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NUMBER 10

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Witchcraft & SORCERY

THE MODERN MAGAZINE OF **WEIRD TALES**
(formerly **COVEN 13**)

NUMBER 10

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FROM THE COVEN

For many of the readers of *Witchcraft & SORCERY*, "Othuum" will likely be the first encounter with what's known as a round robin story. We trust it will prove a happy introduction.

A round robin story is one written by several writers, each one doing a segment of the story in turn. It differs from the standard collaboration in that the writers concern themselves only with their specific portions of the story.

In the Thirties, in the fan magazine Science Fiction Digest (later called Fantasy Magazine), a number of round robin yarns appeared, such as *Cosmos*, the almost legendary science fiction novel where 16 writers produced seventeen installments, and "The Challenge from Beyond" which was the title of two separate works, one science fiction and the other weird fantasy. The fantasy version was written by H. P. Lovecraft, A. Merritt, C. L. Moore, Robert E. Howard and Frank Belknap Long, any of whom would be welcome in these pages by our readers today. (And one of whom, come to think of it, appears in this issue with the never before published story "Restless Waters.") Despite the fame of the round robin stories, only one, so far as we can recall, has ever appeared in a professional science fiction or fantasy magazine before now. (If you'd like to read the original one, *Cosmos*, Forrest J Ackerman has been serializing it in the Perry Rhodan paperback series since number 32.)

To write our round robin, we went after five of the best writers in the field, purposely choosing writers with a variety of backgrounds and experience.

Brian Lumley, who writes our first chapter, first appeared in *Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos*, edited by August Derleth, with "The Sister City" and "Cement Surroundings." Brian quickly achieved an enviable reputation as an acolyte of Lovecraft and has been expanding this reputation steadily with a good many stories all his own.

David Gerrold, on the other hand, began his writing career by selling the well-known "Trouble With Tribbles" episode to the *Star Trek TV* series. Since then he's written a good many stories, several novels (including *When Harlie Was One)*, edited anthologies *(Generation and Protostars*, and written two books about *Star Trek*. A strictly modern advocate of science fiction, Gerrold's participation introduces elements into the story that we think you'll find unpredictable.

Emil Petaja began his writing career with *Weird Tales*. The author of a good many novels and stories in dozens of magazines (including the very popular "Gola's Hell" in *Sorcery*) Emil also operates the Bokanala Foundation, a non-profit organization devoted to the memory of that greatest of all fantasy artists Hannes Bok. Emil's best short stories, by the way, are available in the F.P.C.I. book *Stardrift*.

continued on page 37

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"Othuum...the Great Master of Those-Who-Wait-Without...Dark Lord of those Grinners at the Gate..." Five experts in terror join talents to bring you an unique experience in horror stories.

othuum

by

Brian Lumley Emil Petaja
David Gerrold Miriam Allen de Ford
Ross Rocklynne

CHAPTER ONE

The Last Rite

By BRIAN LUMLEY

Illustrations by Bob Maurus

Jamieson H. Freeland
11 Sumner Drive
Marske, Yorks
27th June, '70

Hieronymus Thorne Esq.,
President: The Society for the
Investigation of Occult Occurrences;
171 Northborne Crescent,
LONDON SW 1.

Dear Mr. Thorne,

Having read your recent article on the early occult life of Adrian White, and knowing that you believe the destruction of Throdag House and White's death to have been brought about by malevolent forces unleashed mistakenly by White himself, I find myself bound to bring the following facts to your attention—while I yet may!

There are, too, *other* reasons which force me to take pen in hand. Of these you will learn.

I imagine your rediscovery of White, after his fifteen years in obscurity, and your conclusions regarding his end, sprang from your society's natural interest in certain of the macabre remains found in the ashes of his house—and I freely admit that had things not happened the way they have...then perhaps your authority in the matter would be indisputable.

As it is you are wrong!

By *my* hand Throdag House is gone, destroyed utterly, reduced to ashes all but certain stone idols and other similarly outre items, and behind the blackened spot where once it stood, Chetwood's cliffs are left scorched and blackened by the heat of that conflagration. I am informed that from casual inspection it would appear that parts of the cliff have actually fallen in. Good! Likewise, into realms of limitless gloom, horror and despair, I have sent the immortal soul of the sorcerer Adrian White, my one time friend and colleague in mysteries.

That these things—comprising as they do a merciful reprieve for the Earth from an era of horror and unthinkable loathsomeness—are of my doing is of little comfort to me; for my mind is yet filled with the memory of horrors passed and my nights still echo to all the terrors I have known. My conscience, too, hounds me still; with the knowledge that I almost let myself help White unleash upon the Earth the suppurating monstrosities of dark dimensions and all the hell-spawn of centuries of occult learning. But mainly it is the additional knowledge *that he might yet do so which* prompts me to write!

It could be argued, I suppose, that it is to my credit I saw and recognized the ultimate abomination before it was too late—if, indeed, it is not yet too late—but the knowledge that for almost fifteen years I have *assisted* White in his hellish researches, that not until the end did I turn aside, abnegates any such distinction; the dog that bites his master cannot hold himself in any great esteem. Besides, while it is true that Adrian White is gone—at least for the nonce—I know that the things I saw in his shew-stone were real and that darker things yet fester in the minds of men, following me through sleepless nights...

I will tell you the story:

...Fifteen years ago, drawn together through similarities of somber imagination and a shared need to explore down quagmire paths of the occult, White and I embarked upon our pilgrimage to hell.

We began, in what now seems a mundane manner, by studying the writings of history's great mages—rare illuminated texts and incredible, black-letter incantations; foul cryptogram-hidden liturgies and hoary, time-obscured tractates—in a word, an almost complete kabbala of the ancients; neither were we forgetful of the magical mandates of certain moderns. Our heroes were Tothdas of Ur and Nitocris of the Nile, Alhazred of Sanaa and Antoinette of Averoigne. Hugo de Themni ('The Great Hugo') and Cag-

liestro, Abramelin and Solomon, Dee and Kelly; and in the steps of Aleister Crowley, we too pondered the riddles of the Tarot and lost ourselves to the all-encircling mysteries of the *Noor'haad Scripts* and the *Yi-King*.

