the boat. "You're not going out?" I said.

He looked up at me. "You coming along?"

I shook my head.

The lake lay like a mirror, giving back the treetops and the lightening sky. In the east Venus shone, a great burning eye, now of fading gold. In the west the spectral moon. I could feel the fascination of the lake, a tangible thing that seemed to draw me toward the water.

Taylor stood up. His face was grim, determined. He stood in an attitude of listening.

"Hear them?" he asked tensely.

"What? I hear a loon calling," I said.

"Voices. Human voices. They're calling. I hear her voice."

He did think he heard something. I heard nothing at all, nothing but the loon and the ringing silence—and the silence of the forest has a ringing for the ears. I've known it all my life. Perhaps the blood's sound echoing in the inner ear. But something is there to be heard. Not voices.

"You must have been in love with that woman, Taylor," I said.

"That's none of your business," he said. "Listen!"

I listened.

"There's nothing," I said.

He began to push the boat out a little, preparatory to jumping in.

"Don't go," I cried. "Don't go out there. You're crazy to go. What can you hope to find out there?"

He stood tense, looking out over the lake. "Look!" he said.

The increasing light made a strange pattern out in the middle of the lake, where mists were rising, shaping. The low mists along the shore stayed down, just over the water—thin vapors; but out there, in the middle of the lake, the mists were columns.

"There they are!" he shouted hoarsely.

He started to get into the boat.

"You're crazy!" I said again. I flung myself upon him, to hold him back. I was as conscious of the pull of the water as he was; I had less reason to yield to it.

He came around with the paddle and hit me on the left temple. I saw stars and fell back, stumbled against a root, and went sprawling.

When I came to, Taylor was gone. I saw him well out on the lake—and now the lake was no longer placid. It was alive with movement; every inch of its surface was agitated. There were great swells, foam-topped waves, and ripples that caught the first light and shone and sparkled like jewels. The still, windless air seemed to reflect the water's exultation, but not a needle moved

on any pine. The water seemed not malevolent so much as joyous.

I called to Taylor, urging him to come back.

He never heard or cared to hear, for his eyes looked ahead, his head never turned. His boat was tossing out there like a leaf in a swift-running brook. He made no sign to show that he was conscious of danger, yet the water was breaking around his craft, and here and there geysers of water shot aloft and fell back.

Every moment the water was becoming more violently disturbed. For seconds now and then I lost sight of Taylor and the boat altogether. I had to step back from shore, for waves were now coming inland as much as five feet and more. The air rang with the sounds of the water, rang and echoed into tumultuous outpourings of liquid voices, that sounded sometimes indeed as if human tones were integral to them. I stood disturbingly aware of the lake's violence, of the water's frenetic joy, a tangible thing as real as the ground supporting me, as real as the motionless trees ringing the lake.

Then, abruptly, the mood changed. The water darkened, as if clouds shadowed the sun; the surging joy triumphed and gave way to great geysers of water that towered ominously high above Taylor and the boat, which were lost to sight behind the columns of water mounting skyward; the very air was filled with a beast-like musk and every sense recoiled from a flowing-out of stark evil and horror.

And, as suddenly, the tumult of the water ceased. The towering geysers fell, the swelling subsided, the waves and ripples died down and, almost as by magic, the lake resumed its placidity. Joy, evil, horror—all were gone; what remained was only the unmistakable impression of watchful waiting.

Of Taylor and the boat there was no sign.

I went back down to the lake after I finished packing for the long trek back to Kingman. There was nothing I could do for Taylor. It was two hours since he had vanished, and I had no recourse but to report him missing. I looked out over that calm body of water for any sign of the boat. There was none.

The lake lay motionless, undisturbed under the morning sun. It did not seem possible that I had seen what I had seen. I knew there was little they would do about Taylor—nobody would make more than a token attempt to drag for his body, if that.

When I turned to go, something lighter in color caught my eye down along the shore from where I stood.

Thinking it might be Taylor's boat, I fought my way through some scrub growth and the tall pines to the spot.

It wasn't the boat.

Come up into the shallows there were the bodies of a man and a woman, clasped to each other. They had been in the water a long time before the lake gave them up.

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CONSTANT COMPANION
- A PRESUMED PSYCHIC
LINK BETWEEN
THE NETHER
WORLDS AND
THE WITCH
OR WARLOCK -
IT ASSUMED
MANY FORMS
- A CAT, A
RAT - OR
AN AMBIGUOUS
CREATURE
SIMILAR TO
A ?



Art and text by R. EDWARDS JENNINGS

Only mortals could slay the dragon--
but Olaf was old, Faith was a pony
and Silverheels was just a kitten!

Silverheels

by Glen Cook

Illustrated by Tim Kirk



In the old days there was a man of Telemark, up in Lochlainn, which you call Norway, who had a very strange adventure. His name was Olav, and he lived in Rauland Parish, beside Lake Totak. Everyone in the parish thought him a ne'er-do-well, because, instead of farming his land, he made his living by fishing the lake, and by trapping in the forests covering the sides of the valley leading down to the lake's eastern edge. Olav did not mind what people thought. He was content with his own sort of friends.

Save for a few animals, old Olav had lived most of his life alone. He had just two friends at the time of his great adventure: a mare pony named Faith, and a black kitten with white paws, called Silverheels. A precocious kitten.

They were very close, those three, and some of the more credulous parishioners thought him a wizard, or even one of the *huldre*-folk—the hidden people, the mischievous elves of that country—because he talked with his animal friends. But there was no truth to the rumor. The old fisherman was as Christian a man as any in the province of Telemark. He had merely saved a talent from childhood, a talent his neighbors had forgotten.

It was a fine, sunny day in June when Olav began his adventure. He had had a particularly fine catch the day before, so he called Faith and Silverheels, and said, "Friends, let's take the fish down to Rauland Market today. I need some salt, and a pink ribbon for Faith's mane."

So they got the fish, put them in two panniers on the pony's back, Olav set Silverheels up on top, and off they went to market. They had been walking about an hour when Faith noticed that Silverheels was sneaking fish from the baskets.

"Little thief, stop!"

"It's just a small one," said Silverheels, guiltily.

"But the fourth. And there'll be another, and another, and then how'll Olav get the money to buy my ribbon?"

"Oh, don't worry, Faith," said Olav. "We've enough to get the ribbon. But if Silverheels steals another fish, we won't get him his bowl of cream." Olav always bought Silverheels a bowl of cream when they took fish down to Rauland town.

Silverheels liked his cream. He took his paws out of the basket, and behaved very well. For a time.

Down around Lake Totak they walked, and came to the foot of Dovre Mountain, where trolls and *huldre* folk are said to live. They reached a turn in the road where an old grandfather of trees had fallen across a huge boulder.

They met a strange man around the turn. Very old he was, dressed in a grey robe, and wearing a white beard so long it hung to his waist. He was leaning on an oaken staff in the middle of the road, humming to himself.

"Excuse me, sir," said Olav, "but I have to get by so I can take my fish to Rauland. I have to get some salt, and a ribbon for my pony."

"He's not going to move," said Silverheels. "He's one of the *huldre*-folk."

The old man looked up then, staring at the kitten. Silverheels stared back, his head cocked naughtily.

"Silverheels is right," Faith said. "He's the king of the *huldre*. My dam told me about him."

The old man turned his strange eyes on the pony. She backed a step away. Olav crossed himself twice, hoping the sign would frighten the *hulder* away. Christianity had not yet spread to the Under Kingdoms.



"I'll buy your mare and kitten," said the bearded man. Olav thought his eyes seemed on fire, so intense was his gaze. Frightened, he crossed himself again, and replied, "I'll not sell my friends, all I have in the world."

"Well, if that's the case, you'll just have to come along too, Crazy Olav." Crazy Olav, that's what the villagers down in Rauland called him.

"Where?"

"A place with no name." The old man walked to the fallen tree and smote the boulder beneath with the tip of his staff. The sound was louder than the ringing of the bell in Rauland Church. As it died, a large door opened in the side of the rock. Olav could see a passage, lit by smoky torches, waiting within. He crossed himself again.

The old man stepped through the door, then beckoned the three to follow. Then they realized that they were *huldrin*, which is the name given those bewitched by a *hulder*. They could not keep their feet from starting down the path which led into the heart of the mountain.

Olav, Faith, and Silverheels followed the wizard through a long tunnel. It seemed it would take forever to get wherever they were bound.

Once they happened on a band of drunken trolls, but the old magician cast a spell so they would not be seen by the wicked *tusse*-folk. Had the trolls known of their visitors, they would have had a plump little pony for supper. And, perhaps, a kitten, or even a stringy old Norwegian.

A while later, they came to caves where dwarves lived. Olav marveled at all the gold and silver the little smiths had.

After more weary travel, they came to the end of the tunnel. Olav immediately knew they were nowhere in Lochlainn. He saw dragons soaring in the sky, *huldre* maidens catching sunbeams in great silver bowls, and knew that they had entered *Utröst*, the land of the elves.

He and his friends followed the old wizard across a strange land, a land where it was always late afternoon, and, at last, came to a great castle with many towers, which sat high atop a hill. *Huldre* knights rode forth to greet them, hailing the wizard "King," confirming Faith's identification. Princesses lined the grey battlements over the gate, waving gaily-colored handkerchiefs, bidding their father a welcome home. All the *huldre* squires and servants, dressed in their best, were clustered at the drawbridge. The old man stopped and greeted each as he led his captives into the fortress.

Olav, Faith, and Silverheels whispered to one another, questioning these strange events, and wondering what they should do. They wanted to go home, but were unable to escape the spell the wizard had cast. Naturally, they were frightened for there are many tales told in Lochlainn about the evil ways of some of the folk of *Utröst*.

Then little Silverheels succumbed to curiosity, and announced that he wanted to go on. Olav told him the tale of curiosity and the cat, but the kitten wouldn't listen.

The wizard led the way into a great hall where a huge meal was already set on the tables. There were just four places set: platters of meat for Olav and the king, a trencher heaped with fine fresh clover for Faith, and a little golden bowl of cream for Silverheels. Relieved, the three captives took their places at the Elfking's table.

When they were done, and after *huldre* maidens had brought

out huge stoops of chilled ale for Olav and the king, it was time to talk.

"Why did you bring us here?" Silverheels asked.

"Ah, little kitten, you're a bold one, I see. I've brought you here because I want you to help my people, in a way only mortals are able. You see, there are a pair of terrible dragons, Ironclaw and Hookfang, who are destroying the kingdom. My people cannot stop them because it's impossible for one under-earth creature to slay another. Only a mortal can give the gift of death to a creature of *Utröst*. And these dragons cannot be bested, save by being slain."

Olav and Faith shook with fear at the mere mention of dragons, for the *linnormen* have a dreadful reputation in their country, although no Norwegian could truthfully claim to have seen one. But little Silverheels was undismayed. "Why don't you use your magic to make them go away, old wizard?"

"Because a wicked sorcerer of the east, of a land where the sun never shines, is using a magic greater than my own. The *linnormen* are proof from my power. These dragons can be slain only by a sword of steel, and only a mortal can stand the touch of iron."

"Then you were certain I would come too?" Olav asked.

"Yes, you're too fond of your friends to sell them to a stranger. And there was my spell."

"Am I not too old for such carryings on? Anyway, I've never held a sword in my life. I wouldn't know how to use one. How could I slay a dragon?"

"You can do it easy, Olav," said Silverheels, cocking his head at the old fisherman. "I think it'll be fun."

"You're just a kitten," Faith scolded. "You've never even caught a mouse. What would you know about dragons?"

Silverheels pretended he couldn't hear her, because he couldn't think of an answer. Olav and Faith argued with the king and Silverheels until late in the evening (it is always evening in that part of *Elfland*), but the question was finally settled in spite of any of their wishes.

When Olav and the king were many stoops of ale along, a young *hulder* knight came running in. He bore evil news. "Sire," he cried, "the dragons have come to the castle proper. The Red Dragon, Ironclaw, is setting fire to the fields in the west. The White Dragon, Hookfang, is burning the farmers' village to the east. The country folk are fleeing into the castle, but many have suffered grievous wounds where they were touched by drops of dragonfire."

Silverheels hopped from his stool to the top of the table. He danced with joy because he had a chance to see a real live dragon. Faith and Olav grew very frightened. They were older and wiser, and knew dragons were no fun. The king grew sad. "My enemy has brought evil to the walls of my people. It is sad that you will not help, Olav."

Olav, too, felt sad, but he had always considered himself a wise man. And a wise man knows better than to challenge the might of a dragon. There are many bleached bones to prove it.

Silverheels suddenly gave a little kittenish "miaow" of excitement. His sharp ears had heard the distant roaring of dragons. He leapt to the floor and scampered across the room. Over his shoulder, he called, "I'm going to see the *linnormen*."

"You come back here!" Olav cried. "Do you want to get burnt?"

Faith ran after the kitten, but Silverheels evaded her. As he

went out the door, he called, "Old Olav, I think you're afraid."

That made Olav angry. "I'm no coward! I just know better than to get myself killed fighting dragons!"

"Old Olav, I think you're afraid."

Olav got madder. Without thinking, he snatched a heavy sword from the hands of a *hulder* knight, and went striding off after Silverheels. Faith looked at the old fisherman strangely, then timorously followed. The smiling Elfking came along behind the mare.

Silverheels skipped upstairs, pausing just often enough to taunt Olav into following. He led the way to the turret of a tall tower, the tallest of the castle. From that vantage point, both dragons, and the damage they were doing, could be seen.

In the west was the blood-red dragon called Ironclaw, and in the east, now destroying precious vineyards, was the ivory dragon called Hookfang. The monsters had already destroyed most of the *huldre* crops. The Elfking was red with rage, but he could do nothing to protect his people from this plague. The lightning-spells he cast, there on the heights of his tower, only served to draw the attentions of the dragons. Perhaps that was the idea he had in mind.

Ironclaw soared up in the west, blood against the sun. In the east, Hookfang spiralled into the sky, turning toward the castle, trailing smoke. Both dragons circled the tower widdershins. Ironclaw roared past at low altitude, a huge, winged snake. His talons and fangs gleamed in the evening sun, like golden scimitars. Smoke and fire trailed from his huge nostrils. Hookfang was close behind. The White Dragon was both larger and uglier, like a gigantic, winged crocodile. His smoke and fire seemed to cover half the sky.

The *huldre*-king told a hasty spell, then said, "Olav, the sword is iron. It is proof against all the magic of Elfland, but still must be used at the right time. You must use it only when you can smite the Red Dragon in the eye, or the White in the heart. Each is invulnerable, except in those places. I've erected a spell which will protect the top of this tower, and you, from their fire, but that protection will be destroyed the moment you strike your first blow. If you make that stroke count, you will need fear but one of them." Having said this, the Elfking hastily retreated into the tower. He slammed a heavy door behind him.

Olav was shaking. He tried the door, but found it locked from within.

"Old Olav, I think you're afraid!" said Silverheels. He thought it was all very exciting. Olav and Faith glared at him. He danced with joy at the prospect of a battle with dragons.

"Foolish kitten!" said Faith, shivering. "You'll dance to another tune when the dragons come."

The dragons flew three times round the tower before diving at the three. First came Ironclaw, spouting smoke and flame, then the White Dragon, attacking with his claws. The flame of the first dragon was turned by the *huldre*-king's spell. The claws of the second were unable to reach the friends because they were crouched beneath the battlements. As Hookfang wheeled up into the endless evening sky, Silverheels jumped atop the ramparts. He arched his back, puffed up his fur, and said some very unkittenish things. Olav pulled him down just in time to escape Ironclaw's second attack.

The three crouched under those battlements for a long time. The two great dragons swooped and swooped above them, like falcons after prey. The king's spell turned fire, the stone turned



claw, and it looked like nothing was going to happen. But old Olav was finding his lost courage by exposing himself each time he had to pull Silverheels down off the perilous battlements.

The dragons grew angrier and angrier because they were unable to harm their three puny enemies. Then Ironclaw, the elder of the two, swooped too low and caught a claw in a crack between stones. The talon broke. The Red Dragon sailed upward, bellowing terribly. Old Olav finally took heart. The dragons could be hurt after all.

When Ironclaw next came winging down, he tried to land on the small turret, apparently thinking he could win the battle simply by dropping his great weight atop the three. The three friends huddled beneath the battlements, trying to avoid claws and the great wind stirred by the *linnorm's* wings. The Red Dragon was far larger than the space where he had landed, and was having difficulty maintaining his balance. Precocious little Silverheels decided to push him off the tower.

He sprang to the battlements again, and began taunting the dragon. Ironclaw roared like a thunderstorm, and loosed a

tremendous lot of flame. Silverheels jumped barely in time to make it back to the protection of the king's spell.

Worried about Silverheels, Olav jumped up and started after the kitten, but he was forced to jump out of the way of a giant claw. He tripped, flung his arms out to catch himself. The iron sword flew through the air and struck the Red Dragon full point in the eye. With a great scream, the *linnorm* fell backward off the tower, his wings beating like the cymbals of a mighty army.

Mystified, Olav collected the sword from where it had fallen after doing its deed, and went to peer over the ramparts. Faith and Silverheels joined him just in time to see the Red Dragon crash against the flagstones in the courtyard far below. "See," said the kitten, "I told you you could do it."

A shadow grew around them, becoming larger and deeper. Looking up Olav saw Hookfang diving toward them in a fury. They scurried for the protection below the battlements.

The White Dragon seemed about to repeat the mistake of the Red. It landed on the tower and immediately began stalking the three. Wishing to treat them cruelly for the slaying of the other, Hookfang withheld his fire.

"Faith, Silverheels, get behind me," Olav ordered as he hefted the sword and braced himself for battle. The kitten leapt to the ramparts, then bounced onto the pony's back. She got behind Olav, watching over his shoulder. The fisherman retreated as the dragon stalked closer.

Round and round the tower they went, the dragon advancing, Olav retreating, time and again thrusting the tip of his blade at a small red heart on the monster's ivory chest.

"Oh, look!" said Silverheels. "The Red Dragon's still alive." Olav glanced over the ramparts. Ironclaw was moving his wings feebly in the courtyard, twitching his armored tail, and spewing out goutts of flame.

"But dying," said Olav. "He won't live much longer."

At his words, the White Dragon made a thunderous, angry sound with his wings, and dove straight at Olav. Faith squealed with fright, and ran. Silverheels leapt from her back to the battlements, and started taunting the dragon. That kitten was either fearless, or a fool. And what is it they say of the young?

Olav retreated as fast as his legs would carry him.

Faith was so frightened that she ran completely around the turret and butted into Hookfang's tail before she realized what she was doing. The dragon turned to snap at her.

"Wheel!" Silverheels screamed. "The Red Dragon's dead!" He had been looking down into the courtyard, and saw it happen. Then, with a grown-tom shriek, he leaped to the top of Hookfang's head. He tried to sink his little claws into the tremendous, fiery eyes, to blind the dragon so it could not see Faith. The eyes closed in self-defense, and the *linnorm* began shaking, trying to get rid of the little nuisance.

Something happened. Time seemed to stop. Olav, who had been moving in with the sword, eyes on the little red heart, stopped moving. Faith stopped trying to get her legs untangled. Silverheels stopped clawing at the dragon's eyes. Hookfang moved only far enough to look down into the courtyard. A black mist had formed there, concealing the body of the Red Dragon. A soft, high pitched keening sound came from the monster's throat. Then Olav, Faith, and Silverheels found themselves in the heart of a dense black cloud. They could see nothing.

A gust of wind blew the cloud away. Silverheels tried to

move—and found his claws were caught in hair. And Olav had the funniest look on his face. The kitten looked down. Why, where was the dragon? He was perched atop a tall, beautiful, dark-haired woman in white, with tears like crystals sparkling in the corners of her eyes.

Olav looked at the tiny red heart over the woman's left breast. "Oh!" he said. "Well!" Leaning over the ramparts, he saw a man in red lying on the flagstones. A mystery of Elfland.

"Why," said the voice of the Elfkling, "you've caught the daughter of my arch-enemy. They took the form of dragons so they could attack me."

"Oh," was all that Olav could say. He was watching the beautiful woman as she gently pulled Silverheels out of her hair, held his soft fur against her tear-streaked cheek. Silverheels winked at him.

"Well," said the king, "this calls for a feast, don't you think?" He started into the tower.

"Yes!" cried Silverheels. "A whole quart of cream! I'm a hero!"

"You're a naughty kitten," said Faith, "and if you had a place for it, I'd ask Olav to spank you."

"He was very brave," said the girl, in a voice as soft and beautiful as the breeze in the pines above Lake Totak.

"He was bad," said Olav, agreeing with Faith.

"Oh, no," she said with a pale smile, "he was a little soldier. A pity he was so brave on the side of evil."

"Evil?" said all three.

"Yes," she said, brushing a tear away. "But I forget that you're mortals. Don't they tell stories of the *huldre* in the world of men?"

"Why, so they do," said Olav. He'd heard them all his life. And never a one was good. "Have we been tricked?" he asked. "Why were you fighting?"

"This was our castle, and these were our lands, before the *huldre* put spells on us and drove us into the land beyond the sunset."

"He said he was unable to put spells on you..."

"Only in our dragon form, where we were invulnerable to everything but mortal-wielded steel."

"I'm sorry," said Olav.

"And me," said Silverheels. "I made Olav do it."

"I might think of a place to spank you yet," Faith told him. She was remembering a pink bow she would probably never see.

"You are all forgiven," said the girl. "You didn't know."

"What will you do now?" Olav asked. He was sad because of what he had done.

"That will be up to the *huldre*-king, won't it?" she said. "They say he has many wicked instruments in his dungeons."

There was a tremendous festival that evening. The *huldre* came from miles around, to celebrate the victory. The party went on for hours and hours, for where the sun never sets, the people need not hurry home. Olav drank the best ale of his experience, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Faith was tempted with just oodles of the finest clover. Silverheels lapped cream until he was round as a ball. But he did not talk much, which was unusual. He always had something to say about everything.

At last, the great party came to an end. "What can I do to repay your kindness to my people?" the king asked. "Would you like a bucket of gold, or a handful of rubies?"

Olav shook his head sadly. "No, no wealth. Maybe my salt,

and a ribbon for Faith, and a hand along the path home. I need nothing else. I have Faith, and Silverheels, and my nets and traps, and what more could a man desire?"

Silverheels had been whispering in Faith's ear. And she had been nodding her head sagely, with female wisdom. Said Silverheels, "Well, I've a request . . ."

"Behave yourself!" said Olav.

"I want the girl," said Silverheels. "I claim her!" Well, how bold can one little kitten be?

The king thought for a moment. "Why not? She'll be less of a threat in the world of men. She's yours."

"And I have a request," said Faith, and she whispered in the king's ear.