But invariably theory leads to practice, and soon our practices were only matched in their unholiness by the zeal with which we carried them out. It seems amazing and monstrous now, but in the beginning I never once saw our operations as being in any way abhorrent. Can the herbalist work without his herbs? And the necromancer...?

Who could number the nameless nights with shovel and pick, the shadow-cloaked quests, the evil errands towards which our loathsome leanings led us? Long the way of magic but fast and slippery the road; and soon, at White's Chetwood house, our hoard of forbidden books, philtres and other fiend-devised vilenesses grew, hidden away and undreamed of by the sleepy local villagers. And even years after I went to live with White in Chetwood, no outsider, no casual visitor, could ever have guessed at the horrors secreted in the depths of Throdag House. For at its back, where it merged with the looming cliffs of Chetwood, lay a series of caves—dark and ominous, deep and sepulchral—and it was this cthonian labyrinth which we decorated with the loot of our thousand awful excursions, so that only in passing was the house itself ever defiled by our treasure-trove.. moreso, it is true, by the presence of the men who lived there!

That the shrieking sights to be met with in our ghoulish grotto would have sickened a drugged de Sade and terrified even a drunken Poe cannot be gainsaid, and I dare reveal only a fraction of the truth regarding its contents.

The entry-way—through an oaken door carved in representation of the blasphemous *Nyhargo Code* inlaid with lead and bronze—led down lightless steps, slimy with the nitrous moisture of slow seepage, to that place we termed The-Chamber-of-Night. There the stalactitic roof was adorned with winged, bat-headed effigies—the ghouls that haunt Kith's leering labyrinth—and from out their bulging glassy eyes, red rays lit in an eerie effulgence each midnight mass which White and I irreligiously prepared. Red and black drapes hid the stony walls and, in sordid sumptuousness oddly woven carpets the color of blood and spilled entrails lay upon the uneven floor. A natural fissure deep in some unseen recess sent occasional blasts of charnel air, reeking of the mists which swirl in the pits at the Earth's core, howling and piping through the great cave like fiends escaped from some inner Avernus.

This, then, was the place where White and I...*worked*, but truly unmentionable were the majority of its contents. Suffice to say that there, with my own eyes, I have seen water from an holy font bubble and boil from no earthly causes, pages from the Bible burst into purifying flame, and leaden effigies of Christ on the cross melt and flow in puddles across the fetid floor....

There, too, did I witness the end of one who wished to join us in our quests; who, at the mere sight of certain things threw up his hands and burst his heart in horror of that which his soul could not contain. That night, I remember, my normal role—if the word 'normal' could ever be applicable—was for once reversed, when I helped White put something *down into* the ground near Chetwood's ancient curch... but not before that cadaver had been put to the most choice occult uses...

Truly, then, Throdag House and The-Chamber-of-Night were not places for normal men but veritable Devil's Pits, and the dripstone chamber itself could only fairly be compared with the grottoes of Endor, Kith's labyrinth, or the dungeons of Baron Ferenczy.

But it was White who was ever the master of this pile with its hidden cavern of secrets, while with the passing of years my own role sank to little more than that of mes-

sage-boy, runner, general dog's-body, and eventually serf. And matching my gradual degradation, my former colleague's demonic megalomania expanded, blossoming ever the more evilly, until it became obvious—even to me in my mazed subservience—that he reeled on the brink of raving lunacy.

Just how true this was made itself amply apparent when the man who was by then my master set his feet firmly on that final, most utterly damnable path of all. That was when I first truly began to fear him.

For months at a stretch our nocturnal trips were put back. I found myself banned from the secret cave while White made of that hole a demon-oracle. The Cumaean Sybil herself would have shrunk in mortal dread from the voices—and only one of them human!—which I, crouched without the oaken door, often heard issuing from the heart of The-Chamber-of-Night... and only the wizard in there! But I was with him that night when first he made his pact with Those-Who-Wait-Without.

I saw them in his shew-stone, writhing and fuming, leering from the crystal with Hell's own faces (and often as not with no faces at all!), reflected in White's round, hypnotic eyes: gods and demons unguessed except in the darkest works of sorcerers immemorial and the prisons of even greater guardian gods.

There were fleeting pictures of a vast underwater fortress... and of the *Thing* that lurked behind those weed-festooned ramparts: there was a hideously alien lake with a shore on which strange cloud-waves broke ... and beneath

which monstrous shapes moved in awful anticipation; there were faceless dog-things howling to a background of monotonous pipes and crackling crotala . . . and, in a greenly-glowing vacuum otherwise devoid of all but the most distance-obscured stars, a conglomeration of shiny, madly sentient globes hung, trembling to its own titters and staring with no eyes whatever!

And then there was . . . something else! A *deity* of sorts, but of no civilization ever spawned on Earth, a—creature?—thrusting out mind-feelers in search of certain long-gone crustacean worshippers until I screamed as those acid feelers touched upon my own thoughts, screamed and fell in a blackness to the cushioning carpet from where, mercifully I saw no more. Yet even as I passed into the clean darkness of unconsciousness I could hear Adrian White's mad, triumphant laughter; and I could see, lumbering in the corridors of my shrieking mind, that *ultimate* horror before which those others—even the Thing of the Mind-Tentacles—had shudderingly turned aside.

For this was Othuum . . . the Great Master of Those-Who-Wait-Without . . . Dark Lord of those Grinners at the Gate . . . Olden Othuum . . . and I knew He had accepted White's proposals!

The next day saw White's lunacy finally burst in a fully-fledged fury of frustrated rage. Nowhere, in none of our books, no matter how diligently he searched, could he discover any certain means by which to open the gates holding back those with whom his pact was made. All the kabbalistic devices laying in that crypt-like cavern, all the leprous lore of the library in The-Chamber-of-Night, nothing seemed of any use to White in this, his latest and maddest design. Nor did the knowledge that close at hand, as near as the City of London, such a means *did* exist but was forbidden to him calm his rage any.