He chuckled, gave Olav a sly look. "Yes, I think that's perfect. He did kill her father. And there's a law in his Christian Bible . . . Your request, too, shall be granted."

Olav was mystified. He looked at Faith, but she ignored him. So. She had a secret, and would not tell him until she was ready.

"Come," said the king. "We'll find the girl, then show you home." And, shortly, they were under the mountain once more, going past the mines of dwarves and the place where trolls dwelt. The king opened the door in the boulder with his staff, and pointed to the place where he had found them. "There," he said, "I think we all have what we want. Farewell," and with that, the king went back into the mountain. The door in the boulder closed, as if it had never been.

Olav looked around, happy to be back in his own land. He had

always loved it, but now it was even better. He looked at Silverheels, thinking of punishments—the kitten was grinning. Why, so was Faith. And the girl, whose name he had discovered to be Amethyst, why, even she wore a tiny smile. Mysteriousest and mysteriousest.

The mystery was resolved when they came to the edge of the lake. At Faith's bidding, Olav looked down into the water—and saw a stranger's face. No, not a stranger. His own, but forgotten, it had been so long ago. He was young, young as the girl. And his spirits were high, as they had not been for decades.

"Even the *huldre*," she said, as she took his hand in hers, "can show an occasional kindness."

"Well!" said Olav. "Well! What do you think of that?"

"I think we ought to go home," said Silverheels. "I'm hungry."

"And the fish in my panniers are starting to smell," said Faith. "I want to smell nice when we see the priest."

"Yes, well, home," said Olav.

So they went to their little home above Lake Totak, and unloaded the panniers, and went back to doing things as they had always been done, except that Olav and Amethyst went to see the priest. And, though she promised the priest she would forget all her witchcraft, well, there always seemed to be lots of ribbons for Faith, and Silverheels stayed fat on mysterious bowls of cream.

Oh, Silverheels never did get the punishment he deserved. That precocious kitten grew into one of the most mischievous and rascally toms ever to plague the parish of Rauland.



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Dragon Saga

by Saliitha Grey

After the dragon emigration from Britain, the days of the knights were numbered. When chivalry was discarded in favor of modern civilization, the residents of the Scottish Highlands and South Wales were astounded to discover dragons were once again in their midst. These were old traditionalists who never wanted to leave in the first place and had merely crossed the Channel to France. On meeting a group of French knights, these dragons deemed it more honourable to die as British subjects defending their homes against British knights, than die as strangers in foreign lands—which would also be giving the French knights an unfair advantage. So these dragons returned to the homes they had so recently left and set to work amassing huge fortunes from those left by the emigrants. Some were killed, but most had found real will to survive and they were a very important factor in the death of knighthood. The major families came to be the Dragons of South Wales and the Dragons of Scotland.

Geoffrey Athelbert Philip Charles Dragon, his wife Millicent Victoria Winifred Mary, their son Godfrey Daniel Ethlered Albert and their daughter Geraldine Elizabeth Katherine Grace lived in a castle in the highlands. Their tenant farmers kept them amply supplied with cows, sheep, pigs and other necessities of life. They had a hunting preserve where they procured such delicacies as deer and wild boar, although they had to be very careful about forest fires. Geoffrey said it made hunting more of a challenge that way.

Geoffrey was a model British conservative. He even had a powdered wig for formal occasions. He favored umbrellas,

bowlers and a tailored suit of grey pearls or onyx, though his wife preferred him in emerald green trimmed with gold and ruby buttons, which she said went so well with his complexion. Millicent was a country gentlewoman, but she liked to dress up and go out to show off once in a while. She knew they made a handsome couple. Geraldine was only 130 years old and still somewhat of a tomboy, but Godfrey Daniel was 190 and determined to strike out on his own.

Down in South Wales, the ddragon boys (reginald, 180, and tthomas, 170) were also trying to leave the nest. They wore bell-bottomed wheat jeans and tie-dyed tee shirts, and they were constantly playing their electric guitars. So the ddragons and the Dragons agreed to let the three boys get an apartment in the city together.

Landlords in London weren't too happy to see Godfrey Daniel, who, being the oldest, was in charge of finding a place to live. So he rented an abandoned warehouse on the Mersey River, decorated it with psychedelic posters, black light and tatami mats and sent for rreginald and tthomas.

Reginald and Tom, as they came to be known, were eager to get into a singing group but couldn't seem to make it. So Godfrey Daniel took up the drums and the Scaly Green Fire-Breathing Dragons became the hottest group in Liverpool. Geraldine joined the group three years later, playing bagpipes and doing an occasional vocal.

Geoffrey and Millicent were horrified. Only the ddragons were still speaking to them and nobody else was speaking to the ddragons. So the two families packed their belongings, divided their lands among the tenant farmers, and emigrated to Canada, where they could begin anew in anonymity. Geoffrey and Millicent became Jeff and Millie Gordon and ddragons became the Dgardons. They built split-level homes in an unpopulated area by Hudson Bay, where you can sometimes see them splashing morosely about. But they are haunted by the disgrace which forced them from their homes. Reginald, Tom, Geraldine and Godfrey Daniel had all become vegetarians.

The Lorn of Toucher

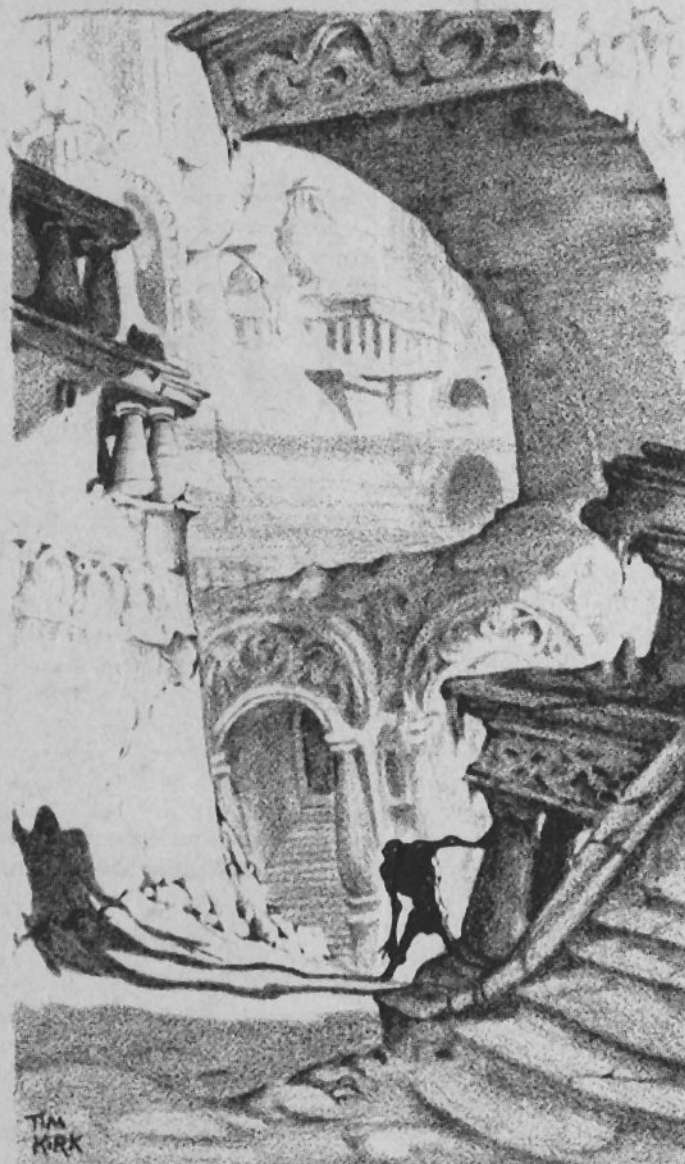
by Ross Rocklynne

They were both fresh young men, comparatively new to the S. P. Ace Corporation, but full of that superlative confidence which comes to those who have learned their professions well. For these young men were well versed in the rational technology of an age that had conquered the planets—but at the moment they were placing their feet where bright young men were not supposed to tread.

"Ready? Then let 'er go!"

Root's slim fingers eased in the control bar, and the flashlight—a ten-cent store item—began to fade off the grid. At





thirty seconds past zero, it still lingered as a pale, transparent image of itself; at which point Root moved the rheostat up to the check mark, and the flashlight melted into Dimension Q.

"Hoo, booy," yelled the other man, Ed Potter, "there she goes! Whaddya think ol' S.P. would say if he knew we were using the lab nights for this wild stuff?"

"Give us a promotion, natch! Now we wait."

"Yah. For something—or *somebody*—to pick up the flashlight over there, fumble the beam on—"

"—which activates the connecting relay—"

"—which yanks the Dimension Q'er, plus the flashlight, over here."

"Yah, yah. Can't help but happen. The rules of logic."

"The irrefutable equations which run the universe," bumbled Potter.

"The natural order of things."

"And because we say so!"

Dimension Q!

A miasma of yellow vapor blew straight up from the chanel of the swamp as the man arose from it. Effortlessly, as the obedient air sucked the poisonous slime off his pallid nakedness, he moved along the edge of the encroaching forest. Licking a last smudge of greenish matter off his strangely formed upper lip, he shouldered against trees which leaned away from him and broke into flame as he glanced at them. He moved beyond the forest, sometimes as tall as the flaming trees behind him, and then again no larger than the frightened shrubs which hopped away as he approached. These shrubs did not get far, for his arms grew long, snatching them off the horizon. He brought the trembling flowery things to him, close to his eyes which had wet red lips instead of lids. He did not eat them, however, but with a great roaring laugh shaped them into balloons with pedaling arms and legs and sent them soaring aloft. He waved his hand to his left, where minareted buildings shoved quickly out of the soil until a stately, half-ruined city faced him. Amongst these streets he walked, leaning against walls and tumbling them until he tired. At this point, he reached his arm high into the sky. It turned a puscid purple, raining hasty black syrupy drops of ichor which he rubbed into his eyes. So, having diverted himself, having eaten, he sat down to sleep and saw the ten-cent store flashlight, examined it, and immediately turned it on.

"For Pete's sake, Root, keep that gun on him! Give him an idea of what he's in for if he gets off the grid." Potter sidled away, watching the incredible creature hunched on the grid, his lipped eyes shrewdly studying them. He fumbled for the phone while Root, suddenly feeling too young, held the Smith & Wesson.

"God, I wouldn't want to kill you," he whispered, half crouching. "Just stay there, until we get some help. If we'd have known—"

The man spoke, slowly, measuredly, from petaled lips.

"If I were you, Potter," he said, "I'd get away from that phone. By no stretch of the imagination could I let myself be captured."

Potter's fingers, at this, shook so badly that he abandoned his attempt to dial the security guard, instead dialed O, and screamed, "Operator!"

"Stay there!" called Root, the gun shaking badly.

"Oh, I'm not going anyplace," came the measured response, and the man raised the flashlight. A pale beam caught the telephone. It boiled, fumed sulphurously, collapsed into a black puddle. Potter mouthed something obscene and hoarse.

"You can't do that," he said. "That's only a ten-cent store flashlight."

The flashlight was a circle of chrome and lighted lens turned toward Root. The gun jerked from his hand.

Root wept. "It doesn't work that way," he choked. "Don't you see? It's not the way things are. In God's name, who are you?"

"I—I am the Lorn of Toucher."

"That doesn't mean anything to us," Root choked.

"Does it have to *mean* something?"

"Yes! Everything means something. The laws of cause and effect. That flashlight. You can't do this!"

The flashlight blinked twice more, very briefly. The Lorn of Toucher looked about him, shrewdly appraising his new situation, then glanced at the silent forms on the floor.

"I can do it," he said. "And if you need a reason, it's—*because I say so!*"

Tomorrow's Mask

by Emil Petaja

The future stood revealed. . . but not the future they wanted

Illustrated by Steve Fritz

"Margaret, I have an insoluble problem!"

"Only one, Doctor Swayne?"

Margaret gave her sheep-dog head a toss, grimacing as she adjusted her laundry-hamper torso on the rolling arm of her fireside chair, her inevitable perch when the telephone nagged her from the bookstore in front to her miniscule apartment in the rear. She was accustomed to having the little doctor call her up when a particular case drifted beyond the limits of civilized misbehavior; the extravagant vagaries of the human mind seemed without end and frequently baffled even such a perceptive psychiatrist as Dr. Swayne. Still, and all, could be that some of his patients and their families might not have taken it kindly if they had known the estimable doctor took it upon himself to consult, from time to time, his dear friend the High Priestess of St. Paul's Coven: Margaret Hummel, seller of mystical books and modern witch!

Margaret fidgeted while the telephone gave out nothing but an empty cavernous drone.

"Well?" she snapped impatiently. "What is it this time?"

"Excuse me, Margaret. I went to close the door. Little outer offices have big ears."

"I'm very busy this morning," she hinted.

"I'll be brief, honest. It's a patient of mine. Miss Karen Bronson."

"The old Lars Bronson lumber baron family?"

"Yes. Very rich."

"Um. Didn't know there were any Bronsons left. A wild predatory clan, from what I've read."

"They were that. But those were the bad old days. Karen Bronson is a lovely little lady, around fifty I should say, fragile as

a piece of Limoges china, still she's got steel wires inside that slender body of hers. A remarkably self-willed woman, self-sufficient, too, except for one thing."

"Yes?"

"Her daughter, Jane."

"Miss Bronson has a daughter. Tch!"

"Adopted, of course," Dr. Swayne added hastily. "Jane's young mother and father were servants of Karen's in the old Bronson Mansion. Nice youngsters, but a little rash, perhaps. They went skating one Christmas Day on a small lake north of the city; it had been a mild winter so far, and the ice gave way. They were alone when it happened and were both drowned. You probably read about the tragedy. About—yes—fourteen years ago. You were here then."

"I remember vaguely."

"Anyway, Karen Bronson took a liking to little Jane. Karen had never married. I can't get her to talk about why but no matter. She is the last of the 'wild clan' as you call them. Jane was and is a very charming and amiable child. Karen adopted her legally when she was ten. She gave her a first-class education, beautiful clothes, all possible advantages."

"Very commendable," Margaret rasped. "But please get to the problem!"

The doctor gave a dry bark.

"Anyway, Karen has recently developed several disturbing symptoms. Her heart, mostly. She finds it hard to breathe. She can't sleep. She hurts here, then there."

"What does her physician say?"

"Gives her a clean bill of health. She's sound as a dollar."

"So he sent her to see you?" Margaret grimaced.



"Right."

"And you have already diagnosed her problem as—?"

"Jane."

Margaret gave her large white head a toss.

"Too much, too soon? Problem of delinquency?"

"Not at all. Jane is as good as gold. Too good, maybe. It's not in nature for anybody to be all good."

"You're being diffuse again," Margaret accused. "We'll get nowhere."

"All right, I'll hurry it along. Boiled down, Karen is upset because her foster-daughter wants to get married. Karen keeps insisting its quite all right with her, but after only two sessions with her, sifting out her self-deceptions, I became positive that she had a deep-seated antagonism about this marriage."

"The young man—is he suitable?"

"Very. He hasn't much money, but he has lots of promise and is a very hard worker. His family is okay. In fact, Brian Quinn is a most acceptable young man. Jane is very much in love with him, and he with her. I met them together at a dinner Karen arranged for me and I was much taken with Brian. He is handsome, has a quick mind, and is obviously sincere in his love for Jane. I don't think that Jane is a probable heiress to the Bronson fortune matters a whit to him."

Margaret sighed.

"This is too simple. There must be something very wrong. It seems to me Karen's problem is pure jealousy. She has known what it is to lose someone, from her early affair, and now she can't bear losing Jane."

"Um," said Dr. Swayne, as if he were nodding in agreement. "But please picture Karen as she really is. She is not a greedy self-centered old biddy; nothing of the sort. She's always had money and this breeds a streak of selfishness. But Karen Bronson is a fine woman; she's freely given Jane everything a girl could possibly want. Perhaps she feels that she has invested quite a lot in the girl and doesn't want to lose her now."

"Bosh!" Margaret snorted. "What's to lose? If she is the fine intelligent woman you say, she will come 'round. As they say, she won't lose a daughter, she will gain a son. And grandchildren, no doubt. She ought to be delighted. I say, let them get married at once!"

Dr. Swayne heaved a deep sigh.

"It's not so easy, Margaret. In one of her rare flashes of wild passion Karen told Jane that if she married Brian she would have another heart attack and die."

"Another?" Margaret heard an alarm bell booming inside her uncanny, psychic mind.

"She has had three so far. And for no physical reason. Each one followed Jane mentioning Brian and their marriage. Jane is terrified. Karen's doctor is scared. I'm scared, too. That's why I'm calling you!"

"You've left out something, doctor," Margaret said, frowning.

"No-o. Only to emphasize the breed Karen springs from. The Bronsons were rugged, dominating, accustomed to having their own way—or else. It has become a psychological and physical habit, and Karen Bronson is the very distillation of the whole breed. If she says she will die, *she will die*. Now do you get the whole picture?"

"Yes."

"And you'll see Karen? Talk to her?"

"Not Karen," the witch said. "I want to see Jane. I believe that Jane holds the key..."

The girl who pushed open the bookshop door promptly at eight that evening, making the silvery camel's bell over it tinkle its warning, was pretty as any model on a magazine cover. Greeting her, Margaret let her eyes sweep across the slim well-groomed figure, the delicately poised head, reading her in one penetrating glance of those shrewd robin's egg blue eyes.

Closing and locking the door against late browsers, Margaret bobbed her great head in approval. Jane had dark brown hair that was coiffed page style and grave hazel eyes, honest intelligent eyes which were just now touched with anxiety. There was an empress tilt to her chin, a Bostonian elegance to her tailored rust and green ensemble. Margaret had met Karen Bronson once, years ago, and she now felt as if she were meeting a pastiche of the last Bronson, mannerisms unconsciously copied since childhood. She could almost see the shadow hand of Karen (however velvet-gloved) behind Jane's every movement and gesture.

"We can talk better in my little back parlor."

"Thank you, Miss Hummel."

"Margaret, please."

Jane nodded and moved briskly to the seat the witch indicated, in front of the leaping fire. She sat down stiffly, while the orange glow of the flames reflected in dark eyes that stared unconsciously at the white-haired woman in wondering awe.

"Have some tea, dear." Margaret removed the tea cosy from the silver pot at her elbow and poured into fragile Italian cups that were a gift from a devoted Florentine artist she had once helped.

They sipped in silence; Margaret wanted to give the girl a few moments to adjust herself to the peculiar aura of the room and to her presence, to relax negative tensions. Margaret was the kindest creature in the whole world but Jane had no way of knowing this.

"I've taken the liberty of delving into your family background, Jane," Margaret said finally, rattling a handful of well-scribbled papers.

"You mean Karen's."

"No, dear. Yours. I got your birthdate and other pertinent facts through Dr. Swayne's assistant and I've spent most of the afternoon doing your chart."

"Astrology?" There was the barest trace of irony.

"You don't believe in astrology, Jane?"

Jane shook her head. "But then I've never been exposed to it. I know absolutely nothing about these things."

"Fair enough," Margaret said. "I've written a book about it, a sort of layman's primer. I'd be glad to lend it to you."

"Perhaps I could buy one?"

Margaret laughed. "I'm in the book business, as you see."

Jane smiled, blushing for fear she had said the wrong thing. Now her hazel eyes clouded, the smile was a tight line.

"Can you really help us? Brian and me?"

Margaret winced, thinking of how Dr. Swayne wanted her to help Karen. Never mind, she mused, helping one of them might be helping all; she disliked divisions into enemy camps.

"I can try. But suppose you tell me about it. I want your point of view."

Jane was normally shy, discussing her deepest feelings with a stranger, but Dr. Swayne had briefed her and this, plus the mystical aura of the witch's personality drew her out entirely. She was a sensitive herself, Margaret knew this at once, and without knowing what she knew, Jane realized that this weird old woman had one foot, or at least a toe, in higher dimensions.

Her story was substantially the same as Dr. Swayne's, more

personal and emotional, of course. There was heavy emphasis on her devotion to Karen.

"She's been so wonderful, always! She took me in when I was four years old. I owe her for every mouthful I've eaten since; for my clothes, my education. Nothing was ever too good for me. Why, it was because of her I met Brian. How can I be ungrateful now?"

"There's such a thing as carrying gratitude too far," Margaret said gently.

"Karen is the finest woman you could imagine!"

"Of course, of course." Margaret's voice was soft, dry. "She gave you everything, you say. But you gave her a great deal, too. Love. Devotion. She had your childhood, your lavish adoration, to warm and comfort her all these years. Your endless capacity for tenderness. Nothing was too good for her, either. You mustn't give her your whole life. You are an individual human being—not a carbon copy of Karen Bronson."

Jane blushed.

"Is that bad?"

"Could be," Margaret told her. "Could be bad, for you both! Perhaps subconsciously that was what Karen wanted to do—make you into another Karen, a projection of herself. Maybe having a child to love wasn't enough for her. You owe her a great deal, but you owe yourself something, too."

"Karen didn't ever have—"

"I know. Perhaps she doesn't want you to know love, either."

Jane stiffened, thoughtful and silent. Anger swarmed in her eyes, and defense of her idol.

Margaret went on inexorably.

"I heard about the others who courted you. Some of them were nice. They weren't all fortune hunters. Obediently, you brought them home to meet Karen and one by one she disposed of them all. Now, Brian. You're both seriously in love. But Karen doesn't want you to marry Brian so she becomes ill."

Jane shivered.

"You make her sound like a monster!"

"Sorry. I only want you to see things in their proper perspective for the first time in your life, not colored by Karen. We're all a little selfish underneath, but most of us manage to rise above it. There seems to be something more sinister in the Bronson blood. With the old Bronsons it came out overtly with smash and take tactics. With Karen it is milder, of course, but the insistence on having Her Way is still lurking there. She loves you, but this very love could become an obsession that might destroy both of you."

Jane choked down a sob.

"But I can't just let her die!"

"Perhaps she won't."

"She will!" Jane bobbed fiercely. "If she says so she will die! She's like that! You don't know!"