Tomes and treatises he brought tumbling from their shelves in crazy confusion; philtre and fetish, talisman and tabloid he flung about in his fury. He tore at the drapes and even kicked the shew-stone into the cavern's darkest part. Then he turned on me. The threats with which he cowed me, the terrors he promised, eternal in their horror, should I fail him in this, his most important hour, cannot be repeated even on paper.

There was in the British Museum an ancient book entitled *Othuum Omicia*, and I was to go to London and stay there until I found a way to secure a transcription of a certain part which White named. Should it occur that I *did* fail, he further informed me, I would be wise not to return! But before I took myself off to London, I was to correct the shambles my master had made of The-Chamber-of-Night, restoring the cavern to its former condition. It would not be seemly to welcome Othuum and Those-Who-Wait-Without into such disorder . . .

I knew then what had to be done, and worked frantically at reshelving the books and setting all those other absurd items back in their respective places, thus allowing time for that other task. Then when all was correct, through mad minutes in the knowledge that at any time White might return, I hunted out a book of translated incantations and invocations, scanning with fear-fevered eyes those pages which I knew contained many a potent spell. Finally my eyes lighted on *THE ONE*—so like many of the others, differing only fractionally from at least four that I knew of—that suited my purpose most perfectly! My greatest fear was that when the time came, White might recognize the thing for what it really was. But I could worry about that later.

It seemed to me that every demonic device in The-Chamber-of-Night knew what I was about, that they screamed in silent accusation as I worked. Shapes gathered in the shew-stone and the bat-faces of the ceiling took on new expressions while I scribbled in frenzied haste with my pen upon parchment. The crawling carpets seemed to tangle my feet when I took up and shattered the crystal shew-stone that White might not spy on me in my appointed task. (This latter I did in that dark corner where he had earlier kicked the thing, in order to make him believe the fault was his.) Black basalt cats arched their backs at me and bronze demogorgons prepared to pounce, ogling me from their rock-cut niches as I completed my task; and even as I fled to the sanity of the outside world the *Nyhargo Code*, carved in the oaken door, seemed to chant itself at me in hateful, sepulchral tones . . .

Three nights later, shortly before midnight, having allowed sufficient time to pass in my absence so as to arouse no suspicion that I had not in fact done the job, I returned through the mist-wreathed streets of Chetwood to Throdag House. The hour at which I chose to return, too, had its part in my plan, for I knew that with the witching hour so close at hand White was unlikely to waste time studying that which I brought him; that he would desire immediately the commencement of The Opening-of-The-Gates.

Then, if all went well——

—And if all did *not* go well . . . ? I found myself shuddering, and not at all from the chill mists, as I rapped with shaking hand in an oft-used code on the great doors of Throdag House. In a moment White had let me in . . . in another, nyctaloptic eyes studied the snatched parchment in candle-thrown shadows. For a few seconds he was silent—puzzling, no doubt, the odd similarities in many of the olden writings—but then his grunt of approval told me my subterfuge had been accepted. We went at once to The-Chamber-of Night.

So intent was the sorcerer on his preparations that he ignored me completely, never once offering thanks (for which I, in my treachery, was thankful) nor even speaking as he scrawled the Pentick Star in chalk on our great stone sacrificial dais. His mad eyes burned feverishly as he waited then, waited for the first stroke of midnight to waft on the fog-laden ether from Chetwood's old church clock. And soon, as that distant reverberation sounded, the very air of the chamber seemed stilled and the piping of the wind through the hidden, unknown crevice came only as a dulled whine.

Then, into hands trembling as if in ague, Adrian White took up the parchment, entered the pentagram and intoned those horrendous words transcribed from one of his own books.

The effect was immediate and mercifully permanent. White screamed once, shrill and high and agonized, before pitching forward on his face in the star. He *writhed* there—his body twitching and lashing—while dim outlines filled The-Chamber-of-Night in a profusion of wavering, infirm shapes. Then he seemed to *snap* into a tight, foetal ball, and the cavern pulsed to the clash of brazen gongs and blare of phantom trumpets. For a moment I thought I saw strange, pschent-crowned heads bowed low over White's form, and I seemed to hear the funerary rites of ancient Khem; and then—even as I knew the deed was done—I must have fainted . . .

When I recovered, all was dark and only a spine- tingling murmuring, like the low mouthings of an idiot child, disturbed the utter silence. This singular noise came from the direction of the dais. I groped my way to a switch hidden behind the black drapes and put on the lights. In the red glow from the demon-adorned ciling I saw that White still lay within the star. He was alive . . . but barely. Flecks of red-tinged froth dripped from his pale lips, and his hair—previously jet—was the colour of snow.

I stayed with him the whole night, until the next morning when he died. In that time the only change I saw in him was a kind of *withering*, a shrinking into himself defying des-

cription or analysis. He was mindless, inarticulate, incapable of any sign of recognition of existence; he had no will, he had not the *spirit* to live. His essence had gone elsewhere . . .

And in the end it was quite as simple as that, a departure of essence, for the parchment I had prepared for him had contained no invocation at all . . . but a sixth-dynasty *devocation* designed to speed on their way to Osiris the Kas, or souls, of the unrepentant wizards of Nitocris!

Adrian White had exorcised his own living soul!

As soon as I knew for sure he was dead, I set fire to Throdag House and The-Chamber-of-Night, letting White's work stand as his funeral pyre, and then I hurried back to my old home in Yorkshire. I have been here now three months. . . .

So far, of all that has passed, there has been a brief. . . well, a *residuum.* For a period of some six weeks after the sorcerer's death I was bothered almost continually by an apparition which only I could see. It was there day and night, a kind of blur on my retina, always in the corner of my eye; a grey thing which waned as the weeks waxed, until finally it was just a blob of smoke and then nothing.

And this apparition had Adrian White's face; at first terrified and accusing, then, towards the end, sneering and threatening. . .and now I believe I know why it sneered and threatened!

I have written, Mr. Thorne, at the beginning of this letter, of my prayers that Adrian White is gone for good—but I fear all such prayers have been in vain. Lately there have been . . . *lapses*! Periods when I have seemingly lost my memory, hours and occasionally even days from which I have suddenly emerged to the discovery that my psyche, as it were, has been absent from my body. Who, I ask, *or what,* has been in possession in my absence?

Only a few days ago there was delivered to my house a letter from a cult-leader in North America; but it was not addressed to me! Nor was it in answer to any letter I ever wrote. . .certainly to none I *remember writing!*

Transmigration, Mr. Thorne? I don't know—but I do know that *I* never bought the air ticket to New York City that I found this morning in my pocket. . .*that ticket which, while it bears my name, was nevertheless signed for in the hand of Adrian White!*

It is up to you now, Mr. Thorne—you and your society and whichever contacts you may have. There are darker horrors than you ever dreamed of. . .and it is my firm belief——

—But there, it has come again, that drifting feeling which ever preceeds my. . .lapses. You'll forgive this abrupt ending, sir, but I must make the post before. . . before——

It is all up to you now. . .

Jamieson H. Freeland

CHAPTER TWO

Out of the Darkness

By DAVID GERROLD

WARD CHRISTOPHER dropped the pages of the letter on his lap and looked across the room at Hieronymus Thorne.

"Well," said Thorne, carefully packing fresh tobacco into his pipe, "What do you think?"

Christopher, a young man with a shock of sandy hair that kept falling into his eyes, said, "I'm not sure—he certainly seems to believe what he says, but——

Thorne struck a match and puffed gently at the flame. It licked across the bowl of the pipe; the tobacco glowed and caught. Gesturing with it, he said, "I think it's a bloody hoax."

"Oh, but if it is, it's devilishly clever. He's indicated just enough to be intriguing and——"

"Nonsense!" said Thorne. He had a ruddy face adorned with a thick brown mustache. "It reads like one of those trashy pulp magazine stories—hints of unknown menaces, strange doings in the dark, mysterious caves—and of course, at the end, a disturbing mention of some dark occurrence that he is unaware of the meaning of, but is all too obvious to the reader. I think what we have here is a reject from *Astonishing Terror Tales.*"

"Oh, now, Uncle, I think you're being too harsh on him——"

"Ward, m'boy, when one deals regularly with the occult, one gains a healthy sense of skepticism."

"Then you're not going to investigate it——?"

"Who said anything like that? Of course I'm going to investigate it. But, as with all matters like this, it's up to him to prove himself, not to me to disprove. . . now, then, have you arranged for the airplane tickets as I asked you to?"

Ward patted his coat pocket. "I have them right here. Two roundtrip passages to New York City; but tell me, Uncle, who is going to use the second ticket?"

"Why, you are, Ward—my secretary is on vacation and I thought you might enjoy a summer holiday——"

A look of surprise crossed the youth's face; the expression quickly became one of delight.

"Before you get too excited, I should caution you: this will be a working trip; you won't be able to spend all your time chasing after those liberated American women."

"Oh, yes, sir—but what will we be working on?"

"You just read it," rumbled Thorne. "We're going to investigate this Freeland character——"

"Just on the strength of this letter?"

"No, of course not—but since I received that, I've tried to get in touch with the man. I found out that he has since fled to the colonies—excuse me, the United States; I keep forgetting. . . The man we need to contact is Chandra Mission, who presides over some kind of Eastern mystic cult. The group is a hodgepodge of Gohonzon Buddhism, the I Ching, and Transcendental Meditation."

"I don't think I understand any of that——"

"No matter. Chandra Mission can explain it all to you when we talk to him. Mission is perhaps the world's foremost master of the occult; if anyone can help us locate Freeland—and Othuum, whatever it may be—he can. We also have to pay a visit on Dr. Delvin Oberson; he's a research physicist at HBM."

"HBM?"

"Heuristic Business Machines—computers."

"Computers?"

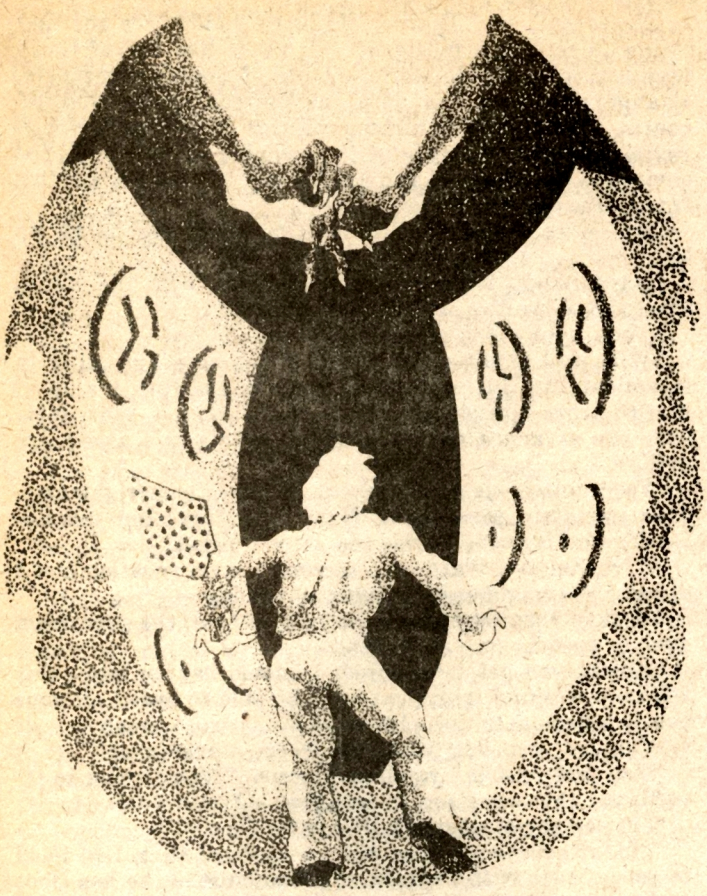
Hieronymus Thorne sighed. "I can see I'm going to have to explain everything to you now. Dr. Oberson is also a member of the Society for the Investigation of Occult Occurrences; he has a theory that I'm very intrigued with. You know how a computer works, don't you?"