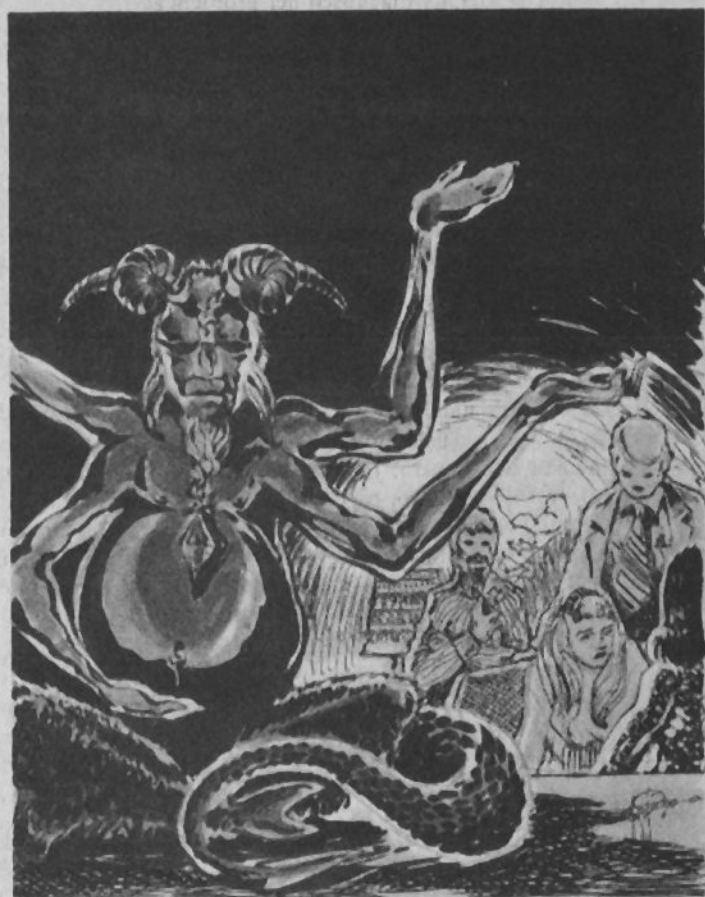
"I think I do, Jane. And I'm forced to agree."

Jane got up and paced, sobbing.

"What can I do? If I have to give up Brian I'll—"

"No, you won't. You aren't of Karen's blood. You won't die. But you will live out your life in bitter frustration. I can see you ending up twenty years from now in a sanatorium for the deranged."

Margaret had a sudden flash of what she called alternate-precognition; she saw Jane's pretty face pinched and drawn, her smudged eyes staring wildly from one corner of an



antiseptic white room to another, searching wildly for something they would never find . . .

Margaret cocked an eye at the gibbous moon floating behind a tenuous webbery of clouds drifting across the deep spaces of Autumn night. In a moment the enormous oak door of Torn House opened in front of her and Wayne Martin beckoned her in. Margaret was grateful that Wayne would allow them to use the old stone out-building to the rear of the grounds for tonight's experiment. The old carriage house seemed on occasions to tremble just on the brink of other dimensions; sometimes, in her High Priestess robes, Margaret had actually felt the tingling presence of Others in the barren room. It was something about this particularly spot of land, as if there was a thin spot where strange mystical influences leaked through.

Margaret bustled into the firelit library and Wayne poured them coffee.

"After you called I got things ready," Wayne said. "Except for the mask. You have that?"

Margaret nodded, giving the tall cadaverous man the smile she reserved for her closest friends.

There was a silent moment while they sipped coffee, which was interrupted by the thrumming of the door knocker. Wayne hurried to let the newcomers in. Jane Bronson was in tow of a young wide-shouldered man with a touse of crisp dark hair and craggy but amiable features. He looked around the library, keeping a muscular arm around the girl, as if expecting to see a wild alchemist's den of some kind.

"This is Brian Quinn." Jane spoke his name and glanced up at him as she did in a way that reassured Margaret completely. Their marriage was a right thing; it must be.

She took Brian's hand warmly.

"Wayne Martin," she introduced their host. "He'll help us with the experiment."

"Take off your coats and sit down for a moment," the tall man smiled. "I'll pour you some coffee."

They obeyed rather self-consciously, then Brian shot a look from Wayne to Margaret.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of this. Experiment, you call it."

"I assure you, there's no danger," Wayne told him.

"Except failure, of course," Margaret put in briskly. "It's a shot in the dark."

Brian frowned.

"I don't much like the sound of it."

"Wait until you hear what I propose at least," Margaret said.

"I shan't bother to go over your problem again. It simmers down to one thing: Karen Bronson has announced that if you two get married she will die. What we must find out is—*will she die?*"

Brian blinked over his coffee cup.

"In order to find out that we'd have to see into the future!" he exclaimed.

Margaret's eyes gleamed.

"Exactly. That is just what I propose to do—see into the future."

"But how—"

"As a matter of fact looking into the future is a very ancient and honorable art," Margaret pointed out. "You have heard of Nostradamus, perhaps the most famous example of forecasting. I could cite others, without end. But we want to go beyond simple forecasting. We want to try actual precognition. There are many authenticated examples of this, too." She turned to Jane urgently. "In order for our experiment to succeed we must have your complete whole-minded cooperation. Do you think you can do that?"

"How can I believe such an impossible thing as seeing into the future?" Jane blurted.

Margaret began to recite case after case of actual precognition. Random cases. Specialized experiments. She pointed out such things as the urgent telegram dispatched from San Francisco in 1906 asking for help, unsigned, sent *before* the quake. There were many others. Margaret's voice was firm and hypnotic and after an hour she felt the change in Jane's skeptical mind—the doubt turning into wonder, then the gradual shading into belief.

"Now we are ready!" Margaret closed her lecture and stood up with a breathy sigh.

Now Brian took on a stubborn turn.

"I'm still against it!" He put his arms around Jane. "You've got to marry me without all this—this—"

Jane shook her head tearfully.

"I can't, Brian. I'll never marry you unless I know for sure. I can't kill Karen. We'd never be happy if that happened."

"Listen!" Margaret admonished them. "In addition to forecasting both your horoscopes I have gone into divergent paths in both your lives. 'Ifs', you might call them. As you know, the stars do not compel—they only indicate the proper path to take. I have gone into a probable future for you both if you do *not* marry, and this is it:

"Jane will continue to live with Karen, a bitter old maid. She will be worse off than Karen was for she won't have a Jane to brighten her life. Little by little Jane and Karen will grow to despise each other. There will be no happiness in that great Bronson mansion. None. Karen will shrivel up and die, much sooner than she should. And when she does die it will be too late. Jane will realize this and something in her will snap. She will end a long miserable life in a sanatorium for the insane."

Jane stared at her in horror.

"And Brian?"

"Brian will be killed in a drunken brawl; having lost the only thing which would have made him completely happy he will crumple up his life and throw it away like so much debris."

There was a long silence.

"This *will* happen?" Brian licked dry lips.

"It could. Both your horoscopes incline toward these things without each other to complement your lives. I have used other means at my disposal."

"Margaret is very gifted," Wayne said. "Believe her."

Jane took Brian's hand.

"Brian! We've got to try!"

Brian's face was twisted with shock. He held Jane close, fiercely, then turned to the witch and nodded.

A mystical pentagon had been inscribed on the bare floor of the stone carriage house and in its center was a high-backed chair, ornately carved. At the points were tall candles, the only lights in the room. The stone room was innocent of all modern appurtenances.

Margaret motioned for Jane to sit down in the chair. She took a soft leather mask out of her pocket.

"I must warn you most solemnly of one thing, Jane—Brian. The future cannot be changed. By means of sensory deprivation and a kind of directional hypnosis we hope that Jane will see into the future. But what she sees can in no way be altered. None of us can change our ultimate Fate. What I told you before might happen but what she sees here behind this leather mask *must* happen!"

She looked at them for an answer. Jane nodded widely, Brian made a low throaty sound.

Briskly, Margaret leaned forward and slipped the smooth blue kid mask over Jan's head and laced it down the back of her head. The mask covered her face completely, closing off all sensations of hearing, of sight, of smell. There was only a mere slit at the line of Jane's mouth to allow her to breathe. Margaret's last glimpse of the tight-lipped determined face in the candles' flame before the mask hid it completely made her nod a mental approval. Jane was not a believer in mystical things, but at least every iota of her mental strength was grimly determined to succeed in her task. Her own happiness was at stake.

"Jane!" Brian cried.

Margaret silenced him with a look and motioned for the two men to move back into a dark corner of the room. The tall white candles flickered across the stone walls. For the space of ten minutes all was night and silence.

Then Margaret's voice began to whisper. Her face was close, first, then retreated, so that her body warmth would in no way distract. The sensory deprivation must be as complete as possible. But her mind must probe into Jane's and direct it . . .

After awhile Jane felt it rapping gently against the barriers of



her consciousness; words were scarcely heard, but the thoughts insinuated themselves in telepathically. Margaret was telling her to search the criss-cross of paths in her mind, through the complex of past and future experiences, shadowy, bewildering, incomprehensible, to find the right path that would lead her to a glimpse of an inevitable future occurrence in her own life.

Karen, Margaret's voiceless whisper told her, compellingly.

You will see Karen for the last time, before she is gone physically from you forever. It will be an important moment. Search for it. Search...

Jane was somehow aware of dwindling, as if what she knew as a conscious mind were collapsing rapidly, falling down, sliding down a smooth mental abyss, with only an atomic fragment of awareness to cling to, to maintain physical life. Radiant clouds billowed and rolled around her, pierced now and then by sharp sudden visions, bits of revelatory knowledge which were and always had been a part of the human segment of existence called Jane Bronson. Unattainable under normal conditions, these bits and flashes lasted such a brief time there was no time to assimilate them, they were like split-second projection slides of people and places, a helter-skelter tumbling of inner visions which only served to point up to her later on—when she had time to remember how it felt: So this is why we say to ourselves when we go somewhere we have never been before, "I know this place! I have been here before!"

There was no pain. No sensations of heat or cold. No time awareness. Everything was one. Jane hunted resolutely through the endless criss-cross of paths for the right one.

Then...

When it came, it came fast, and it was over fast. But she saw it—clear, sharp, unequivocal. While the sight of it was limned before her there was no time for emotion. But when it vanished suddenly, raw emotion came. Fear. Horror. Despair. Utter mind-tearing despair. She knew that what she had seen was the unchangeable truth. It had happened and it *would* happen.

Whimpering, she reached up her hands and clawed at the leather mask.

Margaret was whipping off the mask the moment Jane writhed in her chair. Her mind was tuned to the girl's emotional wave although she was unable to see what Jane saw because what Jane saw was within her own mind, in its most secret corners.

Jane stared around her wildly.

"Brian," she sobbed.

Brian put his arms around her, Jane flung against him and sobbed in hopeless grief. Margaret waited five minutes, then gently pulled her away.

"Please try to tell us what you saw, child."

Jane stared at them dully.

"We can't ever be married. Ever."

"Remember," Margaret said, "what we are allowed to see in these flashes of precognition are sketchy, we can easily misinterpret them. Perhaps what you saw—"

"I saw Karen in her coffin!" Jane cried. "There was no mistake. I saw it, very clearly. She was dead!"

"But—when?"

Jane shuddered away from Brian.

"I saw myself standing there, just as young as I am now, looking down at her in her coffin. She looked so fragile and old, in spite of the paint..."

Margaret caressed her chin thoughtfully.

"What you say is most interesting."

"Glad you think so," Brian flared. "To you two this is just another experiment! To us it's—our life!"

Margaret was absorbed in deep thought.

"Are you thinking that—?" Wayne began tentatively.

"Shhh!" Margaret snapped. "No surmises at this point. We must be sure. Absolutely sure. I think I know a way." She paced the stone floor for a moment, then whirled on Jane. "Child, tell us exactly what you saw. Exactly."

"I already did. It was very sudden. It didn't last more than a second or two. But it was incredibly vivid and real. I'll never forget!"

"Yes, but details, as much as you can. For instance, how was Karen dressed? How were you dressed? The room?"

"It was our front parlor, Karen still calls it that. I had the feeling that there had been a lot of other people there but now they were gone and I stayed there for a last moment alone with her. Karen wore a soft grey silk dress, with a cameo at the collar. I know the dress well."

"Um. She frequently wears grey silk, doesn't she?"

Jane nodded.

"With her favorite cameo. I can't remember what I was wearing. My eyes were on Karen. It happened so fast, then it was gone. But there was something odd—"

"Try to think what that was."

"I'm trying. I can't. All I really saw was Karen, looking so old and tiny. I bent over to kiss her. There was a serene smile on her face but—they fix it that way." She stared around her desperately. "I wish I'd never put on that mask!"

"Don't say that yet," Margaret clucked. "But you did see yourself looking down at her in her coffin, then kissing her. And there was something odd somewhere, something you can't remember because the precognitive vision was so fast and then it was gone."

Jane nodded.

"Now Brian and I can't ever be married. Never! I will not be responsible for her death."

"But my poor child!" Wayne burst out. "If you saw it, that means it did happen! You can't change—"

"Shh!" Margaret shushed him quickly. "We must try again. No." Jane started a shivery protest. "Not you, Jane. Brian this time." She turned briskly to him. "There's something missing. I am almost certain what Jane really saw, but we must have more proof. A clincher. Will you try to find it?"

Brian stared at her dourly, then gave a shrug and replaced Jane in the high-backed chair in the pentagon. His brown eyes were stormy; like Jane, he felt they were lost.

Margaret drew the leather mask quickly over his head, before he could change his mind. She sensed burgeoning antagonism born of despair.

That long moment of silence, then she began again with her telepathic whispering, to direct him to his target.

Denied all normal sensations, Brian's mind retreated into the mists beyond present reality. It took longer for him. Something inside him rebelled, yet he, too, wanted more than anything to know the truth, if it would help them. He soared and descended through the strange rolling clouds, half-glimpsing scenes that would have disturbed him had his mind been able to grasp hold of them; things that would happen to him and to those he knew and even to those who would come after him—a kind of personalized panorama of what was, what is, and what will be . . .

Then it came. Sharp-etched. Relentless. Certain.

Karen in her coffin and the girl kissing her a last goodbye.

They were back in the warmth of the library, before the great leaping fire. On the couch, Jane clung to Brian, as if fearful that any moment Fate would snatch him away from her forever.

"Tell us what you saw, Brian," Margaret directed.

Brian's story was essentially the same as Jane's.

Margaret nodded, a secret gleam of satisfaction in her blue eyes.

"Did you look at Jane carefully, as I asked? What was she wearing?"

"Why—I—it's hard to describe. I've never seen that dress

before. There was something funny about it. I don't quite know why. I don't know much about women's clothes."

"Of course not. You looked at her hands?"

"Yes."

"Was she wearing a wedding ring?"

Brian scowled.

"No. That's strange!"

Margaret grimaced and paced the carpet in front of them.

"Children," she announced, "We've found out just what we wanted to find out. The experiment was an immoderate success!"

"Success!" Jane cried. "But—we've lost!"

"On the contrary," Margaret smiled. "You must announce your marriage to Karen at once. You are of age, Jane. You have a good job and better prospects, Brian. It is possible that Karen will be upset for awhile but we know from the experiment that you will be reconciled before she dies."

"But what we saw!"

Margaret nodded happily. "My suggestion is that you give Karen every assurance of your continued love; offer to live with her, at least for awhile. Give her your company, your affection. Make her as happy as you can. She needs you both and she is a fine woman, in spite of the Bronson quirk."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Brian rasped. "We both saw Karen in her coffin!"

Margaret's smile was a jovial grimace.

"Exactly. You both saw her. Don't you see the paradox? That means you were together. Brian would not have seen the same thing Jane saw *unless he was there with Jane*. You could not have possibly seen the same thing—you would have had to see into Jane's personal future to do that. No. You were there with Jane, Brian!"

"B-but—"

"What put me on to it was Jane saying that she saw herself looking down at Karen in her coffin. That doesn't make sense. It doesn't happen like that. If it was Jane she would be looking down at Karen—not seeing herself doing it."

"Then again, the girl was wearing odd clothes. Why odd? And Jane thought Karen looked old, yet Karen is not old. But she will be—twenty years or more from now! And Jane wore no wedding ring. With Jane's deep love and her sentimental nature that seems most unlikely. No. There is only one answer. The girl you both saw, together, looking down at Karen was not Jane at all. She resembles her very much, naturally."

"Then who?"

Margaret wagged her head and smiled.

"Who else but your own daughter?"

†††

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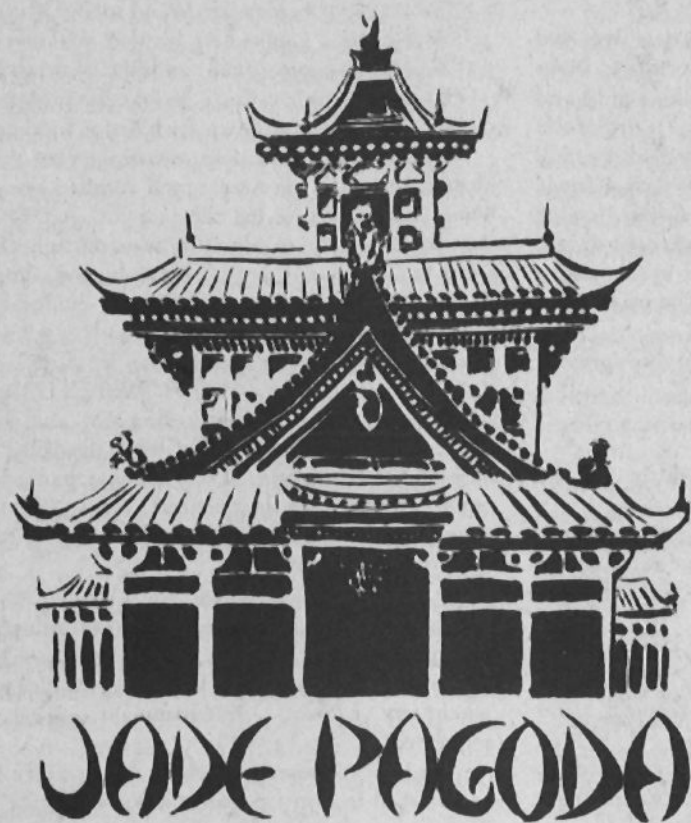
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SPIDER BITE

In 1927, *Weird Tales*' editorial rooms were on East Ohio Street, Chicago, overlooking the Lake. Farnsworth Wright, the editor, lived in Chicago, as did Otis Adelbert Kline, and the illustrator, Hugh Rankin, who did the cover for my lead novelette, "The Infidel's Daughter." My studio-apartment was in Hammond, Indiana, where I was a wage slave. This was twenty miles from the Loop.

And, though I did not know it until late one day in August, Robert Spencer Carr lived in a cubicle on Rush Street, waiting for the sale on a MS he had written in Ashley, Ohio. This was his first novel. Carr had left home with his pencilled story, a bag of cookies, and his mother's blessing.

I had met all but Carr the previous year.

This was a fine fellowship. We were gourmets and mighty drinkers before the Lord, except for Wright, who was on a diet, and sober by nature. Kline, because of a story title, was called Osiris. Wright, because of his bawdy recital of one of Eugene Field's "unofficial" poems, was called Pious Plato. The artist who did many *Weird Tales* covers and much of the inside stuff at that time was known as "Sidi" Rankin, an Arabic honorific with connotation of lordship, nobility—which Rankin always disclaimed—and, *sanctity!* Which he stoutly denied. But, he was stuck with it.

There were some who hinted that Rankin drank too much. Despite this ugly rumor, Kline and I liked Rankin. And when we collabbed on a novelette, the hero was named Rankin—Sidi Rankin. Simple.

The blast and reverberation, the cries of blasphemy, evoked by "Stranger From Kurdistan" still was kicking up high decibels. Wherefore, I was known as Malik Tawus, and my studio, The Throne Room. Subsequent Peacock stories—Peacock's Shadow—cover featured summer of 1926—further built up the Malik Tawus tradition.

This Throne Room was a super-compact apartment with a settee of rattan, lacquered in black, and Chinese red, and spread with a runner shape rug from Kurdistan. There were other rugs, the pioneers of my modest collection—but, only one Throne Rug.

Each of our clique staged a food and drink session when he was in the mood to roar like a lion. Each had his specialties. Mine was the VARNISHED VULTURE.

A varnished vulture was a capon stuffed with wild rice, pistachios, and Greek currants. This fowl was basted with legal cooking sherry, for a few hours, under the grille. The wine made a glaze of high lustre—hence, *varnished*.

Under the kitchen sink I kept a small keg—charred and oaken—filled with corn whiskey hauled from Atlanta, Georgia.

After months of being foot-rocked whenever I washed dishes, which was not too frequently, the "white mule" became Bourbon coloured. Quite potable, too. This was called *Napoleon Brandy*.

If nothing else, we, The Varnished Vultures, as we came to call ourselves, were whimsical, fanciful, as well as bawdy, gluttonous, and wine-bibbing. We did not worship graven images.

Nearly forty three years have elapsed, yet the day lives and glows in my memory. Tall, slightly stooped, yet stately, Pious Plato headed the Chicago delegation, and then solid, ruddy and informal Kline. There was amiable Bill Sprenger, *Weird Tales* business manager. Towering and silent Sidi Rankin, who rarely wasted words when there was liquor to ingest. Then, as a fringe benefit, a chunky, round faced youngster, wide-eyed, seeing wonder through his horn-rimmed glasses. Wide-eyed, open-faced, yet there was also something of a Buddha, junior grade, about this lad, an Asiatic blandness. A paradox, the way he manifested his contradictions.

"Malik Tawus," said Wright, "it is my pleasure to present Robert Spencer Carr."

"What? WHAT! Spiderbite Carr?"

"Yes. The author of Spiderbite."

"Screw me blind! This is a pleasure. Welcome to the Throne Room."

Carr blinked, flung back his fine head of dark and wavy hair. He took a notebook from his pocket and made an entry under "S" and another under "B", comments on dialect and folkways of natives.

I broke out . . . Napoleon Brandy (by Honest Joe Walters, of Atlanta) and *canapes d'anchois* . . . cherry tomatoes stuffed with caviar . . . reeking exotic cheeses . . . morsels of tropical palm hearts . . .

Naturally I had not fired up the grille until the guests arrived. One way of being sure that the roast would not suffer from waiting and waiting. Instead, let the guests wait. They did.

On and on . . . basting the Varnished Vulture . . . dishing out Napoleon Brandy . . . more *canapes* . . .

Robert Spencer Carr, thereafter known as Spiderbite, sat with the stoicism of a brave enduring the Sun Dance of the Dakotas. When, hours later, the capon, gleaming as though lacquered, was carved, I was impressed by this newcomer. Starving Armenians . . . forty two days on a life-raft . . . the Donner Party . . . and, the Grand Master, Robert Spencer Carr, breaking his fast.

For many weeks, I later learned, he had been subsisting on canned milk, and potatoes boiled over a gas jet. He had asked Farnsworth Wright for a few hints on whipping the pencilled MS into shape, but had stoically concealed the fact that as to diet, there was little of that, and, not balanced.

In March 1925 *Weird Tales*, there had appeared "Spiderbite," which August Derleth some years later starred to indicate "outstanding." "Spiderbite" was on the news stands before Carr's sixteenth birthday. His sixth and final appearance in *Weird Tales* was "Whispers," April 1928 issue. This too, was starred as outstanding.

How come—only six stories?

A few weeks later, Carr invited me to the Stevens Hotel, where I met others of his friends. There was a private dining room, a waiter and two assistants. The finest of illegal liquor. Spiderbite had sold *Rampant Age*, a novel of the teenagers of 1926 and now he was roaring, and flinging back his mane.