"Only vaguely. It operates a simulation of the problem it is supposed to solve."

"Yes—well, Oberson's theory is that reality—that is, what we perceive as reality—is actually a simulation, too. That is, we don't really exist; we only *think* we exist. We're all patterns held in the banks of some vast macro-computer."

"He sounds as mad as Freeland."

"No, not quite—besides, I haven't done justice to his theory by describing it like that." Thorne puffed at his pipe slowly, decided to rephrase his description. "It has to deal with the theory that all mathematics is only a hypothetical construct that has correlation only to occasional specific incidents in the real world—what we perceive as the real world. However, Oberson believes that any *real* event of any magnitude can be expressed in mathe-



matical terms or logical equations; hence, perhaps our correlation to reality is only occasional as well. In other words, our reality is only a set of relationships that is currently existing in some cosmic arena of possibility.

"Now, we don't know why this particular set of relationships has been set up, do we? Of course not—but let us assume, for the sake of argument, that some entity—call him a god, a demon, whatever—has created us for his own amusement. Perhaps we are nothing more than a diversion—a puzzle, a toy. Periodically, he might wish to insert himself into our universe and look around; if so, he would probably arrange some kind of simple safety mechanism which he could use in case of danger. It would quickly remove him from this world, or it might give him powers and abilities otherwise impossible. By safety mechanism, I'm suggesting some kind of simple routine or pattern of behavior which might seem totally meaningless, but would cause the master computer in which we are only a simulation to alter the meta-program——"

"I think you're starting to lose me."

"Magic, m'boy—magic. What we perceive as magic or occult events could possibly be the accidental triggering of one of the god's devices in this universe which allow him to sidestep the cumbersome task of achieving the same effect by manipulation of actual physical matter through our so-called laws of physics. In other words, he can change the conditions of this universe simply by a few careful chants. I believe that most of the black magic spells and arcane arts that we have stumbled across are clues to the nature of some cosmic all-inclusive equation. If we could gather enough knowledge about all the various *known* occult occurrences, we might be able to extrapolate *the basic* equation to all magic patterns. Of course you can understand, then, the importance of proper verification of every event. One false event in the equation would throw off the validity of the whole theory. Dr. Oberson has programmed a computer to evaluate all occult happenings in search of some usable common denominator. He thinks he's very close to it."

"That's where Freeland comes in?"

"Almost. When Adrian White's house burned to the ground several months ago, the evidence hinted at something most unusual; I allowed myself to be talked into investigating it and found some indications that an actual occult experience had occurred there. I wrote up my conclusions for the *Modern Occult Journal*, but I stated that the matter was not definite one way or the other. More information was needed. I believe that's what prompted Freeland to write to me. Of course, I didn't believe one word of his letter; it was too patently phoney—then Freeland disappeared and I started investigating some related incidents ... well, to make it short, m'boy, there is a strong possibility that the soul of Adrian White has claimed, or has lodged itseslf in the body of, Jamieson H. Freeland. If this is true, then we have an actual occult experience around which we can perform an experiment to test the validity of Dr. Oberson's hypothesis—he wants to try to perform an actual magic spell derived from his computer equations; the exorcism of Adrian White!"

Ward's eyes were glowing with excitement when Hieronymus paused to relight his pipe. Thorne looked across his study at him and said, "There're two problems, however: the first one is locating the missing Jamieson Freeland; all we know is that he is somewhere in the United States. The second one is more serious; if we are able to find him and make him the center of a magical rite, can we do it without attracting the attention of the God, the one we perceive as Othuum?"

It was not Hieronymus's first journey to the United States of America, so he was not as startled by the intensity of New York City as Ward was. However, within a few days, the lad was able to adjust and could snarl his way through a crowd as well as anyone.

Other matters, through, did not proceed quite as well. Jamieson Freeland was reported to have contacted Chandra Mission only once and shortly thereafter disappeared. There was a rumor that he had been sighted in Macy's basement, but this proved to be beyond investigation; the two Englishmen were left without a clue.

Dr. Oberson, however, was not dispirited by their lack of success; he said to Thorne, "All right, Herky, so we can't find Freeland; that doesn't mean that we can't still perform our experiment."

"But I thought," said Ward, "that the experiment would be to exorcise Adrian White from the body of Jamieson Freeland."

"On the contrary," said Oberson, a tall, thin man, bald on top, with narrow horn-rimmed spectacles, "the experiment will be to determine if our computer-extrapolated equations bear any correlation to the basic magic structure of this space-time continuum."

"Oh," said Ward.

Oberson added, "If we can't perform an exorcism spell, perhaps we can perform a different kind of spell—one that will locate the missing Jamieson Freeland. You still have his letter?"

Hieronymus produced it.

"Ah, good—you see, we have one object which was quite close to the missing person: a letter written by his own hand. It will have a certain resonance that is particular to Jamieson Freeland; it will be a faint echo of his personal aura. We can use that as an element in the equation."

Hieronymus began to pack his pipe. His large, deep-set eyes were thoughtful. "I'm not sure it's such a good idea

to use that letter, Dr. Oberson——I'm not an expert on supernatural resonances, but I suspect that these are 'bad' vibrations——"

Oberson dismissed Thorne's objection with a wave. "I believe we can compensate for that. I should have the spell equations derived within a few day; you'll look them over, of course, and we'll see if you still have doubts——"

Hieronymus still had his doubts as he looked over the carefully inscribed computer printouts, but he could not pin down exactly what it was that bothered him. "Maybe," he muttered to himself, "maybe it isn't possible to express the supernatural in physical terms.

But the printouts were before him, a physical stack more than three feet high and covered with equations and carefully drawn runes.

"Now, all this," explained Oberson in a scratchy voice, "is merely the description of the basic program. Once we switch the computer on, it will begin to execute the program, and as it performs these various chants and equivalent functions and rituals——symbolically, of course; the spell is a simulation—we should derive some form of occult effect. Hopefully, it will tell us, without resorting to normal channels of information, where we can find Freeland." He busied himself at a console for a moment, then said, "I have high hopes for this, Herky——if we do produce a supernatural effect, it will be a landmark first for science, It will be an effect that will be reproducable by any scientist who can duplicate our conditions. We'll be taking a giant step for all mankind in unlocking the secrets of the occult—science will invade the supernatural world——"

"I think," said Hieronymus quietly, "that first we had better perform the experiment before we pat ourselves on the back."

"Oh, yes," said Oberson. "Right. You're right. If you'll sit over there—and if Ward will sit over here..." He indicated two chairs on opposite sides of the room. "I'll stay by the console and operate the program."

Ward and Hieronymus took the seats indicated and watched as Oberson began setting up last minute details.

There was no pentagram on the floor. There were no candles. There was no blood in goblets, or dusty tomes; there were no sacred knives in cobwebbed altars; there was not even the fur of a newly skinned toad.

Instead, the room in which they stood was brightly lit; a fluorescent ceiling glowed overhead, white walls shone with reflected glare. Banks of computers and memory units stretched up and down the length of the chamber. The air conditioner whirred softly, just below the threshold of consciousness. There was not a speck of dust on any surface.

"Now," said Oberson, as he performed the last check of his material, "if everything works right, we will evoke a pattern which will simulate a magical spell, thus evoking a metaphysical change in this space-time continuum, Everything depends on the pattern being correct; to this end, I have analyzed every element of Freeland's letter—I have used Graphology, Numerology, the I Ching, Supernatural Aura Detection—I have reduced those elements to values in the equation which we are about to work——"

And with that, he pressed the button.

Every light in New York City went out.

All electricity on the whole Northeastern end of the United States ceased to flow.

Every device that depended on the flow of electrons through conductive metal stopped.

"Oh, nuts—" said Oberson. "Not again."

"This has happened before?"

"Yes, a few years ago." Oberson's voice floated out of the darkness. "We'll have to wait until the power is restored before we can perform the spell."

Hieronymus stood up, but the room was so black that he decided to sit down again; it was safer than groping his way around sightlessly. Conversationally, he asked, "How long will it be——?"

"Hours maybe—it all depends on how widespread the failure is."

"Will we be all right here?"

"Oh, yes—if necessary, we can go down the emergency stair. But I'm disappointed. If the power failure had only waited a few seconds more——"

"Eh?" said Thorne.

"The program was set up to execute the spell almost immediately. It would've taken only a few seconds——"

"Oh, you blundering fool!" raged Thorne. "Don't you know what you've done——?"

"What—what are you talking about?"

"Every magic spell involves a release of power—a spell violates the law of conservation of energy. That energy has to come from somewhere; usually it's drawn from the body of the person who is casting the spell. That's why most spells take several hours to prepare and execute, so a person won't kill himself; he's going slow enough so that the energy loss is minimal and replaceable—but you, you idiot—your computer executed the spell in the space of a few seconds; it pumped all of its available personal power into that spell! You've drawn off all the power from the entire Northeastern electrical network! You're responsible for this blackout, you thundering oaf!"

"Then, you mean—we haven't failed?"

"No, of course not! This blackout—this is your supernatural effect!"

"Erg," said Oberson, choking deep in his throat.

Somewhere, something chuckled——

Hieronymus went chill. Abruptly he realized that Ward hadn't spoken a word since before the lights went out. "Ward?" he called. "Ward?" He stood up nervously. "Ward? Are you there?"

The blackness was impenetrable.

"Ward—?" Hieronymus took a step forward——

Something made a sound.

Then Ward's voice, strangely distorted, as if someone else were using it. "Ward?" it asked. "Who's Ward?" And then it laughed maniacally.

CHAPTER THREE

The White Magician

By EMIL PETAJA

THE SILENCE that followed the obscene laughter was even more sinister than that invidious sound.

"Ward?" Hieronymus called out into the invading dark. "*Ward?*" His voice crackled like paper being crumpled.

No answer. More terrible nothingness. The world itself seemed to have been blotted out of existence, with him and Dr. Oberson suspended in some endless oblivion beyond time and space. The vague scent of all the inert metal in the walls of Oberson's laboratory, metal and tape and all those sealed elements, was strangely incongruous with this supernatural take-over, yet it was something *human* to cherish and cling to. Well, human-made, at any rate.

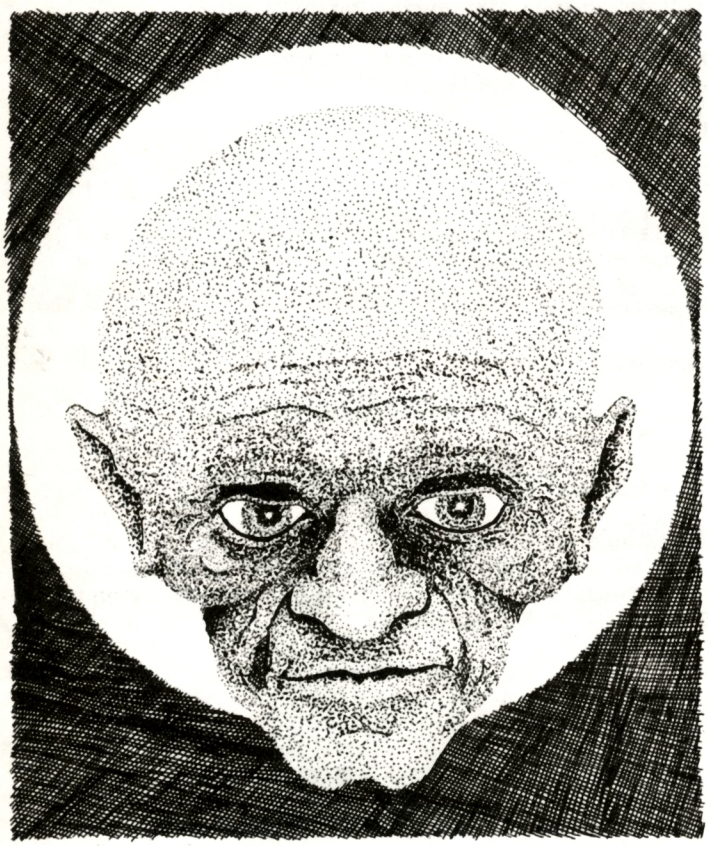
Now Hieronymus Thorne was aware of another sound: the harsh noise of his own stifled breathing roaring through the channels of his ears. Hieronymus was not easily frightened, but he was frightened now. The maniacal voice coming out of the unnatural blackness brought rushing to his consciousness all the bits and scraps of legend, *past* and present: legend which the human mind can never escape, not quite; legend that every now and then, for brief soul-rending seconds in the coils of a sleepless night, becomes *certain knowledge*. Of the terrible Out There. Of