"Any man," he declared, "who is able to rise from his place without help of block and tackle, is a coward and deserter!"

I led off, "Bring me an alligator pear—"

"Waiter! Put in lots of alligators," Carr thundered.

"And green turtle soup—"

"Waiter! Extra green turtle and lots of sherry!"

"And a squab guinea hen, broiled, with mushrooms—"

"Waiter! A *virgin* squab, and lots of mush in the mushrooms."

Having paid his tribute to the *virgin* dove of that western classic, Spiderbite sat down with us for food and drink.

Twenty nine years later, crossing from the Tribune Tower, I blundered into Rush Street, and recalled the old days, and Carr's living there until he hit the jackpot. As H.P. Lovecraft used to say, this was unnamable, this was eldritch terror. I took a few pictures and got out, before I was slugged, shot, or knifed . . .

From the horrors of Rush Street, Spiderbite moved to a high rise and high priced apartment, with a round of parties which were timed by calendar rather than by clock . . .

He discovered the DILL PICKLE CLUB, a group of what he called intellectuals. Always dramatic and loving masquerades, Spiderbite proposed that (a)-I meet the Dill Pickles and (b)-pose as a Hungarian count. The first was bad enough. The second, worse. The package, loathesome. I said, "Tell the group that I am an imposter, impersonating E. Hoffmann Price. You can be sure, then, of a convincing act."

Collegiate suicides were quite the thing, at that time. The newspapers, especially the columnists, were having a field day. I had barely made my bow to the Dill Pickles reception committee when my opinion, my comment, on student suicides was requested.

"Sir," I answered, "I think it's a splendid idea. Should be encouraged in every possible way. Room for progress, of course. Thus far, no *mass* suicides."

The program committee invited me to lecture, next discussion session. My choice of subject struck them as "somewhat advanced," and that did it. To this day, I fear I embarrassed Spiderbite. He never again invited me to meet groups of intellectuals . . .

Through Spiderbite's studio-comrades, I met Helen, who in due course became my first wife. Although she and I parted long ago, neither has ever cherished resentment against Bob. That's just what you deserved, hanging around writer studios . . . In March, 1928, I was transferred to New Orleans. Around that time, Spiderbite got a screen writing contract in Hollywood. Instead of revolutionizing the movie industry, Bob found himself unemployed at expiration of his contract.

His Hollywood adventures are to this day concealed behind veils of mystery. Mid-1928, he appeared in New Orleans, in the Model "T" which he and Ralph ("Effendi") Parker had driven from Screwey-Land. Although I was expecting them, I had not anticipated their triumphant advance into the *Vieux Carre*, the Old French Quarter.

I was reminded of how Bob had relished my references to the story of THE YOUNG MANG WITH THE YELLOW FACE, whose adventures appeared in Dr. J.C. Mardrus translation of the Thousand Nights and One Night. This unusual character attracted the Caliph's attention by riding through the streets of Bagdad, preceded by a file of musicians mounted on camels. The "musicians alternately played Chinese and Indian airs . . ."

In the Throne Room, to parade thus, with Chinese and Indian music, was the ultimate uttermost splendor.

And here I saw it:

Carr, crossing the Mississippi (by ferry, the only way, in 1928) had met the One Man Band—an onion-nosed, purple-faced sot who foot-pedalled to beat a bass drum—tootled many wind instruments fixed to shoulder harness—and with hands, whanged, flicked, plucked, smote cymbals, sistra, strings, castanets, rattles.

The One Man Band stood on the running board. This I saw, looking from my balcony overhanging Royal Street, when I heard the blare of (s) trumpets and the clash of symbols. The Chinese and Indian Musicians led the way up three flights of stairs.

Spiderbite reported, "Malik Tawus—I have arrived,—is there food and drink?"

"A pot of chili con carne, and a keg of Shirazi wine."

I referred to the 25 gallon keg through the bung hole in which I had stuffed 25 pounds of Grenach raisins, added water, and let the yeasts get to work. Fermentation had ceased at least a week ago. From that same keg also came Falernian, Chian, and Samian wine.

Food—drink—music—and the story of the safari—

Finally, Spiderbite, impressed by the musician's ability to toss off wine, and continue sternly to earn his \$5 honorarium, proposed that I confer an order of Knighthood. Effendi had seen a sword, probably dress sword of some army or other. He handed me the weapon.

Spiderbite and Effendi separated the One Man Band from his instruments. The man was more purple faced than ever. Courteously, they got through his perpetual fog. Still bewildered, he was game. Each took him by the arm, escorted him to the throne, and bade him kneel.

In those days, I could draw saber like a professional—after all, I had been one. The blade hissed. The musician barely flinched. I tapped him on the shoulder.

Something exceedingly strange happened. There gleamed from behind, and right through that sottish, sodden, purplish face a glow of the fine and noble. He saw, for a flickering moment, Lands of Wonder. This, for a shred of time, was no burlesque; it was real.

"Rise, Sir Knight!"

The wonder faded, and he went back to his music.

Thirteen years later, sitting in the bitter wind, was this one man band. He would not recall that it was I who had knighted him. Sadly, I passed on.

Bob Carr's years had been varied. Five years in Russia. He had left that blessed land, it is whispered, just in time to frustrate a firing squad. Back to Hollywood, and Walt Disney's studio. World War II service . . . a novel of war time Russia . . . a spot in New Mexico, midway between heaven and earth, where he wrote a novel, *The Room Beyond*. Over the years, I re-read this story from time to time.

There were science fiction *novelas*, in *Saturday Evening Post* and in *Blue Book*, which pulp masters of old declared to be harder to crash than was any slick. Science fiction, yes, but I recall these tales as pure fantasy, and of the loveliest.

For some years now he has conducted classes in Creative Writing at University of South Florida. He is now building another novel. Will there be among today's characters one as hauntingly beautiful as Cristina, of *The Room Beyond*?

Fantasy fanciers, you know now why that schoolboy of Ashley, Ohio appeared only in six issues of *Weird Tales*. From afar, I hear Chinese and Indian music again . . . once more, nobility glows through a sottish stupid purplish face as a man sees, for a sparkling instant what, perhaps, he *really* is . . .

I sit no longer in a Throne Room. Joss sticks fume as I write in this Lamasery, where for more than twenty eight years, I have learned that "*This hour cannot return: a shred of time is worth a bar of gold.*"

STARDRIFT AND OTHER FANTASTIC FLOTSAM

by Emil Petaja

\$4.95

BUMBLING LITTLE AINO finds a strange piece of drift on a lonely California beach after an earth-tilting storm. In his inarticulate way he insists that it came down from the stars, that it is a god's gift from some super star-race. His burly ex-con companion beats the hell out of him for his stupidity and presumption of special knowledge. But Aino receives a curious boon. . . .

This is just the first of more than a dozen pieces of flotsam from wild alien dimensions, some shaped out of delicate eggshell fantasy, some from black mind-shattering terror.

Like *Dog's Best Friend*.

The animals of Earth, all of them from the giant beasts of the jungle down to the smallest insect in your back yard garden, decide that Man has gone too far. Man wants to destroy himself. Good. Let Him. But has he any right, in his stupidity, to drag all of them along with him? They whisper and fumble and plot. . . .

Like *Patterned For Plunder*.

Otava, a small vernal planet under the wing of *Ursa Minor*, is shrouded in mystery and shunned by all. Yet when the outlaw ships come there for plunder they are welcomed with open arms. They are given everything: mineral treasures, women, the very land itself to despoil forever. Why?

Like—

The man who hated war with such blind all-consuming fury that by cyronics he preserved himself for a distant future when Man would have at last outgrown it—and wakened to a terrible irony.

Or the biologist who found himself irresistibly compelled to revisit the small mining town of his childhood and a graveyard called *Only Gone Before*, where there was a grave that ought to have been filled a hundred years before, but wasn't.

FULL COLOR jacket by HANNES BOK

F. P. C. I., Book Dept., 1855 W. Main St. Alhambra, Ca. 91801

JADE PAGODA 43

He came to rescue us from Circe--but could he guess the extent of her power?

Circe's Laughter

by Carleton Grindle

Illustration by D. Bruce Berry



Circe's dining hall on the Isle of Aiaie was as vast as the audience chamber of the Court of Persia and her table would seat a thousand feasting revelers. She would seat herself at the table's head, a meal of almost banquet proportions before her, and she would eat with leisurely attitude and pace. Often times she would throw open the doors to her hall and in we would swarm, squealing and shoving one another, striving to be foremost in the throng that would crowd around her. She would laugh and toss scraps to the floor and we would scramble after them to her amusement. How we hated that laugh of Circe's. We hated it the more for we also hated Odysseus who had never heard her laughter mocking him.

It was on a night such as this, when we fought and kicked and bit and squirmed for the privilege of being close to Circe and of obtaining the choicest cast-off morsel from her table, that the Sailor Odaron came to Aiaie.

The earliest any of us knew that he was on the island was the moment we heard the great doors of the dining hall slam back against the walls. The sound of our fighting was drowned in the louder noise of the wind and the sudden cold was like a premonition.

The man who stood in the doorway was tall and gaunt, his features dark as if with much exposure to the sun and the wind of the sea, his black beard and long, unkempt black hair astreak with

grey flames. Even from the distance that separated us I could see those eyes of his, like blue fire, trying to burn into the soul of Circe. I felt, rather than saw, that Circe had risen to her feet and I did not hear the hated music of her laughter now. Terror gripped me and I knew it gripped my companions. It was always thus. Each time the witch found herself a new victim we would feel this same feeling of fear and dread, for we knew best what horror Circe's magic held. Only somehow, this time, we felt the dread multiplied greatly by what I could not say. Perhaps the seawind, perhaps a premonition.

Circe spoke. "Welcome to Aiaie," she said. Her voice was musical, her tone mellow, friendly, alluring. The Sirens must have learned their song from Circe! The intruder came closer and behind him, as if moved by invisible hands, the doors closed.

"I am called Odaron," said the man. "I have heard many tales about this isle and its queen, Circe. I have come to see for myself."

"You are just in time," Circe said. "For a feast. Will you join me?" Her arm moved in a languid motion, her hand outstretched in a gesture that indicated us. "I have been amusing myself by feeding my pets."

"Your victims, you mean."

Circe almost gasped—she made a sound at least, that in a woman of less presence of mind might have become a gasp. Her composure remained unruffled and calm.

"I have heard many stories of you and your magic, Circe. Do not think you can ensnare me as easily as you have ensnared these . . . these poor swine."

A calculated smile appeared on Circe's face. "I am appalled to find you believe those horrid tales," she replied. "And even if you do believe them, you do not imagine it can be so horrible a fate to be the victim of such sorceries as I possess, do you?" She moved from the table, around toward him, and we scurried aside to make a path for her. She held out her hand to him.

"Come," she said to him. "You must be my guest. We will feast now. Afterward, I will offer you what entertainment I can."

Odaron remained stiffly upright, his burning eyes staring at her beauty. He said nothing, neither did he move.

A light mocking note crept into Circe's voice. "Are you afraid of me, Odaron?"

For answer, Odaron took her hand.

She led him to the table and saw him seated at the guest's place, which was always set with plates of beaten silver and a goblet of jade from Egypt, inset with rubies from beyond the farthest borders of Persia. She started for her own place, then glanced down and noticed us. Her smile dissolved and a look of utter desolation emerged upon her golden face. "What are you doing here?" she screamed at us. "Out of here. All of you out of here!" She stamped her foot and like a flash we ran, crowding in a panic for the doorway.

That night I could not sleep. I chose a place close to the great palace of Circe, and though the wind had subsided to a mild flower-scented breeze and the night was mild and cool with it, I could not bring myself to sleep. The palace was dark and none but Circe and the stranger within. No nightbirds made music. The isle was silent until morning, but for the occasional bright music of Circe's laugh.

Came morning and soon a new victim would join our cheerless band.

The sun was high above the glassy blue of the sea and no one had stirred within the palace. No new swine had bellowed in fea

and frustration, in desperation, and squealing run to join his predecessors. A sleepless night had left me with a strange, unexplainable sensation.

I had to know. I was always the brave fool—how do you think I ended up like this, after? Shoving trepidation aside, I crept to the low wall and awkwardly climbed it. It was easy to gain entrance to the palace of Circe through an open, unbarred window. Circe felt little need for protection, especially from us. I stealthily crept through the hallway, followed by a straggling few of my comrades, toward the rooms of Circe herself. We found the rooms empty.

Or almost empty. On the bed was a pig, all right. But a most unusual pig, not the sort we had expected at all.

A sow.

Gripped more in fear than understanding, I turned and ran, my hooves sliding and slipping on the smooth tile of the floor. I ran squealing in fear, all the way out of the great palace. All the way to the sandy beach itself.

And suddenly, I had run all the way to the feet of Odaron the sailor.

I stopped, petrified with fear. He looked down at me—at us, really, for my brothers were gathering—and he did not smile. "You have discovered Circe?" he said.

We said naught, for Circe had robbed us of our power to speak.

"I see you have. You are frightened. But you now have nothing to be frightened of, my piglets. Soon you will be men once more. Circe too will be restored—is, in fact, restored this minute, for her swinhood has served its value to me. I am protected from her magic by the herb moly, the same herb which protected Odysseus, and she did not bother to protect herself from the spells she relied upon. I have the power to transfer you all again to your manly shape."

At his words, I was trembling in expectation. To regain my human form! To again travel with freedom and honor and dignity as a man. To be free of Circe!

"You will leave this island," he said. "Circe has no hold while I have power over her. Circe is defeated. You will leave her."

Yes, I thought. We will leave her. Leave Circe . . . It was a strange, disturbing thought.

Odaron went on. "I have tasted of her wiles and she is but a woman. Be glad you are rid of her. Come with me to the sea and I will work the spell that will free you."

He was standing on a ledge, overlooking the sea. The way to the beach was the way we had come; he would have to pass through our hordes to gain the sea. He stepped forward. We did not move.

"Well, move aside," he said with anger. "You are blocking my way!"

I was the only one that moved. I took a step toward him and he did not see me. With sudden speed, I leaped at him and my full weight carried him to the ground. He cried out in surprise, then in pain as my sharp hooves dug into his skin. The others rushed at him and he screamed the louder as his pain and fear increased.

Within minutes, we returned to find Circe awaiting us.

That night we feasted in the great dining hall and Circe tossed choice morsels of food to the floor for us. We hated her with the same intensity that we loved her. Her laughter mocked us, but it was like music. Odysseus had never heard that laughter from Circe's lips. Nor had Odaron.

And we were jealous of them both.

The GRIMoire

by Gerald W. Page

1.

The fiction of H. P. Lovecraft falls into several distinct categories: most obviously, the early Dunsany-influenced stories such as "Cats of Ulthar" and the novel *Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath*; the "straight" horror fiction such as "The Rats in the Walls"; and the stories of the Cthulhu Mythos such as "The Colour out of Space." Admirers of Lovecraft are divided as to which facet of his fantasy writing represents the epitome of his talents. In his essay "H. P. L.—An Informal Commentary," Joseph Payne Brennan asserts the opinion that Lovecraft's best stories were horror tales not aligned with the Mythos, dismissing the Mythos stories as lacking "the economy, the conviction, the sustained suspense of the best early stories." He also describes *Dream Quest* as a "juvenile nightmare fairy tale."

Yet there are other viewpoints. The recent paperback reprinting of *Dream Quest* edited by Lin Carter, selected HPL stories all from his Dunsany-influenced period—generally regarded as minor works by most Lovecraft admirers. As for the Cthulhu Mythos, Brennan admits in his essay, "It has had far-reaching effects in the entire fantasy field."

The Cthulhu Mythos is one of the most interesting backgrounds ever conceived for fantasy fiction. Roughly, the idea is that earth has been visited in the past by aliens from other planets, chiefly two races: the evil Great Old Ones, including Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth and the blind idiot-god Azathoth among others; and the benign Elder Gods whose infrequent interventions have prevented—or at least postponed—the Great Old Ones from destroying or enslaving mankind. To this basic idea was added a wealth of trappings, including various deities and messengers of the Great Old Ones, ancient cities and races which served the minions of evil, various place names which were evolved to identify the "homes" of the creatures.

The geography of the Mythos included many real places and a number of fabulously mythical places: the Plateau of Leng, Kadath, the sunken city of R'lyeh (where dwells Cthulhu). Most importantly, Lovecraft created some notable New England locales: Dunwich, Kingsport and Arkham.

To link the present with the past, to provide explanations and to involve his characters with the Great Old Ones, HPL made liberal use of the device of the fictitious book of spells and incantations. Influenced, perhaps, by Chambers' use of a similar device in "The King in Yellow," HPL created the *Necronomicon*, supposedly written by the mad Arab, Abdul-Alhazred, as well as the *Phanatic Manuscript*, the *R'lyeh Test* and the *Dhol Chants*, among others.

Lovecraft wrote about thirteen definite Mythos stories, including "The Nameless City," "The Call of Cthulhu," "The Whisper in Darkness," *At the Mountains of Madness* and *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*; "The Dreams in the Witch-House" is, in

some ways, a key to many of HPL's basic ideas regarding the Mythos. Certain of the non-Mythos fantasies contain cross references to the Mythos (the Dunsanian *Dream Quests* for example).

When J. C. Henneberger founded *Weird Tales* in 1923, he apparently was very influenced by HPL's writings. On two occasions he offered the editorship of the magazine to HPL—but each time Lovecraft turned him down. Henneberger apparently had read some of Lovecraft's stories in a magazine called *Home Brew*. The first 19 stories published under the Lovecraft name in *Weird Tales* were reprinted from *Home Brew* and various limited-circulation amateur magazines.

Lovecraft was a man with a very magnetic personality who wrote some of the finest letters of our century. (These letters are now being collected by August Derleth and Donald Wandrei and are being published by Arkham House; four were published in the previous issue of *Witchcraft & SORCERY*.) Reading them, it is easy to understand the tremendous influence Lovecraft wielded over Derleth, Wandrei, Frank Belknap Long, Clark Ashton Smith, Henry Kuttner, Robert Bloch, Fritz Leiber and a score of other writers. Many writers wrote stories at HPL's encouragement which fit deliberately into the Mythos; many of them contributed new gods, new settings and new books. The end result was that HPL has become the most influential writer of weird fiction since Poe and one of the most widely read.

But of course it was not entirely his remarkable personality that brought about this influence. Lovecraft's contributions to weird fiction are as remarkable as the man himself.

-2-

Lovecraft was a strange man to be writing fantasy fiction, for while he possessed one of the finest imaginations of his day, he was also a strict materialist who adhered to no belief in the supernatural and openly scoffed at organized theology. He is certainly not the only sceptic to have written notable fantasy fiction—L. Sprague de Camp and James Branch Cabell are two outstanding examples that come readily to mind. But de Camp's fantasies are either light or adventurous and Cabell, while one of the century's outstanding writers, wrote in a romantically poetic style; while his philosophical intentions might be serious, Cabell's novels are usually far from oppressively serious. Lovecraft, despite his early experiments with the light Dunsany approach, took a basically serious attitude toward weird fantasy.

In 1923 *Weird Tales* became the first all-fantasy magazine in history. It had troubles from the start and may not have shown any profit until the 1940's. In 1926 the first science fiction magazine appeared and became an instant success scoring with a circulation reputed to be around 100,000.

It is the contention of science fiction and fantasy historian Sam Moskowitz that one of the major factors that kept *Weird Tales* alive in those early days was science fiction. This contention is supported, however reluctantly, by any collector who has acquired early issues of *Weird Tales* only to find that someone has excerpted all the science fiction stories from the issues, leaving the fantasy. It is further borne out by the fact that at one point Farnsworth Wright, *Weird Tales'* editor was considering starting a magazine called *Strange Stories* which would feature pseudo-scientific stories. Most, if not all, of the stories written by Farnsworth Wright also fall into the science fiction category.

Moskowitz rounds out his argument with the fact that *The Moon Terror and Other Stories*, an early collection of stories from *Weird Tales* consisted of science fiction, not fantasy. This was unquestionably the first science fiction anthology.

There can be little argument to the assertion that the science fiction stories published among *Weird Tales'* fantasy were extremely popular with the readers.

In his essay "The Lore of H. P. Lovecraft," Sam Moskowitz offers the contention that most of Lovecraft's horror stories are science fiction. His point is well taken.

Science fiction and fantasy are very similar in nature—both are forms of the same general field. But there is a basic difference, discernible in the story's background.

Both science fiction and fantasy take place in a world deliberately created by the writer (even though the writer may believe in this world as an occultist might accept a theosophical background as reality in a fantasy tale or an astronomer might readily accept his extrapolations about Mars in a science fiction story). The key—or one of them—lies in the relationship of that world to ours.

In science fiction the background of the story grows out of our world. It grows from conjecture and extrapolation of what currently exists or is known to exist, whether it is a cultural trend or a theory in physics. (Please note that at no time do I insist on accuracy here; a writer who misconstrues a trend or fails to understand a natural law can still write science fiction from his erroneous viewpoint—it's the process, not the result, that determines the nature of the story.)

Fantasy, on the other hand, presents a world that exists somehow separate from the world we all see around us. It exists outside, beyond what we can see and feel. We do not extrapolate this; we assume it. The universe of the fantasy tale is a universe filled with ghosts or demons or strange creatures or fabulous lands. It does not grow out of the world as we know it. Rather, it engulfs it.

Even a fantasy set in the far future when magic has returned follows this rule in describing a world where the outside has engulfed and permeated our own.

Lovecraft was a materialist. He did not believe in supernatural creatures or life after death or immortality. But he possessed a tremendous imagination.

The basic idea of the Mythos was that earth had been visited in the past by aliens born on other planets. Different from us, but not supernatural. Their ability to instantly transport from one place to another was based on a superior knowledge of the way the universe was constructed. If they were summoned by the chanting of their followers, it was only because the chanting set up certain vibrations. It was super-science, quite obscure and fanciful, perhaps. But it denied magic and grew out of a recognition of physical laws.

Many writers participated in the Mythos in *Weird Tales* and other fantasy magazines. But some of HPL's ideas drifted into the science fiction magazines as well. The conflict between Arisia and Eddore in E. E. Smith's Lensman novels echoes the conflict between the Great Old Ones and the Elder Gods. The development of a highly detailed background that characterizes the Mythos was later used as a device for tying stories together in a fictionalized future by writers such as Neil R. Jones and, later on, by Robert Heinlein and Nelson Bond. (Though in justice it must be pointed out that Edgar Rice Burroughs seems to have made use of this device in his fiction from the start.)

The Cthulhu Mythos was certainly science fiction as written by Lovecraft. Yet it properly belongs in *Weird Tales* where the tradition of Poe was continuing. After all, there are few Poe stories that are properly supernatural—Poe himself was something of a materialist with little regard for the supernatural. Some of HPL's Cthulhu stories appeared in science fiction magazines and were completely at home there.

The Cthulhu Mythos was HPL's way of resolving the conflict between his interest in the horror story and his materialism. It offered him a chance to write strong, terrifying stories that did not rely on the supernatural. It offered him, as it were, the best of *both* worlds. To achieve this, it was necessary he come up with a completely new point of view regarding the universe.

-3-

A large number of writers have written stories in the Cthulhu Mythos and, in a recent anthology, August Derleth has assembled an outstanding collection of them. *Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos* by H. P. Lovecraft & Others (\$7.50, Arkham House, Sauk City, Wisconsin, 53583—order direct from publisher) is one of the finest anthologies of horror fiction ever published.

It's prefaced by a brief explanation and history of the Mythos by August Derleth, followed by HPL's "The Call of Cthulhu" and 18 other stories in the Mythos. "The Call of Cthulhu" is the oldest story in the book, having been published in 1927. Six of the stories are new, written expressly for the book.

The stories are mostly excellent. Most disappointing are Frank Belknap Long's "Hounds of Tindalos" and "The Space-Eaters." For some reasons, Long's best fiction appeared not in *Weird Tales* at all, but in *Unknown Worlds* in the early 40s. The other reprinted stories, by Clark Ashton Smith, August Derleth, Robert E. Howard, Robert Bloch, Lovecraft and Henry Kuttner are good to superlative.

Of special interest is the publication (for the first time together) of the trilogy begun by Robert Bloch with "The Shambler from the Stars," continued by HPL with "The Hunter of the Dark" and completed by Bloch with "The Shadow from the Steeple."

To the reader familiar with the Mythos, perhaps the most interesting part of the book are the six new stories.

Only one of these stories fails to completely captivate and that is James Wade's "The Deep Ones," which is still an entertaining variant on the Mythos. J. Vernon Shea's "The Hunter of the Graveyard" is a fascinating story, so well written that you'll forgive an obvious change of direction midway through it. Ramsey Campbell maintains his record of excellence as the youngest writer of Mythos tales. Brian Lumley, new to me with these stories, impressed me sufficiently that I contacted him and asked for stories for *Witchcraft & SORCERY*—the first of which is in this issue. He could possibly become one of the giants in the field.

The final story in the book is Colin Wilson's "The Return of the Lloigor" and an excellent story it is. Wilson's novel *The Mind Parasites* was one of the major recent contributions to the Mythos and "The Return of the Lloigor" is a far better story. Don't miss it.

The book as a whole is a bargain, the stories by Lovecraft, Howard, Bloch, Lumley and Wilson far exceeding the price in entertainment value.

-4-

The significant thing about *Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos*—aside from its entertainment value—is how it demonstrates Lovecraft's influence down to the present day. But it seems to me that most of the writers who have contributed to the Mythos have contributed very little to the basic idea of the Mythos, Lovecraft's suggested viewpoint toward the universe.

Repeatedly we find the use of gods from the canon of the Great Old Ones. We find styles sometimes deliberately molded on Lovecraft's. Sometimes we find new books, to sit upon the same shelf with the *Necronomicon*. There are variations on Lovecraft's plots and the minutiae of his stories.

But there is little investigation of his theme.

Lovecraft, the materialist who did not believe in ghosts or demons. How does such a man write horror fiction? Lovecraft solved the problem by creating a universe in which his stories would take place—a universe that had as its major characteristic an antagonism toward man.

In HPL's universe, to explore too far was to risk death or worse. To learn too much about the nature of things meant insanity.

Far too many critics have passed off this idea in HPL's writing as being merely part of the mood-building; excessive melodrama meant to add to the fright. Perhaps this is due to the theme's conflict with the basic Christian acceptance of a benevolent universe.

Whatever the reason, few of the writers who have added to the Mythos since Lovecraft have realized that the menace in any Mythos story is the nature of the universe itself. Few who have accepted this point have explored it.

There has been considerable development of the Mythos by writers other than Lovecraft. August Derleth has written stories set in the North Woods of Wisconsin and the Canadian border. Ramsey Campbell took the Mythos to England, creating a whole

new aspect to the background. Brian Lumley has also written of the Mythos in England, with a point-of-view fresh as Campbell's.

But these are primarily background factors. The window dressings of a story are important, but the thematic elements run deeper. As far as exploring *thematic* elements in the Mythos is concerned, I can offhand think of only two outstanding examples, both novels. One is Donald Wandrei's *The Web of Easter Island*. The other is Colin Wilson's *The Mind Parasites*. Despite the excellence of the greater share of the Mythos stories (certainly better than half are excellent of their type—a notable refutation of that fatuous humbug known as "Sturgeon's Law"), only Lovecraft's original stories and these two novels come readily to mind as examples of solid exploration of the theme of a hostile universe.

-5-

Think of that for a moment. Suppose that man is not supreme in this universe, not the favored of the gods, but an aberration not really suited to reality. If this is so, what does it mean to man?

This is the reason why those who meddle with forbidden things, in HPL's fiction, are destroyed. In a universe hostile to man, the conflict is directly between man and reality.

I'm not attempting to suggest that HPL believed the universe to be basically hostile to man. He probably felt the universe had no outlook as regards man one way or the other. But I am suggesting that a theme such as this was a necessary compromise between HPL's beliefs and his interest in horror fiction.

It is also interesting to note that Lovecraft handled this theme with great care. One does not find anti-heroes in his work, but scholars directly concerned with the study of this hostile universe. What, superficially at least, must seem a negative and pessimistic viewpoint was never really treated by Lovecraft in a negative or pessimistic way.

The theme of the Mythos was an intellectual compromise—a theme and a handful of devices to resolve an esthetic conflict. Yet it has dominated horror fiction since the late 1920s. And the theme still offers a lot of possibilities for exploration.

For one thing, if the conflict is between man and the nature of the universe, it suggests that sooner or later, in order to survive, man must challenge the universe itself.

And *that* could well be the story of the century!

★ ★ ★

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THE GLORY STONE by Emil Petaja. Rod Power,

super-agent for the Intergalactic Control, possessed incredible Wild Talents for instantaneous mutation. He was, in fact, a Prot—one who could change shape and form at will. He needed this and much more when he faced Amuruth, the Divine One, on the neo-Persian planet Mazda. On this world of houris and hedonists Rod met a hermit beyond time itself, living so very simply in his cave of pure gold. Rod did his thing to order: like turn ape, eagle, or shark, as the occasion demanded—and sometimes did it with a girl-prot out of everyman's most glorious dreams. Pre-publication Price \$3.95

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To release an old friend's imprisoned soul Simon Grisaille sought his killer--
and found supernatural fire and an invincible opponent.



FIRE MASTER

by Edmund Shirlan

Illustrated by Jeff Jones

A month after the death of Matthew Ruston, Simon Grisaille heard Ruston calling him.

It happened in the black room of Grisaille's penthouse—a room only Grisaille could safely enter. A cold wind seemed to pass through the room and cold hands seemed briefly to touch the sorcerer's face, causing him to start. The seven tapers that burned always in that room flickered briefly though they could not go out so long as Simon Grisaille remained alive. The voice, distant and wailing, called his name.

"Ruston?" Grisaille answered. "Is that you? Where are you?"

"Help me, Simon," said the distant voice. "Free me! Erika! Help, help her, Simon . . .!"

"Who did this to you?" Grisaille asked, rising. "Can you name him, Ruston?"

"Help me . . ." The voice grew more distant and the chillness

seemed to flow from the room. Ruston was gone—or that part of him that had been there was gone—and Grisaille knew he would not return. And that if he could return, Ruston would be unable to say more . . .

The next day Grisaille and his valet Swan called on Ruston's daughter, Erika.

Ruston had been a man of taste as well as fortune. He and Grisaille were once partners in an import-export business that also provided them with contacts and excuses for traveling all over the world. That business had been for both of them, and continued to be for Grisaille, an excellent front to hide sorcery. Ruston's home—now his daughter's home—was a large, two story brick house atop a small mountain that afforded a view of cultivated fields, a river and plenty of woods. The forest dominated the

mountain except for the ground immediate to the house. There was isolation here and a calmness and peacefulness that had meant a lot to Matthew Ruston. Grisaille suspected it meant a lot to Erika, too, and he was pleased to note she wasn't letting the house or grounds run down. The lawn had been recently mowed and the shrubbery pruned. The trim on the house was freshly painted.

Erika Ruston was a tall, strikingly beautiful woman in her early twenties. Her hair was blonde and she wore it long. She had a delicately molded, pleasingly expressive face that reminded Grisaille of Erika's mother, who had died a little over five years ago. She offered to make drinks for Grisaille and Swan, and as he stood in the living room, helping her fix the drinks, Grisaille noticed much about Erika that reminded him of her father, too. Grisaille realized that he had many memories about the Ruston family. The most vivid and recent one was the hearing of Matthew Ruston's voice in the black room.

"I was surprised to get your call," Erika said after the drinks had been served.

"I hope our visit isn't an inconvenience," Grisaille said.

"Oh no," Erika said. "I'm glad you came. I let the servants go so I could have more to keep myself busy with, but it gets lonely. The only person I see these days, it seems, is a yardman who comes up every Saturday to work on the grounds and house. Besides," she added, smiling, "You and Swan are always welcome."

Swan smiled and glanced at Grisaille. Swan did not often smile, but when he did it was warm and friendly; a surprisingly pleasant smile from that small, ugly man with the dark bushy hair. Swan passed as a sort of combination valet and secretary to Grisaille but he was much more. While not a sorcerer, Swan was a totally remarkable man. And his loyalty to Grisaille gave him a devotion to the forces Grisaille served with his powers. Grisaille and Swan had been together long enough for the sorcerer to know what was on Swan's mind right now.

There was a fact that might or might not present a problem. Erika Ruston did not believe in magic.

She did not believe that her father had been a sorcerer, or that Grisaille, or any one of two dozen other sorcerers who had been friends of her parents, could possibly possess powers of magic. It was not that her father had been secretive. It was merely that he was not demonstrative. And Erika was very modern.

"We've been worried about you the past month," Simon Grisaille said, looking at the fabulous view through the window. "I see now we shouldn't have."

"It's very flattering," said Erika.

The conversation became filled with small talk that consumed hours and conjured images of the past. That night Grisaille lay for a long time without sleeping. He and Swan had rooms on the second floor of the house. Outside the window Grisaille could see the darkness of the night. There was no moon and few stars. It was silent. After an hour or so Grisaille got up, found his slippers and a robe, and went to see Swan. He found him awake and standing at the window of his room.

"Too quiet," said Swan. "This place was always full of night sounds before. Now, there's nothing. Something's wrong, Mr. Grisaille. Bad wrong."

"I've got the same feeling," said Grisaille. He peered out at the still night that was so black and silent.

Then, faintly, there was a sound.

Swan heard it too, for he turned to the door, saying, "What's that?"

"It could be Erika downstairs," Grisaille said. But there were more noises, this time a crashing sound as if something had been knocked over.

"Downstairs, quickly," Grisaille said.

He rushed out of the room and down the stairs, followed by Swan. As they reached the foot of the stairs, the lights came on and Grisaille saw Erika by the hallway light switch.

"I heard noises in the basement," she said.

"Where's the door?" Grisaille asked.

Erika's room was on the first floor and the basement door beyond it. She led the way, but Grisaille pushed past her before she reached the door.

"It's locked," she said. "Daddy's workshop is down there. He always kept the door locked. I haven't gotten around to going down there since he died."

"It isn't locked now," Grisaille said, opening the door. There was yawning darkness below. Grisaille switched on the stairway light and the single dim bulb revealed a closed door at the foot of the stairs.

"You'd better stay here," Grisaille said.

"Don't be silly," Erika said. "It's probably nothing, and even if we do have prowlers you can more than handle them."

The tone of her voice told Grisaille she didn't intend to be argued out of going. He didn't like exposing her needlessly to danger but there didn't seem to be much choice. "Very well," he said. "But stay back out of danger."

At the foot of the stairs, he tried the door. It was a heavy wooden door, but well balanced, so that it opened with ease and silence. Grisaille was aware as it opened that it should have been locked.

The room beyond was large and lined with books. Old books with old-fashioned and sometimes handmade bindings. The lighting was poor and the shadows dark in the room but Grisaille could see the glass-fronted cases of instruments and boxes against the wall between huge floor-to-ceiling bookcases. There was a heavy wood table near the far end, littered with the instruments and accumulations of an alchemist. A pentagram was drawn in blue chalk on the floor.

And seven lighted tapers that should have ceased burning with the death of Matthew Ruston still burned.

"Someone had to light those candles," Erika said.

"Those aren't ordinary candles," Grisaille said.

"Let's not bring that old joke into this," said Erika.

And then she screamed.

Something stirred in the dark shadow that almost hid the entire far portion of the room. Something huge and black and impossible moved from those shadows. Grisaille recognized it at once and his blood seemed to freeze in his veins.

"Get Erika out of here," he told Swan.

Swan knew better than to argue; Erika didn't. She protested as Swan forced her from the room and closed the door. Through the heavy door Grisaille heard her say, "We can't leave Simon alone with that!"

Grisaille reached back and closed the bolt, locking the door from the inside.

The thing came toward him. It was coal black and tall like a vaguely man-shaped cloud of ink. Two burning lights marked the place where eyes should have been. Grisaille knew that this

creature was capable of killing him with a single blow—or of doing worse. Demons can do much worse than kill.

Grisaille backed away from the door, avoiding the demon, and began to speak a rune.

The creature recognized the words and with an unearthly scream leaped at Grisaille. Grisaille jumped to one side, but he moved too slowly to completely avoid the blow. He was struck on the left shoulder and the blow sent him rolling across the room. He came to a stop against the wall, knocking books from the shelves above him. It took an almost superhuman effort to regain his feet, but Grisaille made it before the creature could reach him again. The creature leaped.

Grisaille avoided it again and resumed the rune. The thing turned and started to move toward him again. There was room to move now and Grisaille backed away from the demon. It obviously intended another and final leap.

But Grisaille completed the rune.

The creature was moving ponderously toward Grisaille, then stopped as a small spot of red light formed abruptly in the air in front of the creature's face. The spot began moving around the demon, gathering speed, as other lights formed, some green, some yellow, some red like the first, all orbiting around the creature. The creature screamed its unearthly death cry as the whirling lights engulfed and destroyed it.

For a long time Grisaille stood breathing heavily. There was fiery pain in his shoulder and he could feel bruises where he had hit the bookcase. The spell he had used was a simple one that did not expend much energy on his part, but the battle with the creature had added to the strain. It had taken a toll on him.

Moments later he was upstairs in the living room and Swan was applying a special ointment to Grisaille's shoulder. Erika, still pale, stood near a window, staring at the night, her hands moving with nervous restlessness on the window sill. Grisaille and Swan let her finally break the silence.

"What was that?" she asked.

Swan finished applying the ointment. "You can put your shirt back on," he said to Grisaille.

Simon Grisaille carefully put his injured arm into the sleeve of his pajama shirt. By morning it would be completely healed, but now it was still stiff and painful. "That was a demon," he said quietly.

Erika said nothing.

"Erika, you've got to face a few things now. Before it didn't matter. Now it does. You're in danger."

"I can't understand this, Simon. I can't."

"You never will, fully. It's too complex. But for your own good you have to admit that certain things you don't understand are at work here. Call it magic, sorcery, unexplained phenomena—the name doesn't matter. What does matter is that demon was sent here for a reason, perhaps to kill you. You're in danger, Erika, and I may be the only person who can help you. But I'll need your cooperation."

"Simon—did my father know how to . . .," she groped for the word, "summon something like that?"

"Yes," Grisaille answered. "Any wizard could. That's what the pentagram on the floor of his workroom was for."

"It's horrible. Did that thing get in through that pentagram?"

"It may have gained access because of that pentagram," Grisaille answered. "But it was sent here, not summoned here. There are a number of ways it could be done."

Erika continued to stare out the window.

"Aspects of it are horrible," Grisaille said. "But other aspects are not. Your father took his responsibilities seriously. He had respect for the powers he could wield and respect for his fellow humans. He and I often joined talents to prevent the misuse of such powers in others. He used his powers—or talents, if you prefer that term—wisely."

She turned so that she faced the room. The room was lighted by a single lamp and her face was hidden in shadow. "There's more," she said. "There's more you're not telling me. What is it? Why did you come here?"

"I can tell you in the morning—after you've had some sleep," Grisaille said.

"Don't fence with me, Simon. I have to know."

Grisaille's hesitation was only momentary as he considered the matter. "Very well. You'd better sit down."

When Erika was seated, Grisaille said, "I was called by your father. I heard the voice of his elan calling to me."

"His soul?" Erika managed to say after a long moment.

"Not his soul. I don't know if there is such a thing. The elan can be destroyed and usually is by death. But sometimes it can be kept in existence after death. Held captive."

"And my father's elan is being held captive by someone?"

"Yes."

There was strain in Erika's voice. "But why?"

"I don't know," Grisaille answered. "Perhaps to learn something. Many sorcerers might covet your father's secrets."

Erika's hands clenched, opened, clenched again. "You're saying my father was murdered, aren't you?"

"Not necessarily," Grisaille said.

"But you think he was. He would have had to be killed. If he just died his elan would have been destroyed. In order to capture it a sorcerer would have to know when it would be possible to capture it. To know when death was coming. Isn't that so?"

"It's so," Grisaille said.

The next morning Grisaille slept later than he intended. Swan, he realized, had not disturbed him because of the injury to his shoulder. The shoulder was healed, now, thanks to the ointment. It was almost nine thirty. Grisaille dressed and went downstairs.

Swan met him on the stairs. Grisaille saw from Swan's face that something was not as he liked it. "What's happened?" he asked.

Before Swan could answer, a deep voice said, "Hello, Simon."

"Quentin Gehman," Grisaille said with surprise but not pleasure.

Gehman smiled up at Grisaille from the base of the stairs. He was a tall man running to a slight plumpness, dressed in a conservative blue suit. His plump face was twisted into a smile that was too ingratiating and his pale eyes denied that smile.

"Simon!" said Erika. "He heard Father's voice too. Father called to him to come here."

"I'm surprised to find you here," Gehman said. "But of course that makes it easier—there being two of us here."

He turned and started talking to Erika. They walked toward the kitchen, where Grisaille could smell the odor of brewing coffee. Grisaille remained on the stairs and Swan looked up at him.

"Gehman and Matthew Ruston were anything but friends," Swan said.

"I know," answered Grisaille. "I know."

It was afternoon before Grisaille managed to break away from the others.

He went down into the basement. The workshop was still a shambles. Books littered the floor and one shelf had been splintered in the battle the night before. The chalk marks that outlined the pentagram were smeared and a censer was overturned. The seven tapers still burned.

Grisaille surveyed the room with an expertly appraising eye. Nothing seemed out of place other than the books on the floor. Nothing seemed missing at that first glance. But also there was nothing in the room that seemed special enough to warrant killing Ruston and enslaving his elan.

Yet, if Gehman had done these things to Ruston, the only reason he could have for tipping his hand would be to find something he could not steal by magic from a distance.

Grisaille found a catalog of Ruston's possessions in a drawer in the table. He opened it and started reading.

The items were listed in black ink, in Ruston's clear, spidery hand. They seemed normal items for a sorcerer and the occasional rare or special item did not seem enough to warrant murder. After almost an hour of reading, Grisaille came to the entry that read, *Amulet of Flames*.

Of course, he realized, that was what Gehman was after. Grisaille had not known that Ruston possessed the famed amulet and he did not know how Gehman had learned who had it. But Grisaille saw Gehman's reasons for wanting it. The amulet gave complete mastery of the elementals of flame to the person who carried it. It was a prize of sufficient value to make murder and black sorcery worthwhile, Grisaille thought grimly. A lot of things were now explained.

Except—where was it hidden?

Grisaille went to find Erika and Swan.

Swan was in the living room, seated in a chair. "Where's Erika?" Grisaille asked.

Swan did not answer.

His eyes were closed and he did not move. He looked pale and his face was drawn. Swan looked dead.

But he still breathed shallowly. Grisaille checked his pulse and found it slow. Gehman had struck Swan with a spell. It would not be hard to bring Swan out of the spell, but it would be some time before Swan would be able to do anything. Gehman had made his move.

Grisaille said the words to counteract the spell and made passes with his hands. Swan's breathing became more normal, but his eyes did not open. Grisaille found his pulse more normal, but it would be hours before Swan would be able to move around.

He left Swan in the chair and went outside. The cars were still in the driveway which meant Erika and Gehman were still around. But where?

Then Grisaille heard the sound like a thunder of winds from the sky to his right.

He turned and saw the fireball streaking toward him at such a speed he barely had time to move.

He fell to the ground and rolled as the green fireball streaked past, plowed into the ground and skidded, leaving a patch of blackened earth and a pungent reek of sulphur.

It had missed him on purpose, Grisaille realized. Gehman was playing games. But Gehman was making his own rules, too. Grisaille catapulted himself to his feet and ran for the woods in the direction the fireball had come from.



There was no sound but the sound of his own running. The air was heavy with a musky forest odor and traces of the sulphurous reek from the fireball.

Then he saw Gehman, standing a hundred yards away, atop a small rise. Erika stood at the foot of the rise. She saw Grisaille and broke into a run toward him.

She was crying but seemed otherwise unhurt. Grisaille stopped less than fifty yards from Gehman and Erika fell sobbing into his arms.

"He's the one," she said, forcing each word out bitterly. "He killed Daddy. He was after a necklace Daddy gave me."

"You've figured it all out by now, of course," Gehman said. "How the amulet was on a necklace so garish that Erika would seldom if ever wear it and how it was protected by a spell so that the only way to recover it was by personally coming for it. It took a lot of magic to find out where it was, Simon. It would have been easier if my emissary had killed you last night as I had hoped he would. But now that I have the amulet I have the power to kill you."

"Watch!"

Gehman raised his hands in a sudden gesture and began chanting. Even as Gehman began his chant the flames began to spring up around Grisaille.

Before Grisaille could react he and Erika were completely surrounded by flames that were already hungrily leaping and closing in. Erika screamed and Grisaille felt the searing heat against his face and body.

There was little time for action. Grisaille held tightly to Erika with his right arm and lifted the left toward the sky. He chanted loudly but the roar of the flames almost drowned his rune out.

The sound and smell grew increasingly oppressive as Grisaille called to the elementals of the wind.

The flames parted in front of them as the wind elementals reacted to the call, making a passageway. How long it would last, Grisaille wasn't sure. His control of the wind was strong, but not so strong as Gehman's control of fire with that amulet.

He half dragged, half pushed Erika through the opening in the ring of fire. The scorched ground was hot beneath his feet as he and Erika made their way past the flames.