beings shambling about their unthinkable business between and beyond the stars. What Man has learned, the so-very-little that Man has learned about time and space, has not lessened the supreme terror. Oh, no. Not one whit. It has in fact intensified his horror of the *blind beyond* a million times. Why? Because the revelation of one jealously guarded secret only serves to unleash a thousand more!

These and nameless worse thoughts billowed and churned up into Hieronymus's craw to strangle the life out of him, as the palpable *blackness* blotted out all sensual knowledge of an uneasy and questionable existence.

Man has always feared the dark, the ordinary dark, and rightly. But this—*this*...

* * * * *



Fingers clawing across his arm, clutching his hand when they found it.

"Hieronymus, it's me!"

"Dr. Oberson! I thought they'd got you, as well."

"They? Who are *they?*"

Hieronymus swore, and that helped, somehow. "Never mind. How the hell do I know who they are? Othuum, perhaps. That's what all this is about. What are we going to do? This blasted dark has got me petrified. It's as if I'd been sealed for centuries in some devil's black amber!"

"Yes. That's what Othuum wants. But if we force ourselves to move—if we force our minds to take control of our bodies... I did it. You can, too."

Hieronymus tried to nod and found that he could, even though it meant nothing. But it was a gesture of defiance, a nose-thumbing toward the supernormal power which had tried to take them as it had taken Hieronymus's younger, more vulnerable nephew. As a further gesture of defiance Hieronymus took his pipe out of his tweed jacket and filled it. This he could and had done many times in pitch darkness. The rasp of a match across the side of the small matchbox was a homely, comfortable sound.

Flame leaped into being.

"It works!" Dr. Oberson's voice was jubilant. "They can't control fire!"

"Man-power sources, yes. Fire, no. Fire is a basic elemental. An occult power unto itself." His hands shook as he lit his pipe, but equilibrium was taking hold again. "I've got a packet of matches. Let's locate Ward."

Dr. Oberson's white head wagged vigorously in the flicker of the matchlight. "First things first. This is more important. If we're to help Ward, in any case... hurry!"

The scientist's tactile familiarity with his lab took them swiftly to a small circular stairway twisting upward around unpainted pipe. Hieronymus's matches kept going out. Finally he groped up in darkness until the dizzying spiral came to an end. In a small chamber at the top of the stairway, Dr. Oberson drew out matches, lit one, and stepped across the room toward a mass of switch boxes and metal-encased service wiring. The wires led up.

"What—" Thorne began.

Dr. Oberson's deeply-lined face was pale; rivulets of sweat in the creases illustrated his high desperation. He gave a sharp cry of triumph when a feeble glow of light flooded the room.

"Let there be light!" Oberson exulted. "That's what's needed to shoo them back where they belong."

"Of course. But where's it coming from? The whole area's blacked out. All power sources are kaput."

"Not quite. You called me a bloody fool a while back, and rightly. But I did have this ace up my sleeve. My secondary power source—based on the element of fire itself and shielded even from Othuum—is, if I say so myself, unique. In fact——"

"Well, I'll be damned!"

"Not yet, at any rate!" the scientist chortled.

Hieronymus looked around the room nervously, anxiously. Dr. Oberson had plunged the whole area to the brink of doom, yet now...

"Ward!" he cried. "We've got to find Ward!"

They scrambled down the stairs into the relighted computer console chamber. Young Ward lay in a heap against one of the walls. His hands and face were bloody, as if he had tried to escape by driving his body into the wall itself. Hieronymus knelt and raised up the limp head and shoulders.

"He's alive!"

"But is he..." Dr. Oberson couldn't say what they were both thinking.

Each day, each night, of the next full week was one of anxious concern. Hieronymus spent many hours of those days and nights pacing hospital corridors, biting down on the stem of his gone-out pipe. It was Dr. Oberson's opinion, as well as that of Ward's medical doctor, that the coma he remained in for so long was a blessing; the sensitive youth needed nothing so much as rest to lift him gradually out of the chasm into which he had been flung.

Finally, sitting at Ward's bedside, reading and rereading a letter that his series of calls and telegrams had produced, Hieronymus heard Ward let out a sudden yelp.

"Hi, Unc!" A feeble grin went with it. That, plus the youthful, thoroughly human sparkle in his blue eyes, made Hieronymus cry out in relief.

"How do you feel, boy?"

"Fine. How do you feel?"

"A bit tired, actually. I haven't——"

"I know. What happened——in the lab, I mean?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing, Ward."

Ward blinked. "How do I know? Suddenly I was wiped out. Did the machine do what it was supposed to?"

Hieronymus recounted briefly what had happened. When his pointed questionings about Othuum's intrusion into Ward's mind brought nothing but pained scowls and shrugs, Hieronymus was forced to assume that, in taking posses-

sion with such frightening speed, Othuum had left no residual scrap of knowledge of itself. Or, possibly, Ward's resilient young mind had defended itself by denying such knowledge. Even the merest shading of knowledge of such horrendous enormity might well have shattered the young mind beyond hope of repair. Hieronymus decided to let well enough alone. He was grateful to have his amiable young nephew back.

"What now?" Ward asked. "And what about Dr. Oberson's occult computer? Is it a dud or not?"

"You might say that it works all too well. It allows for no means of controlling what it calls forth. As of now it's not selective, the way, say, one of the old demon-calling invocations were. We simply opened the floodgates to things and forces which we know nothing about. Everything in the books—all the unknown and the unknowable. No. We'll have to find another means of approaching our problem. We can't risk another try with Dr. Oberson's device, at least until he has provided some means of selectivity and some better safeguards which, by the way, he is working on right now."