But other flames were leaping up around them, now. The whole forest was catching fire. Soon it would be an inferno that no amount of wind could blow apart. And even if he could have caused the wind to do that, Grisaille knew there would be more flames at the end of any path he could make. While Gehman held the amulet the flames were supernatural and not even a storm could douse them.

Then Grisaille saw the lake. He glimpsed a bright reflection of flames off the surface of the water, through the thick smoke haze. The way was still clear. He and Erika could make it with speed.

Erika had stopped crying and the shock that had held her a few moments before had given way to the urgency of their predicament. They reached the lake and ran into the water until it was up to Erika's waist.

"Can you swim?" Grisaille asked. His throat, like his eyes, was smarting from the smoke, and speaking required an effort.

"Yes."

"It may be necessary to swim to the center of the lake if the flames get close to the edge of the water. They can leap short distances and Gehman can still use fireballs. But his fire can't burn on water and it can't cross running water. You might also have to escape the smoke."

He glanced around and saw how small the lake was and knew it was not large enough to save her life if Gehman came for her. But he said nothing to indicate that.

"I'll be back soon," he said. He waded back to shore before she could protest.

The fire was raging madly now. There could not be much time before it would reach the house where Swan was still helplessly asleep. Grisaille knew he could never reach the house in time.

There was only one thing he could do and he did it. He raised his arms and began chanting to the wind. The wind rose and the sound of it competed with the sound of the burning forest. For a while at least the wind would blow against the fire, slowing its movement toward the house.

But for how long Grisaille could only hope. If anything happened to him the wind would cease to struggle with the flames and the fire would rage hungrily and out of control.

Gehman would not be far off. He would recognize Grisaille's magic and would know Grisaille had somehow survived the flames. Gehman would not fear testing his strong new magic even against Grisaille's powers.

Grisaille headed back for the rise where he had last seen the other wizard.

The rise and the surrounding land was burned off now, a black scar that still smoked but bore no flames. Gehman was not in

sight. Grisaille had not expected him to be but he suspected that Gehman was somewhere close by. Grisaille called to him.

In spite of the crackling, roaring fire and the sounds of the wind, the forest seemed somehow quiet. Grisaille called Gehman's name again.

Gehman stepped over the rise, into view.

"You're good, Simon. Not many wizards have the control to react as fast as you do. Where's Erika?"

"I don't want to kill you," Grisaille said. "Put out the fire and give me the amulet."

Gehman was amused. "And what about Matthew Ruston?"

"Release his elan. I'll let the brotherhood decide what to do with you."

"You're generous, Simon. But you've lost."

Gehman made a sudden gesture with his hands.

Grisaille had expected that and he was ready. Through the smoke haze he saw the green glow of the fireball streaking toward him and he reacted quickly.

He did not leap aside but gestured with his own hands. The wind stirred, roaring with sudden life.

The wind obeyed.

The fireball veered aside and rose, carried by an unnaturally powerful wind that snapped some of the nearby charred tree trunks. Grisaille fell to the earth, blown off his feet by that wind, and the fury of the wind dragged him across the ground. But he caught a quick glimpse of the fireball completing an arc and streaking for the rise of earth where Gehman stood. He heard Gehman's scream, then he smashed up against something and for a moment was too stunned to be aware of much of what went on around him.

He did not lose consciousness entirely. Somehow Grisaille willed himself to retain consciousness, but for a moment he could not get to his feet, could not move except to breathe laboriously.

He made himself get to his feet, finally. He was weakened both by physical exertion and by the exertion of his wizardry.

He saw what was left of Gehman. The fireball had landed on top of him, leaving only charred remains. The fireball had not harmed the amulet. Grisaille retrieved the amulet and pocketed it.

Had Gehman been less careless, Grisaille told himself, it would be Simon Grisaille who had died. Had Gehman maintained control over the fireball as it streaked toward Grisaille, then the wind would have had no effect on it. But he merely formed it and sent it. His mistake had been in not guiding it: in letting Grisaille get in his own spell.

Gehman had said it. Not many wizards had the control to act really fast.

The fire was already abating, with Gehman's death. Grisaille conjured a storm to take care of the rest of it. Then he found Erika and the two of them went back to the house where Swan was beginning to stir. Grisaille took the amulet from his pocket and showed it to Erika.

"Keep it," she said. "You'll know how to use it—or keep it from being used."

Grisaille went into the cellar of the house where Matthew Ruston had worked his magic. The seven tapers no longer burned.

The elan of Matthew Ruston was finally at rest.

Miriam? She was no problem. Miriam dreamed. And dreams can kill...



Hungry Ghosts

by David A English

Illustrated by R. Edwards Jennings

"Harry, Harry, Harry," she said in a toneless mutter, "I just can't take this crap anymore. You rent this stinking pad for me; sometimes you put a little food in the fridge. Hell, I might as well get a job."

"Well, I can't stand it either," Harry Hennault snarled back. "Why don't you?"

Harry and Jennifer were playing one of their games. She was threatening to throw him over and become the mistress of someone who could do better by her, or get a job, or something. He was threatening to let her do just that. Each in turn advanced reasons why this would be a good thing, mostly character defects in the other. The object of the game, whatever Jennifer might secretly hope and fear, was not to bring about this revolution in their affairs. It was simply, as in boxing, to damage the opponent.

Trapped in their lives, their selves, as some are in cages or cells, this was how they beguiled the time. A game is a series of stereotyped maneuvers in which variations are possible, and it gets you nowhere. How did you pass your day, friend?

Jennifer said: "Good: we can't stand each other. So go on already. Hurry back to your Miriam. Don't be late—she might cut off your allowance."

"I'm her business manager," he snapped.

She just laughed. Immediately, he felt like a jerk—like a child breaking up under mother's sarcasm. He always fell into that trap, and the routine, an old one with them, ran its course like one of those clockwork Franksteins which menace, drop their pants and then blush. The key word, which was 'allowance,' put him in short pants and forced from his throat that stale barf about being

a 'business manager.' The first time, she had coolly pointed out that he didn't make any financial decisions for Miriam at all, just followed her instructions and ran errands. That was no longer necessary. Now all she needed to demolish him was a sarcastic chuckle.

She continued to stare out the window, absorbing bitter energy for the game from the spectacle of the world she had retreated from so long ago. Harry watched her and strove to hate her, to view her as something it wouldn't hurt him to lose. He let his eyes wander over her, kneading the passion into existence as one works up spit.

She wasn't so attractive really, he told himself. She was too heavy in the hips and legs, too narrow across the chest and shoulders in anomalous contrast. She was also something of a slob, or at least there was a kind of repulsive confusion about her. Why, if someone were to dress her up very carefully and neatly, within a few minutes she would be utterly messed. Her stocking seams would writhe out of line, her skirt would crumple and crawl up her hams, and her hair, of its own languid life, would uncoil. Her nose inevitably shone, and her blouses were never without their powdering of cigarette ash. She was just a slob with a broad, white ass, he raved into himself.

But he said: "Don't you love me, Jenny?"

Game or not, it really seemed to him that she was trying to break away from him, and, poignantly, he realized that he dare not lose her. He did not love her; say that and you mis-use the word. But he needed her, just as he needed Miriam, whom he did not love either. He could readily understand his dependence on Miriam; her money was all he required of her. The factor that grappled him to Jennifer was less easy to isolate. Only, sometimes, she became a vortex of insane ecstasy that caught him up and turned him about until, what with the strain and the dizziness of it, he lost all sense of himself and could for a little while believe that his life was not altogether empty, altogether wrecked.

But he did not love her; you do not love an addiction.

He put his hand out tentatively, needing to touch her, but afraid. Approaching her was problematical at this stage of the game. He could easily precipitate one of her crazy rages, one of those terrible rip-snorts where she became like an animal, shrieking demented imprecations, spitting, eyes all flaming and bereft of sense.

His fear was needless. She was calm.

"Don't, Harry. You're just making it harder."

He held her shoulders and put his face in her hair, snuffing its perfume like a weedhead his sick-sweet smoke. He tried to imply a pun.

"Get off me!" She was having none of it.

"Please, Jenny, I need you so much. You're all that I have."

"You have your Miriam, baby. It's me that doesn't have anyone. Because Miriam has you."

"Miriam . . . is dying."

End of games. Abandoning the pastime, one of the prisoners becomes serious, real, and begins to scheme escape.

"Miriam will live a hundred years," said Jennifer. "Miriam will be around, sick heart and all, when both of us are wormfood."

"I'm not kidding," he insisted. "She's going fast because—"

He stopped. Jennifer twisted in his embrace to view him intently. At first glance, people thought her eyes harbored a vivid intelligence; but if you looked too long, you saw the deep

confusion that lurked there like something languidly writhing at the bottom of a well.

She broke away from him and slipper-slopped over to the davenport. Harry watched her slump there, crossing her thick ankles, and wanted very much to go back to playing games. Could he trust her? Would she even take this thing seriously?

"Jesus, I hope you aren't doing something stupid. They're good at finding out if someone has been poisoned. And they always suspect the husband." She laughed nervously. "Awful commentary on marriage."

"I'm not stupid," he said.

"Okay—maybe not. But you might be desperate. I mean, how else can you be so sure? All the time, I read these newspaper articles saying how hopeful they are about heart diseases."

She patted her lap. "Come here. Baby has his sly look on. Tell us all about it."

He stretched out near her and lay his cheek against her warm thigh. She stroked his neck, and he talked.

"You won't believe it unless I prove it to you," he said. "It's too fantastic."

"How do you mean?"

"Look, for a minute, please baby, just do as I say. Shut your eyes and make your mind a blank; make it as much like sleep as you can."

Muscles stiffened under his cheek.

"What are you doing with her, Harry? Hypnotizing her? For god sakes—"

"No; even stranger than that. You don't know everything. Watch, I won't say a word. Just do as I told you."

They fell silent for a few minutes, the two of them. Harry's face shrank with concentration, while Jennifer's grew blank and soft as she tried to follow his instructions.

"Harry—"

"Wait!" he stopped her. "You saw something, felt it—like in a dream. Was it—?" His voice became a blurred, shamed mumble.

She stared down at him. ". . . Yes."

"You see! You see!" he crowed. "I can do it. I can force my thoughts into somebody else's mind."

She was trembling; he had made her tremble. "Oh Jesus, honey, this is scary. Where did you learn to do that?"

"I don't know really. The first time, it just kind of happened. Like all of a sudden you find out that you can wiggle your ears or raise one eyebrow. Don't laugh: it's just like that, like suddenly making new connections in your nervous system. Only it feels more like a connection with something outside of you, like there was some kind of . . . powers around, that you hooked up with and they helped you."

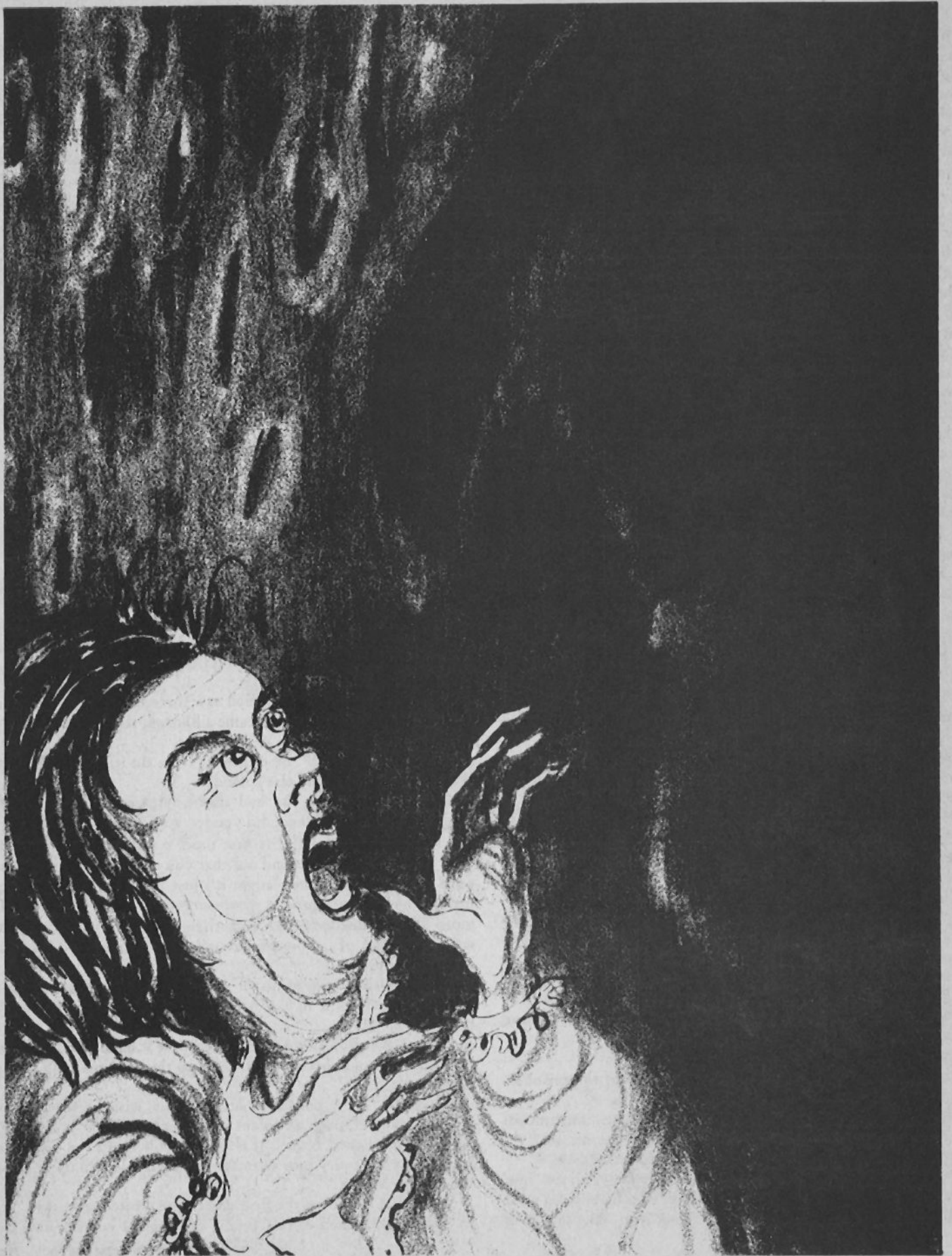
He fumbled a slip of paper out of his shirt pocket. It was deeply creased, as if it had been unfolded and re-folded many times.

"Here, listen to this. After the first time it happened, I looked at a lot of books—occult stuff. I found this in something about Paracelsus . . ."

He read: "'It is possible that my spirit, without the help of my body, and through an ardent will alone, and without a sword, can stab and wound others. It is also possible that I can bring the spirit of my adversary into an image and then fold him up or lame him at my pleasure.'"

"But what happened the first time?" she wanted to know.

"One night, listen to me, Jenny, one night I was standing by



Miriam's bed. She'd fallen asleep, her mouth all open and making an ugly gurgling. So nasty. And I thought, sweetheart, I thought how softly you slept beside me. And thinking that, I hated her more and more. God, but I hated her. I thought I'd go crazy. I felt like I was a volcano trying to erupt. All that rage and hate, and nowhere it could come out. No channel in all the world for its relief."

"Because she has you in her power," Jennifer said. "Just like I have in a different way. You're like a tiger or something held between two chains, and you can't go either way."

Her speech had become faintly taunting again. But it was just habit, nothing behind it. As a sportsman in his daily pursuits might move in a way reminiscent of his game simply because it was a way he had learned to move.

Harry knew that and paid no attention to it. Dry of mouth, he went on. He shaped his thought carefully, sharpening it to penetrate her understanding and compel belief.

"It made a way for itself. The beast leaped—in a direction no one could have conceived of. The hate made a way for itself, only not in this world, no, in some awful other world. All around me, I felt the presence of something that was dead and yet not dead, some kind of minimal consciousness. There was a stirring of . . . shapeless powers . . . Down There under the world—"

Jennifer shivered. Deep within, she felt the gnawing of a tiny seed of terror, like the cold augury of madness that one chemically predestined to it might feel on a morning when the metabolic poisons have reached a certain temporary concentration. She felt it as a woman might imagine that she had conceived, and knew that it had begun to grow.

In the single dead hour of the city's night, the brief silence before another day and its noise begins, she had known the queasy sense of formless beings in some region under the earth, or in the deepest pits of the mind. The desperate and distracted, like Jennifer and like Harry, those who librate on the lip of a chasm of madness, in which the fallen rave and weep, do know of this, and obscurely feel the presence of the crowded, un-kinged tribes of the dead.

Just for once, she wanted Harry to hold her and hide her from something that came on like the night. It was not, as usual, mere dependence on him for her living, in exchange for which she entered into some kind of a relationship with him and gave him her body. This was almost, if not quite, love, and if Harry had known of it, he would have found it more acceptable than their customary transaction. But he did not know, and she could not bring herself to cling to him and hide from the night. For he had brought in the night.

"What happened then?" she asked.

"Miriam woke up. She screamed and flopped around, coming up out of dreams like someone drowning. She scuttled back from me like a fat, white crab. She was choking and her face was turning purple. I had to give her her god damn pills, and the nurse called the doctor.

"Before he got there, I convinced her she'd been dreaming. She had been, of course—but it was *my* dream she dreamed: the hatchet smashing at her, the shiny blade that split her and twisted in her ugly meat—"

Jennifer winced. "Yick . . ."

More calmly, Harry went on:

"You see, she dreamed a dream that I myself had made and transmitted to her. And the shock of it almost killed her right

there, what with her sick heart. She's been weak since then, and I've given her some more dreams . . ."

He rubbed and rolled his cheek against her legs. His jaws ached to bite.

He snarled: "She can't last much longer; by hell, she can't!"

Jennifer pressed one hand to his head to keep it still. With the other, she mechanically stroked his damp brow. Her cool fingers soothed him. He could not see the despair in her eyes.

She feared the world and its cold inhabitants and had withdrawn from it. Once she had believed that she was too fine for the world. In her retreat, looking inward, she had learned she was merely afraid. But always she hoped that something would drive her from her covert, that she might be forced to find the strength to live with people and dare the treacherous wounds they can inflict. In so far as it was not out of simple self-hatred, that was why she played her game with Harry, as one might throw an issue on the knees of fate. One day, perhaps, she might make him drive her away, but she would not have to truly decide anything.

"You'd better go now, Harry," she said.

She laid her hand on his mouth.

"I'm afraid of you, Harry. You're clotted all over with some kind of sickness, and something old and rotten has been drawn to you and given you some kind of power. But I know you and I know me. If this thing that you're working doesn't eat you up, you'll be back and you'll have all the money in the world, and I'll let you in. Because I can't face the world any better than you can, and you'll take care of me. I won't like it, but there are things I like a lot less even than you, Harry."

Apprehension gripped him. She had spoken vaguely of something going wrong. He was afraid to ask what she meant, but he remembered another thing Paracelsus had written: "Because men do not perfectly believe and imagine, the result is, that these arts are uncertain."

But as he nuzzled in the front of her peignoir, the smell of her underpants poked stiff fingers up his nostrils, and he let it impassion him and sharpen his resolve.

Miriam said: "Don't leave me, Harry."

"I'd better, darling. You need to rest."

"How can I rest with those awful dreams? It would be better if I didn't sleep at all."

Damp, white fingers crawled up her throat like precocious graveworms. Harry smiled.

"You have to be calm, sweetheart. You'll just bring on those dreams of yours by thinking about it."

"Don't think about a monkey!" she snapped. "That's all you know about it."

She closed her eyes, spent. Harry knew she had not slept the previous night. She could no longer resist her drowsiness, and the sleep that prisoned her would be the stronger. In that dungeon of the mind, she must helplessly await his pleasure.

"I don't want to die," she whispered. "Down There, you become nothing—forever . . ."

. . . or a ragged shred of consciousness fluttering in the wind of some nether void, thought Harry. But are you so much more than that now? You must be very close if you can see so clear how it is Down There. Go on now, die the rest of the way! Die and let me live!

"You won't die," he said. "Rest and get strong."

He backed towards the door.

"You don't care if I die," she spat. "You want me to die. I'll be dead and you'll be alive and I know what you'll do then, you and your whore."

A needle-thin stream of rage, like a squirt of tepid milk: that was as much as she dared permit herself. Harry couldn't help but smile as he closed the door on her words.

As he moved down the long corridor that separated their bedrooms, her weeping followed him, a hollow throbbing like that of seepage falling one drop at a time in deep, funeral vaults. He was disgusted by the noise of it, as by the bubbling of slime-choked plumbing. He hated it as he hated the flesh from which it issued, as one might abhor an odor, suddenly realizing that one is ingesting the very molecules of its source.

Good: let me hate her as much as I can, he thought. He would need the strongest hate he could muster; it must fill his heart like a wordless prayer, an invocation of shapeless powers.

For passion was the key to deep realms where inchoate gods crawled through the ooze that greased the axle of the world, down where a spider called Weep Man spun the web of human fate, and an Endless Beast, eternally circling, conducted all things back to their source.

He undressed and crept into his bed, already cold with the dark power that was growing in him.

Lying in darkness, he saw, as his eyes made their accommodation, the furniture of his room come slowly into being. But it was a being somehow deprived of the determination of daylight entity, a kind of magic substance responsive to the will and imagination, which might be molded by them. The faint luminescence remained on the surface and failed to inhere in the objects themselves. In fact, the pale glow of these nighted entities might not, after all, lay upon anything so homely as chair and dresser and lamp; it might caress the incomprehensible forms of sleep, the nameless objects that populate the broken landscape of dreams.

Yet, he was not asleep. Not unconsciously did he weave the dismal tapestry of his dreaming. At all times he was aware, he thought, of his dual presence: here in his bed and *here* in some skewbald realm of shattered forms.

The ancient anger stole softly upon him, softly at first, and its flow increased by such minute gradations that he could not say when it first became a torrent. The anger flowed over him like the unbroken clouds, stretching from horizon to horizon, on a day of storms, like an onward-surging sea of clouds that writhes with tormented ghosts. And tears filled his eyes and flowed like acid down his cheeks, unwiped, almost ignored, as he grieved for the joys untasted, the life in him denied, unlived, choked down by that hated woman. His hunger for Jennifer, kept from its meat by the interposition of Miriam's grub-like bulk, came and licked his face like a cur. Rage boiled in his throat. Jennifer's sweet and fecal odor haunted his sinuses, gust of ghost in the halls of his skull.

Abruptly, with a kind of electrical shock, he realized that a titanic form overshadowed him and let descend her monstrous paw. It fell upon his face to crush his mouth and nose and force back his breath. It clung; he could not breathe. Often this vision had been the herald of sleep, its induction; and even now he could not say if it was something that had really been done to him, or only a sick bedtime story he had told himself so many

times that it had become a memory. But he knew that giant image as his mother, and he loved and hated what happened, that descent into the hissing dark and its nameless, horrifying pleasures.

This was the ancient wrong that had othered him from the world. This was what had made him a nidding, to cringe before women and crave their succor. But at least the primal wound might be its own revenge: it had left some strange fistula in his soul, a channel to the realm of death and dreams...

And thank you, mother. Thank you very much.

Movement now: like the sideward drift of a drunken room, that never arrives anywhere, it began, a sensation of sinking forever. His passion bore him away and downward, always downward. And his hatred spurted onto the sour earth Down There, and hungry ghosts, mere seeking mouths of the starving dead, scuttled upon it and lapped it. He heard their voices, tiny and insect-like as a held-away telephone, or like the random discharge of a brain-cell where some unremembered phrase is inscribed. "Wanted milk, but the breast had needles." "Mummy, not the pig-mask, not the feathers, but be a loving mouth." "Only want to be real, only that."

He spilled out his rage, his hate, his lust for the woman's destruction. He let them taste the joy of Miriam's dissolution. The hungry dead grovelled and ravened over it with a sound of rats slithering in garbage. They grew strong and real to abet him, and he felt his passion thrown back upon him, now transformed and augmented for his use.

He was... there. All around him lay the broken land of dreams... where the slant ray of the moon tangles inextricably the skewbald landscape... a place of dreadful stelae whose inscriptions are the senseless murmurings of ghosts... a wretched domain where dreamers meet...

He would find her here. Here he would assail her, wreck her, rend and abolish her. But first he must array himself.

If a sculptor worked the receptive clay from within (some there are who do), that would be how the dreamer formed himself for the encounter. He made his dream-body, as once we may have grown our flesh bodies, no longer knowing how, according to our desire. He formed it along terrible lines. Fang and claw he chose from among generations of predators, and the yellow drool of their absolute hunger. Out of monkey memories and the long nightmare of tree-top times, he made for himself a loathly flesh of serpents and a vile, sinuous movement. Worse: from a place beyond all places and outside of time, he dredged up a mask of evil yet to come, and an old sick face from the deepest level of dreams, the negation of everything we hoped...

Let her come now. He was ready.

She came, or he drew her, to where he lay in wait, down, down, to his dismal realm of moonlit wreckage. From his ambush he watched her move among shattered and incomprehensible objects, such as are observed in dreams, whose use we will never understand. She, too, wore a form of dreams, one which he had imposed upon her. Hers was the guise of fragility, the ceremonial dress of the victim; for she was the object of all that power and terror he had put on.

Little more than a wraith, she had become, in this dream, a pale and tenuous sketch of herself. But a slaughterhouse horror of red and purple heart pulsed in her breast, clearly visible like a target. It was a nasty caricature such as a vicious child might draw, then stab repeatedly until the pen-point is broken.

Pervading the landscape, the loathsome shape of the principal dreamer dogged her distacted wandering. Instinct drove her to seek concealment, instinct and a kind of . . . shame. But the deceitful land, in which it seemed the simplest thing to lose oneself forever, offered none: not to her. If she sought to hide in bowers of white, wormy vines, or creep into sheltering crevices of the sour rocks, the creaking and murmuring of imbecilic ghosts drove her forth again. When she tried to lose herself in tangles of shadows, the sick moon bent to eat them away.

And always something frightful dogged behind her. Wherever she turned, it was always there at her back, stalking nearer. She tried to flee, thus bringing to the dream that increment of fear that flight produces. And wherever she turned, there was always the slant ray of the moon to confuse her, the looming of wicked forms and tottering spires, and something evil that peered out of the faceless land and leered with infinite bale upon her agony.

Carefully, the pursuer gaged the minute gradations of terror. There is a point where terror, over-driven, annihilates itself and finds peace in despair. He could not let his victim say: "No worse. There is nothing more they can do to me;" for then he would have the whole dreadful ordeal, as it was for him also, laboriously to build anew. Rather, he must wait until this precise point has *almost* been attained, and then drive hard at his victim with all the force he could summon.

That point was approaching fast. The dream-form of the victim had grown paler still and more frail. It seemed to flap in tatters against some frightful wind. She was a candle about to

expire, a leaf that in one moment more would part from the twig and be blown away.

Look! he shrieked, the whole dream shrieked. Behold the power and terror of all my hate, and all my rage, and all my loathing of you! See me now, and know despair, and break, heart, and die under the fiery rain of my hatred!

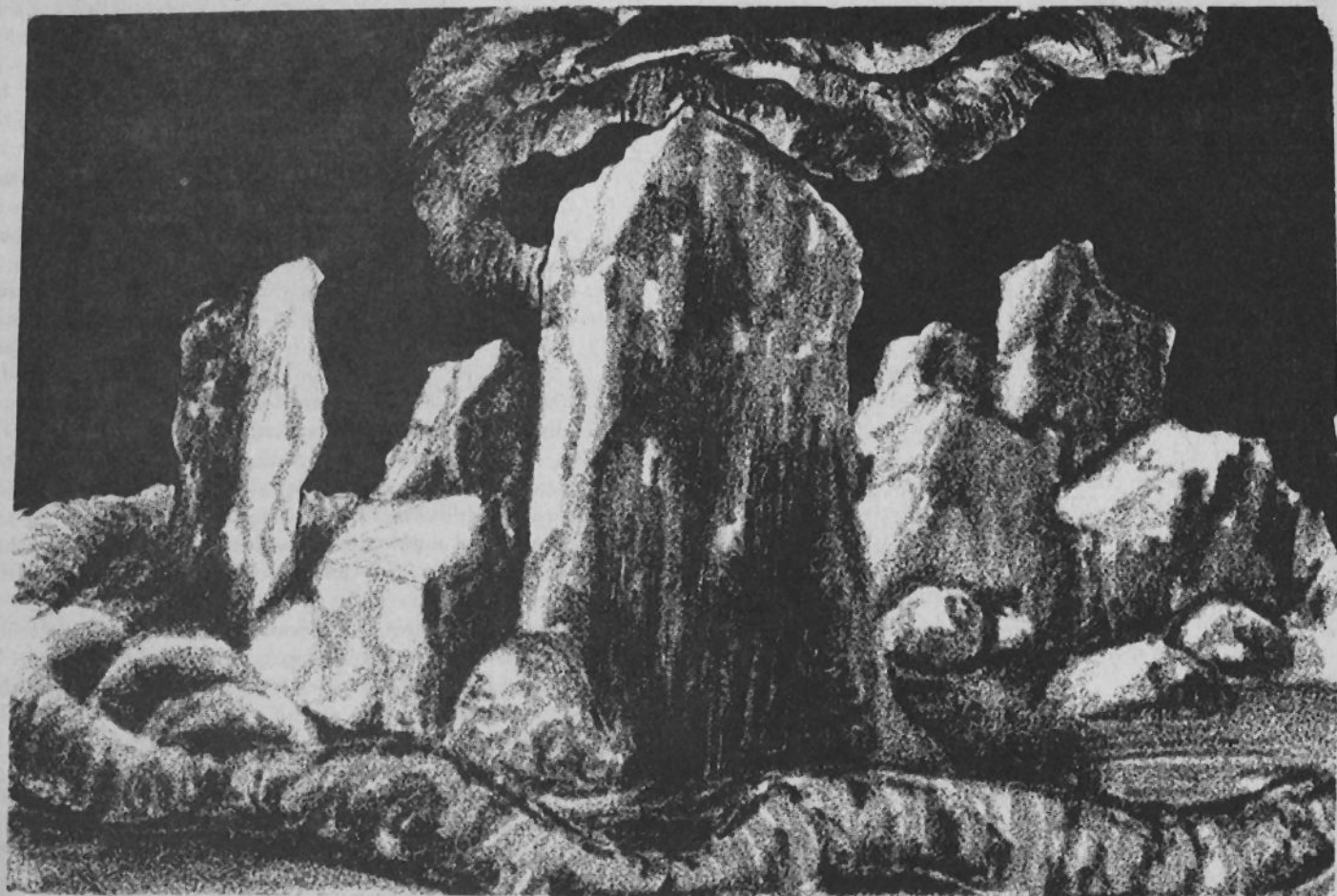
And all around her there was the carnivore's brutal lunge, and from everywhere the swoop of the hawk on pinions of whirlwind. The nightmare land contracted upon her like a throat. The disintegration of unbearable fright flamed in her and wrenched asunder the rarest atoms of her being. And at the last, there was a crazed beast-face of ancient negation that hung over her dropping yellow drool, then fell to raven in her breast and tear from it the living heart and its long scream of despair.

Her dream-form lay under his claws. Now it was shattered and fragmentary like the other broken forms of the moon-blasted land. He moved away; and with his passing there came hungry ghosts, mere seeking mouths, like scavengers.

"Dead . . . dead . . . old bitch is dead . . ."

In threatening orbits around his buzzing head, tenuous fragments of the broken land slowly revolved. The phosphoresces circled nearer, and, with the soft violence of snowflakes, broke upon him—as worldlets might be re-absorbed by a central sun. Each collision augmented just a little the inward quaking of an unacknowledgeable sickness.

From the corridor came the sounds of anxious muttering and



sloppy padding of slippered feet, sounds of midnight emergency. As usual, no one thought to call him. It would not occur to them until Miriam herself asked for him.

But of course, she couldn't . . .

Was she dead then?

Certainly she was. He had seen hungry ghosts devour the last fragments of her life, lapping like cats at an egg-yolk. There are dreams that bring only confusion and uncertainty, but he had dreamed the other kind.

He thought for a moment of how it would be necessary to conceal his elation. For his own amusement, he tried on an unseemly grin such as he would have to hide later.

To his surprise, he learned that counterfeiting grief and gloom would be no chore at all. A feeling of loss, of creeping doom, hummed in his flesh: but not for Miriam, no, he felt nothing at all about that. His concern, as always, was for himself. It was as if her death had invaded him with some dire malignancy, or as if his sojourn in the broken land had rendered him as tenuous and subject to change as its ghosts. Be careful not to grieve, something told him. Grieve, and you will become a tear, a hot, oily globule, or only its bitter tickle on a cheek somewhere.

Panic quickened his heart. Something, not blood, crawled in his veins, and he felt the sick undulation of the nerves which is called anxiety. Driven by an impulse to flee, to seek some sanctuary, he rose from his sweated sheets.

He felt somehow ruined, and the sense of freedom and glee which he had briefly known was completely gone. It had melted on his fingers before he could more than cursorily inspect it. He remembered another reaction like this. His first sexual experience had seemed to wound him the same way, and this, his first encounter with magic, was an initiation for which he was even less prepared. Afterwards, that long ago time, his body had felt internally congested, tender and secretly injured. The sense of some cryptic wound, manifesting itself as insensate surges of panic, had persisted for weeks, as though he had been invaded by an interior decay which must at last issue in his shameful destruction.

Hardly knowing what he did, he made his way down the dark back stairs and out into the night. The cold air on his face brought momentary flashes of clarity in which he saw himself for a fool. But these moments of comprehension never persisted long enough to cause him to turn his feet about and go back. A dumb tropism towards warmth and re-assurance drove him to Jennifer. Even his absolute conviction that she could not and would not offer him these did not halt him.

He was no longer in control, it seemed, not even to the minute extent to which his conscious will had formerly been active. He saw clearly that he was driven by tenuous forces with which he had saddled himself in the underworld. His own impulses had become indistinguishable from the devious urgings of hungry ghosts; he was not even sure he had ever known the difference. It seemed that the shapeless gods of the dream played games, arranged dramas . . .

The air around him, as he fled through alleys and backyards, glad of the night that hid his corrupted being from the eyes of men, droned with solemn coronachs and sang with endless dirges. Perhaps it was only his ears' singing with some soul-deep sickness, but he felt surrounded by spirits of air, who mourned. And there were gasps and windows slammed, and sometimes flashlight-beams roamed like quicksilver in yards he had passed

through. Blundering from one darkness to the next, he startled cats from their obscure transactions, set the dogs of the nighted yards to barking, and left an old woman who rummaged in dustbins to rave and scream after him; and her shrill cries, far behind, did not cease but only faded. He passed through the night like some European legend of evil.

At last he emerged from one final, reeking alley. Ahead, he saw a familiar pattern of street-lights, a known configuration of housefronts uneasily differentiating itself from darkness and confusion. He had seen this phenomenon too many times before, coming this way wounded in spirit and seeking solace. This time he needed comfort more desperately than ever; and this time he was less assured than ever of receiving it.

He crossed the street cautiously, away from the lights, unable now to bear any scrutiny but Jennifer's of his shamed flesh. In the familiar hallway, he rang long on her bell, as he always had to, until Jennifer should lose hope of her caller going away. Finally her voice, flat and tinny, buzzed in the speaking tube.

"It's me," he cried. "Harry. Let me up."

"I told you not to come here until—I told you not to come back."

"It's done, what I told you. I have to see you."

"When?"

"Tonight. All done, finished—"

"You stupid, it's too soon."

He begged, he pleaded. It was not his reasons that finally persuaded her; he had none. It was his meaningless urgency, arousing fear of the unknown. When she released the lock from above, it made him strangely angry. His need had not softened her heart at all, only waked her dread of notoriety. Resentment seethed in him.

For a moment his mind became clear and he almost saw that he hated her. Then need reasserted itself to tangle with the disgust she aroused. His brain was wrenched with warring tendencies, and he felt a cerebral twisting akin to the frustration of trying to trace a figure by reference to its mirrored image. There was the same sense of moving against the grain of one's will, the same viper's snarl of conflicting impulses.

Her door stood open for him. He could remember ascending the stairs, but only at second hand. Somehow he had not been present during the actual climb. His existence was full of blank spots.

I won't go in; it will be too terrible, he thought, entering.

"I'll be there in a minute, Harry," she called from the bedroom. "You sound rotten. I didn't even recognize your voice—like you were a million miles away. Listen, you shouldn't even be here, you'll wreck everything for yourself. Not for me, baby. No sir. I had nothing to do with this mess, you know that, and there's any crap you better not say anything different. Because—"

Even as she came through the door, he was beginning to cringe away from her. He threw his arms around his head to hide his face and crouched low as if to fold himself so tightly together that he could not be seen, as though he were trying to hide behind himself. He no longer wanted her to see what he had become.

It was too late. She saw: saw him in the crawling horror of his dream-shape. Her eyes widened and stared as if they were being squeezed forth by the swelling of her nightmare-congested brain. Brow and lips contorted with an enigmatic rapture, ambiguous as

such extremes must be. Deep in her throat, there was a painful grating as her jaws gaped ever wider. The scream, when it came at last, was the death-cry of her mind, like the shrill, inhuman shriek of the exhausted libertine brought by long toil to a bitter climax.

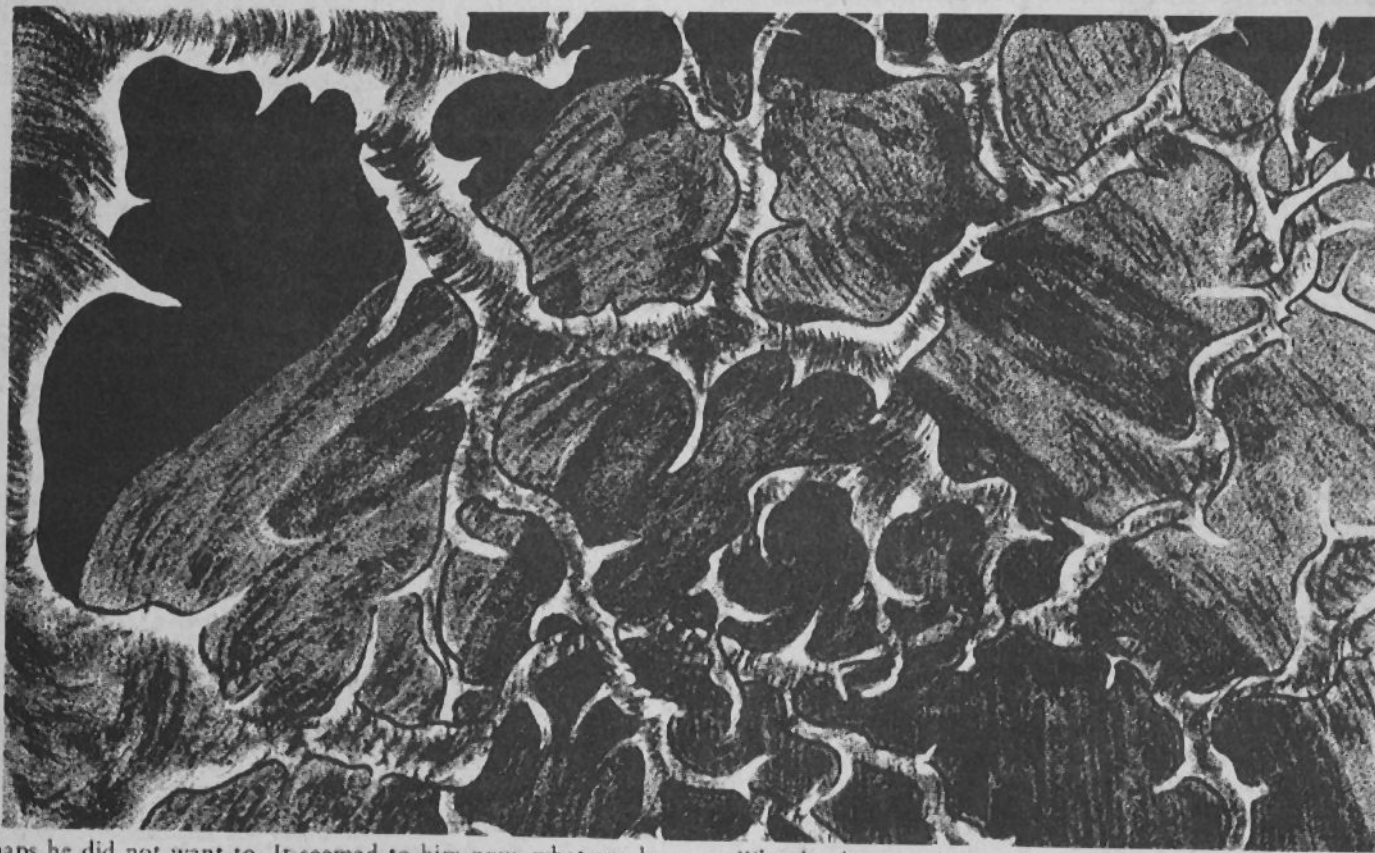
Jennifer's cry tore the fibers of his brain like damp paper. He couldn't stand it. But the more he tried to soothe her, the more frantic she became, crawling blindly to escape him, howling wilder. He found himself snared in an old, bad dream of his, where his tenderly-meant caresses, to his bewilderment, rasped flesh from the loved one's limbs and his softest touch was a fiery brand. And ever, as in a dream, he perplexedly offered his dreadful comfort.

Could he no longer put off the mask of terror he had assumed?

"What the hell's wrong with her?" "She's having a nervous breakdown," someone explained. "Drugs more likely." "I called the hospital," an old woman said; "they're coming after her." "Terrible, terrible . . ." "Hey, get those goddam kids out of there. It ain't right to see—" But the voices were going away, becoming tiny like insect voices or brain static.

No one paid any attention to Harry, and he didn't regard them much anymore. The scene before him was little more than confused images that crumbled, dim cries like cries in dreams that melt into other cries. A skewbald waste of meaningless monuments was far more real to him.

Something dark and ponderous, like a bear, stood always at his shoulder. It moved heavily after him. It was called Despair.



Perhaps he did not want to. It seemed to him now, whatever he might once have reasoned, that he had not made himself frightful for Miriam alone. He had not accidentally walked abroad in his dream-guise, as might a somnambulist in his nightshirt. Whether he acted as the agent of the starving dead, or whether he had planned all this long before, in secret even from himself, he no longer knew. But somehow he was glad, glad, to have kicked Jennifer's fingers from the lip of her gulf and sent her spinning where the fallen rave and weep. Well, everyone he had ever met in the world had wounded and enslaved him; now he had turned upon them.

Jennifer's apartment was filling with people, other occupants of the building, and neighbors from adjoining houses could be heard on the stairs. They milled around Harry, ignoring him. The women tried to quiet Jennifer, but it needed men to grapple with her and keep her decently in her clothing. Children crowded at the door and gaped at her antics.

What has happened to me? he asked it.

In the world, those who kill with a sword die thereby. In dreams, you become a sword.

I didn't know that, he protested solemnly.

It doesn't excuse you. There is something like laws, something like.

He hesitated. He hardly dared ask it:

Who did I really kill?

I don't think you can know. From here it is indeterminate, lost in the confusion and flux of our uncertain domain.

And now?

At least you have transcended the world that only hurt you. You have become some kind of a force perhaps. Chattel of hungry ghosts, you can feebly interact with real beings should they sleep. Corrupt as a dream may corrupt. Crawl like sick love into the brain's darkened rose. Your long home is ceaseless sleep. Forever?

The Reader's Eyrie

While Conan is certainly the most popular of Robert E. Howard's characters, the Conan stories make up only a small portion of Howard's writing and Conan is only one of his characters. There was King Kull and Bran Mak Morn, both of whom have appeared in recent paperback collections. But Howard's first great series character—and some of us consider him the best—was Solomon Kane.

Kane is a tall, pallid, gaunt man, a Puritan wanderer seeking out whatever evil crosses his path—and dealing with it in a grim and purposeful way. A fighting man, like all of Howard's characters, he is moodier and more thoughtful than Conan, wiser and more complex than Kull. Such Solomon Kane stories as "Skulls in the Stars," "Rattle of Bones," "The Hills of the Dead" and "Wings of the Night" are among the best Howard ever wrote; and by and large the Kane adventures are better as stories than the adventures of Conan and Kull. Good plotting, together with Howard's hallmarks, strong characterization and vivid description.

A couple years ago Donald M. Grant published a collector's edition of the Kane stories under the title *Red Shadows*. It sold for \$6 and had almost 400 pages plus color plates by Jeff Jones—four paintings that are among the best he has ever done. Twelve stories and three poems, some of them never previously published and a couple of them unfinished at Howard's death. The book went out of print but Grant has announced a new printing. We recommend it highly.

The other major publishers specializing in weird fiction also seem interested in writers who appear in *Sorcery*. F.P.C.I. is in the process of publishing *Stardrift*, a collection of stories by Emil Petaja. F.P.C.I.'s book division is unconnected with *Sorcery* so we haven't seen the book or heard much about it. But the stories will be by Emil, which is assurance of entertainment; and the jacket will be the work of Hannes Bok, perhaps the greatest fantasy illustrator of our time. (Emil has written a story around another Bok drawing and both will be in the next issue of *Sorcery*.)

Arkham House, the dean of weird fiction publishers, has announced several books of interest. Brian Lumley will have his first collection of short stories out this Spring. The stories will be largely Lovecraftian and the book's title will probably be *The Caller of the Black*. Price, \$5.00. Later in 1971, Arkham intends to offer *Songs and Sonnets Atlantean* by Donald Sidney-Fryer, which you can sample in this issue. Also on Arkham's Spring list is *Selected Letters of H. P. Lovecraft Vol. III* (\$7.50). Arkham has all of Lovecraft's fiction now in print. Brian Lumley also informs us that his first novel has been accepted by Arkham, though it hasn't been announced on their schedule as yet. You can order these directly from Arkham House, Sauk City, Wisconsin, 53583 or through your local book seller. You might also be interested in *The Arkham Collector* (\$.50) a small magazine published twice yearly, featuring weird fiction and verse as well as news of the field.

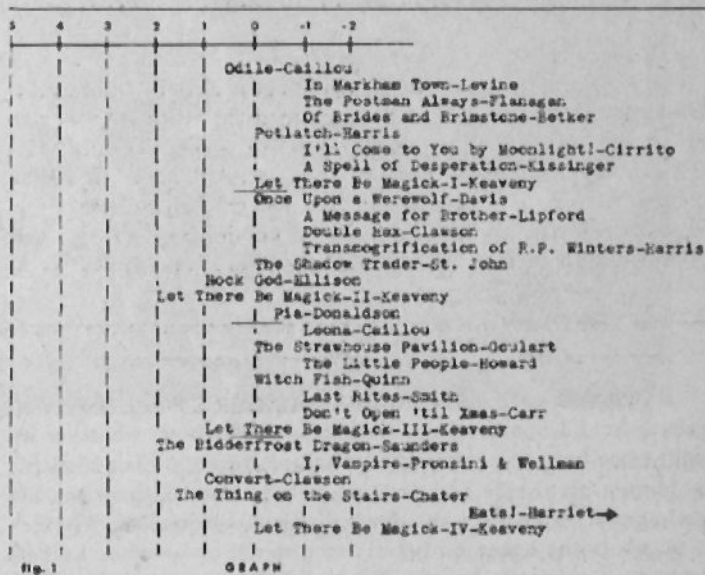
Letters for *The Eerie* should be sent to *Witchcraft & SORCERY*, P. O. Box 1331, Atlanta, Ga. 30301.



Dear Jerry:

My overall impression of W&S, an advance copy of which Bill Crawford was kind enough to send me, is that it really is a "modern *Weird Tales*." It is attractively set-up, the stories read well like oughta (although at this writing I have not finished all the tales) and of course by the second issue the small print will be gone, which is the only possible detraction here—and yet I do not really object to it. I am most taken, by the way, with the Jade Pagoda. E. Hoffmann puts the same strong color into his dept. as in his stories. Here is a man who knew a lot of the old writers, and he is a man with verve in words and speech. (I know from having listened to his discourse by the hour at the Hotel Claremont in Berkely in '68, myself, my son, Sheila Woodward, Roy Squires, and if only I'd had a recorder . . .)

Many Regards,
Ross Rocklynne



Dear Sir:

I'll be sending some funds to your subscription department (must be awkward, having your offices so far apart) despite unhappy memories of *Fantasy Book*...

About the former COVEN 13—nothing in it rated above 2, out of a possible 5. (See fig. 1.)

When you pick "Swords and Sorcery" use a good filter.

Howard's "Conan" once in a while reached 1. De Camp's *Incomplete Enchanter* and Norton's *Witch World* stories run to 3. Top rating (mostly without swords), goes to Heinlein's *The Devil Makes the Law* (Magic, Inc.) and Anderson's "Operation

Changeling" and its predecessors. And ASF has had an excellent parallel-world series based on developed ESP.

But far too many are Conan imitators and dilute any interest they may have with too much action. Straight sorceries need not too often follow the medieval-church-based diabolism—it is too limiting. Jules de Grandin's best exploits may inspire, but they shouldn't be copied, and the Markham item in issue No. 1 suggests that pastiche-Lovecraft should be very well done before you use it.

All best wishes,
W. Robert Gibson
Calgary 4, Alberta, Canada

But ESP is out of our province—it's the property of the science fiction magazines. Overall, my judgement of *Witch World* and its companion books is that they fall in line with the science fiction field also.

This is a problem, of course. As I state elsewhere, the basic idea for the Cthulhu mythos is science fiction—but the stories are definitely the province of weird fiction magazines. One reader has already complained that everything in our last issue was science fiction except "Were-Creature." This includes the walking corpses and monsters of "Mistress of Death," the elementals of "Wind Magic," the Lovecraftian creatures of "The Dark Door" and the afterlife and ghosts depicted in "Momentary Ghosts." I agree that "The Rat and the Snake" was science fiction—but this other stuff?

Thanks for the evaluation of our first four issues. We'd be pleased to see evaluations (in any form) from our other readers.

—GWP

Dear Mr. Page:

I was recently in Sauk City to visit August Derleth and he gave me the good news that you have assumed the editorship of and will shortly be bringing out *COVEN 13* again. This is very welcome news indeed. Those of us interested in a periodical devoted to serious weird fiction had placed high hopes in the magazine before its recent suspension of publication. Not that the previous editor, Mr. Landis, seemed on a very satisfactory track

policywise. Most everyone I know, writers as well as fans, seemed in agreement that Mr. Landis had a bad weakness for a tongue in cheek approach to the supernatural. I think I need not tell you that while there can be, and often is, an element of wit in the best weird stories it is not the type you laugh at or appreciate in a vein of parody. At least I cannot believe that most people read uncanny stories primarily to snicker. And past that very cardinal error, Mr. Landis seemed to have a very narrow outlook as to material he would use. He seemed to be working in the more restrictive tradition of *Unknown*. What one very much hopes is that you will lead *COVEN 13* in the direction Farnsworth Wright led *Weird Tales*, that is to say, a periodical that welcomes the full spectrum of types and styles and mood in supernatural fiction, from sword and sorcery to eerie stories in the more modern vein.

I think in putting out a magazine of the kind you are, there is always the very great danger of unconsciously writing off a large portion of one's potential audience, as it strikes me both Campbell (editor of *Unknown*) and Landis did. It really seems to me true that only a weird magazine offering such a variety of material on a regular basis can hope to long prosper, at least above the almost unnoticeable level that the reprint fantasy magazines exist on. Naturally these are but commercial appraisals and longings of my own and I hope you will not think me presumptuous in passing them on to you. I put them forth in the spirit of one sincerely interested in the lasting success of *COVEN 13*. As I hardly need tell you, a long running magazine of its general type is very badly needed. Whatever way you decide to go I wish you only good luck and hope you can manage to overcome the always large problem of distribution.

Sincerely,
Kirby McCauley
Minneapolis, Minn. 55408

We intend to run one humor item to lighten the grue, each issue—various factors permitting. But no parodies of the field (they've been done.)

—GWP

Continued on next page

WITCHCRAFT & SORCERY READER'S POLL

Please rate stories in order of preference, 1, 2, 3... etc. List ties, if you like. If you feel a story was outstanding, please indicate with a check mark beside your rating. Stories you feel to be bad, please mark with an "X."

—DRAGON'S DAUGHTER	—MOTHER LOVE
—GHOST LAKE	—FIRE MASTER
—TOMMORROW'S MASK	—CIRCE'S LAUGHTER
—SILVERHEELS	—HUNGRY GHOSTS

How do you like our artists? Please rate in order of preference:

—BERRY	—BURGE	—FABIAN	—FRITZ
—JENNINGS	—JONES	—KIRK	—TIANI

PAPERBOUND FANTASY FICTION FOR SALE

SPACEWAY: Issues 1 through 8, published in the '50s. 85c per copy; set \$2.50. The four issues published in 1969 and '70, 50 cents each. Stories by A. E. van Vogt, Andre Norton, August Derleth, Arthur J. Burks, Forrest Ackerman, Ralph M. Farley, Emil Petaja, Gerald Page.

FANTASY BOOK: Published in late '40s and early '50s and sold mostly by subscription. Five issues still available: 1, 3, 4, 5, 6. 85c each; set \$1.50. Stories by A. E. van Vogt, Robert Bloch, Andre Norton (Andrew North), Cordwainer Smith, Isaac Asimov & James MacCreigh, etc.

GARDEN OF FEAR: A booklet containing weird-fantasy stories by H. P. Lovecraft, David H. Keller, M. D., L. A. Eshbach, Miles Breuer, M. D. and Robert E. Howard. The title story, relating the adventures of Hunwulf the Barbarian, is by Robert E. Howard. 85¢ per copy.

Can also supply copies of many of the digest mags of the '50s, such as **FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION**, **FANTASTIC**, **IMAGINATION**, **IMAGINATIVE TALES**, **FANTASTIC UNIVERSE**, **AMAZING STORIES**, **ORIGINAL S. F.**, **FUTURE**, **GALAXY**, **S. F. PLUS**, etc. 50 cents each. Send your want lists. Fifties and sixties only.

F. P. C. I., Book Dept., 1855 W. Main St. Alhambra, Ca. 91801

The Chinese lettering used in the heading of E. Hoffmann Price's *Jade Pagoda* is authentic and was supplied to us by Price. It was drawn on rice paper, which is a difficult achievement since rice paper absorbs ink like a blotter—calling for the most expert and delicate touch to avoid getting anything other than a smear. In response to a query about the calligrapher responsible, Price writes:

Dear Jerry,

Calligraphy for *JADE PAGODA* is the work of Tseng Ta Yu, who lectures at California Institute of Asian Studies—City College of San Francisco—Stanford University. Subjects, calligraphy, poetry, literature, symbolism—Chinese, all of them, of course.

To refer to him as "Doctor" Tseng no doubt is technically incorrect, as he does not have any doctoral degree that is officially accredited in the United States. Conditions in China make it impossible for him to get his credentials. He is, however, one of that unusual hierarchy, with its many centuries of tradition, the Chinese scholar whose background goes far into antiquity.

Yours,
E. Hoffmann Price

AND IN CONCLUSION . . .

Next issue the result of the Reader's Poll becomes a regular part of the *Eyrie*. If you want to help us direct this magazine to satisfy your likes, there's no better way than to send us a note telling us how you rate the stories in this issue. Or fill out the coupon.

We're interested in turning up good short fiction with unusual ideas on the theme of witchcraft from both established and unestablished writers. So interested that I'm announcing a sort of informal competition.

I want to see short fiction (under 2000 words long) built around the most unusual witchcraft idea you can come up with.

No ghost, no vampires, no sword and sorcery tales, unless there's a witch practicing somewhere close-by—and central to the story. Start with the idea of a witch or witchcraft—and see how far you can go from there.

The stories must be typed, double-spaced, one side only of white paper with a black typewriter ribbon. Writer's name and address on the first page in the upper left corner, wordlength in the upper right. Story title in the middle of the page, author's name or pen-name beneath. Story starts on the same page



beneath that. Stories we don't use will be returned only if an envelope is enclosed with the writer's address on it and sufficient postage to cover cost of returning.

We'll pay \$50.00 for the story the editors of *Sorcery* judge to be the most unusual on the theme of witchcraft. We reserve the right to buy other stories at our usual rates. The contest is open to anyone except the staff of this magazine and F.P.C.I. All entries must be received in our offices by the end of March.

Fair enough? Get your idea down on paper and send it in. No letters or outlines—we only look at finished stories. Good Luck!

—Gerald W Page

Please send the following. Enclosed find _____.

- ☐ The next 6 issues of *Witchcraft & SORCERY* (\$3.00).
- ☐ The next 12 issues (\$6.00).
- ☐ The following back issues of:
COVEN 13
☐ Sept. 69; ☐ November 69; ☐ Jan. 70; ☐ March 70;
Witchcraft & SORCERY
☐ Feb. 71, @ 60¢. (Minimum order for back issues alone (\$1.20).)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____

Zip Code _____

Witchcraft & SORCERY, 1855 W. Main St., Alhambra, Ca. 91801.

How do you like our features? Rate in order of preference, please:

☐ EDITORIAL ☐ WITCH WAYS ☐ POINTED TALES
☐ JADE PAGODA ☐ GRIMOIRE ☐ READER'S EYRIE
☐ SUPERDRAGON ☐ VERSE

What do you like most about the magazine? _____

What do you like least? _____

Name and address: _____

Mail to: *Witchcraft & SORCERY*, P.O. Box 1331, Atlanta Ga., 30301

The Adventures of GEORGE SUPERDRAGON

by Saliitha Grey

George Meets Gladys

George Superdragon was sitting in his yard, ostensibly sunbathing, but actually eying his mailbox wistfully, when he suddenly heard the pitiful roar of a female dragon in distress. Although unable to assume his Superdragon powers—he needed *Witchcraft & SORCERY* for that and the new issue had not arrived yet—George grabbed up a convenient boulder and rushed to the rescue. There in the nearby forest a lovely chartreuse dragonette was struggling with a villainous-looking blackcloaked hippogriff. Instantly sizing up the situation, George launched the boulder, crushing the hippogriff's backbone. The dragonette (her name was Gladys) thanked him graciously but distantly and, preening herself, flew away.

That ought to have been the end of that, but George decided he was in love with Gladys and was sure that she would

Besides, Superdragon wouldn't have used a boulder to kill the hippogriff. No, you're just plain George St. Dragon."

"No," said George. "I really AM Superdragon. If you'll just come over to my cave . . . DON'T HIT ME! Really, the next issue of *Witchcraft & SORCERY* will be there by the time we get back and I'll just read one story and change into Superdragon right there before your eyes."

Alas for George. Oh, Gladys went and the new issue of *Witchcraft & SORCERY* was there all right. But as George leafed through to pick out a story he chanced upon the E. Hoffman Price novelet and was lost in it quicker than you can say "Chrysophylax" eight times very fast. And by the time George had the story committed to memory, Gladys was gone. He tried to call and explain it to her, but even her maiden aunt wouldn't believe it. So George went back to sunbathing, eying the mailbox and listening hopefully for another scream.

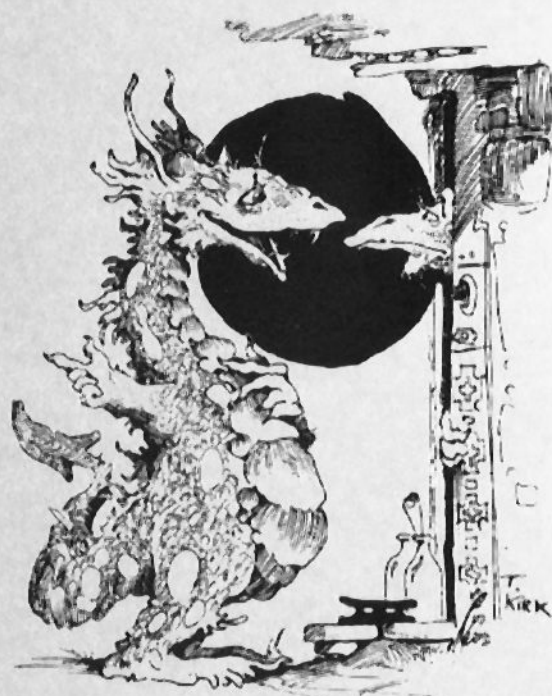
Poor George. But at least he has his consolation. If you have a broken heart, why not mend it with a subscription to *Witchcraft & SORCERY*? Fact is, if you don't have a broken heart, why not subscribe to *Witchcraft & SORCERY*? The best in new fantasy by master writers old and new, in attractive, strictly up-to-date format. For stories of horror, fantasy, Merittesque adventure or swash-buckling à la Howard—together with features like the Department of Pointed Tales, *Witch Ways* by Robert E. Jennings and E. Hoffmann Price's *Jade Pagoda*—not to mention the further adventures of George Superdragon—*Witchcraft & SORCERY* is a bargain you can't pass up.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

Witchcraft & SORCERY will feature longer stories next issue. Our cover story is a long novelet by Carleton Grindle, *THE CASTLE AT THE WORLD'S EDGE*. Horror threatens to engulf the world and can only be stopped by one man—the last sorcerer. But the spell he must use is as horrible as the menace he opposes. This is a story that combines the suspense and atmosphere of Gothic horror with the pace and action of heroic adventure fantasy.

GOLA'S HELL is the title of a previously unpublished drawing by Hannes Bok which will be featured on our back cover. It's also the title of Emil Petaja's new Gothic novelet about Bron Gola, the strange, macabre genius who created the greatest, most realistic horror films ever—and the ruthless studio boss who deprived Gola of what he most wanted in life.

In addition we'll run a short novel, *THRIST* by Gerald W. Page, dealing with vampirism in a most unusual light. The setting is contemporary, the characters believable—but the horror they face is as old as legend. Among our short stories will be *THE PRICE OF A DEMON* by Gary Brandner, wherein a young housewife dabbles in witchcraft, unaware that it can have serious consequences. Our regular features, including E. Hoffmann Price's *THE JADE PAGODA* and *POINTED TALES* (illustrated by Tim Kirk) will be back, as well as our regular staff of illustrators. Jerry Burge is doing the cover painting. In all, a better than average issue you won't want to miss.



appreciate his rescue enough to accept his offer of marriage. So the next day he set out to find her.

After much hardship, George arrived at the secluded estate where Gladys lived with her aged father and maiden aunt. Blushing furiously, George rang the door bell. When Gladys answered, he explained why he'd come.

"Oh," said Gladys somewhat less than enthusiastically. "Well, I guess even you can be in love with me. And, since you DID save me from the hippogriff, I'll go out with you tonight. But I can never marry you, for I love Superdragon."

"Oh, but," stammered George. "I am Superdragon!"

"Come now," said Gladys. "Anybody can see that that's impossible. Superdragon is tall, invincible and red and blue. You're short, weak and orange. And you blush in Day-glo.

ANNOUNCING **STARDRIFT**

by Emil Petaja

\$4.95

STARDRIFT

AND OTHER FANTASTIC FLOTSAM

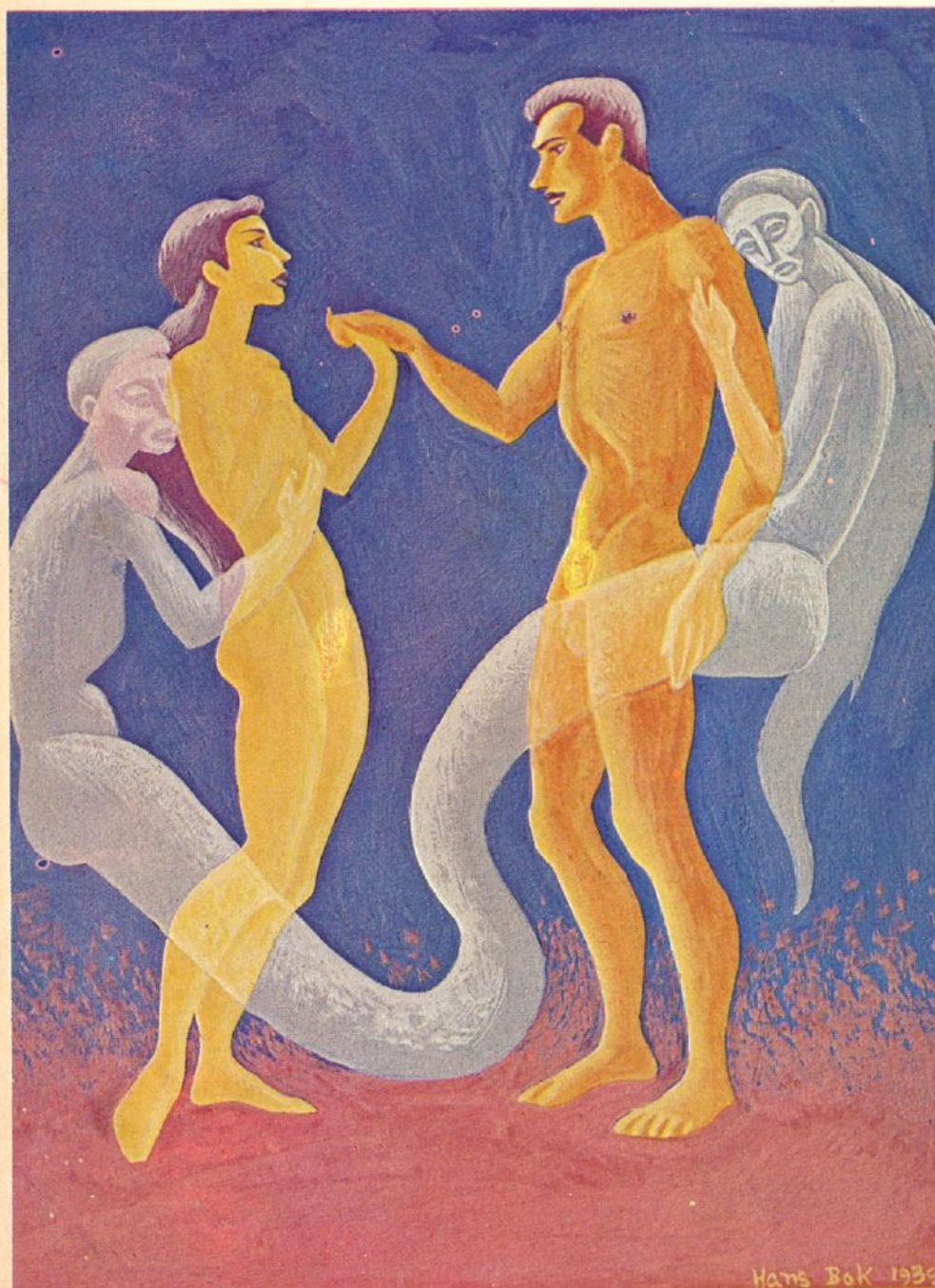
by **EMIL PETAJA**

The stories in STARDRIFT represent the finest that Emil Petaja has written in the genre over a period of thirty years. They were selected by the author, after three years of meticulous consideration, as prime examples of his lifetime of studying, absorbing, and digesting all the great fantastic literature of the world. Emil Petaja is an ardent student of world mythology. Those who enjoyed his KALEVALA novels, based on the Finnish epic, LAND OF HEROES, will be pleased to find an Otava story herein.

There is a touch of Saki or John Collier in such stories as FOUND OBJECTS and DARK BALCONY. ONLY GONE BEFORE (the title was taken right off an old Welsh tombstone) and DARK HOLLOW are pure Lovecraftian horror. A DOG'S BEST FRIEND makes a grim social comment. MOON FEVER and PEACEMONGER are science-fiction with a twist. DODECAGON GARDEN examines what a hip planet might be, if...

We are proud to present this mixed grill of wolfbane and wonder by Emil Petaja in this fine limited hard-cover edition, illustrated with newly discovered drawings by the master fantasy artist, Hannes Bok. Forrest J. Ackerman's penetrating Introduction adds the final touch.

Jacket Design by:
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