Ward propped himself up on one elbow.

"By problem you mean——?"

"Finding Jamieson H. Freeland. Freeland holds the key, I believe, as no man *living* holds it. That's why he is on the run, and hiding."

"Key?"

"To Othuum. After all, we still don't know what we are up against. Dr. Oberson's theories—and mine—are yet to be proven, and that letter Freeland wrote me before he disappeared is purposely obscure when it isn't bordering on the irrational. You can't put what he experienced into any letter. No. We must find him!"

"Where do we start?"

"I've already started. I couldn't go anywhere with you here in the hospital, but I did make a lot of phone calls and send a few telegrams." He held up a letter.

Ward's eyes gleamed.

"You've located Freeland!"

Hieronymus shook his head. "By no means. Not a living trace. But I did locate the man so many millions call Master. I really believe that he'll find Jamieson Freeland for us, if Freeland is...alive."

"He?"

"Chandra Mission. The man they call the White Magician."

The San Francisco fog was particularly dense the afternoon their plane came in over the international airport. They were delayed for several bleak hours of circling the salt flats, the Peninsular mountain ranges and all those clustered nodules of lights strung together by the freeway scrawl south of the city. Finally they landed, and several hours later a Yellow Cab deposited them at the California Street address provided in that fortuitous letter. One of Chandra Mission's balliwicks. (There were others in Delhi, in London, in Cairo, and in Helsinki.) The Master of White Magic was a busy man, seldom actually seen, hence held in awe and fear by the general public, who mistakenly allied him with Satan and all things Anti-Christ.

Hieronymus Thorne did not share those fears, of course. He had studied true magic and believed in it as an ancient and respectable Force not to be tampered with by anyone.

Night and fog had the city blind and helpless. Staring up at the great black Victorian bulk of Chandra Mission's domicile, Hieronymus said, "I hope he got my telegram."

"We could have waited another day for his reply."

"You were the one in such an almighty hurry," his uncle pointed out, leading the way down the flagging and up the rococo steps. "Besides, Mission is on the go so much. Having pinpointed him here, I couldn't take the chance of just missing him in flight. He spends a good deal of time in India. More than here, actually. Since he is at least half Indian, that's hardly surprising."

He banged the horned-head knocker resolutely, as if by believing and willing it so, Chandra Mission would be behind it.

They waited. Dim light shone through *dark colors from* the cut-glass pattern of narrow window above their heads. Then the door opened. The shadowy figure who opened the door was abnormally tall and abnormally wide of shoulder. He wore a crimson turban and a wide crimson sash across immaculate white linen.

"Hieronymus Thorne?" His English was perfect.

"And nephew, Ward Christopher," added Ward, with a grin that had awe in it. The factotum (you could not call him servant) appeared to be made of burnished metal, although the cool savvy behind those large dark eyes indicated that he was human, not robot.

"Come in, please. The Master is expecting you. In fact, he has delayed his Far East trip until tomorrow on your behalf. It is well that you did not wait, but took the first plane out of New York when you received his message."

"Message?" Ward blinked. "We didn't get——"

"There are," Hieronymus said, "messages and messages. They don't all come via Western Union."

The darkish chamber into which they were ushered was lined with books, some beyond price, Hieronymus observed at a sweeping glance. There were rich Oriental carpets on the hardwood floor; otherwise, curiously, no furniture. Only *that* great teakwood desk, stacked high with letters, between the windows. And there at the black desk sat Chandra Mission.

They could not help themselves from staring.

The White Magician was small under his robes, which were raw silk and unadorned. Something about the folds of his robes indicated what Hieronymus had heard whispered about, but had never been sure of... Mission was deformed, badly. The violent crushing wrench of his spine was something impossible for any orthopedist to consider dealing with; and then there were those poor stumps of legs, too. The reason for the factotum's prodigious shoulders was made evident. Here in this great house of stairways and angles no wheelchair could maneuver, the White Magician had to be carried like a small child.

Yet the sight of that magnificent, incredibly handsome head, and those large, luminous eyes that held such fire, dismissed immediately all notions of sympathy from their minds. Chandra Mission's true life was within that breath-catchingly beautiful head, beyond those lambent eyes.

Hieronymus was held in the glamour of those penetrating eyes, speechless until Chandra smiled warmly. He seemed ancient as the stars, yet forever vibrant with new energy.

"As you see there are no chairs. My constituents prefer the carpet. However, if you wish it, I will have Rjam bring——"

"No! Certainly not! The floor will be fine."

Ward was already seated in modified lotus position. Hieronymus hastened to do the same.

"Now, Mr. Thorne, since we are familiar with each other's work and qualifications, since I have little time to give you, unhappily, with so many calls and duties on every side, may we please arrive quickly at the reason for your visit?"

Hieronymus nodded.

"We are seeking a man, an Englishman named Jamieson H. Freeland. An occultist associated with a man named Adrian White, who—but you already know about White's death, I can see that."

Mission was nodding gravely, frowning. "I know about Adrian White. I deplored what he was trying to do. I can only pray that his end was swift. He was dabbling with

such forces that——" He broke off with a vibrating sigh. "Never mind. I also know about Jamieson Freeland's disappearance. Nothing helpful, I'm afraid. Between them they followed devious and treacherous trails beyond the stars and all human sanity. Why, exactly, do you want to find Freeland?"

"He wrote me a long rambling letter before he vanished. In it he hinted terrifying things about a malignant cosmic Presence he referred to as Othuum..."

"Othuum. Yes. I have heard the name and its many variants around the world." A suggestion of dismay clouded Mission's face. "It is your intention, perhaps, to continue Adrian White's lamentable experiments? To loose this—this Presence on our dimension?

"No!" Hieronymus was momentarily flustered. "I have been made to believe that Othuum already constitutes a monumental danger. That Othuum is already pounding on the Gate, you might say."

Chandra Mission sighed.

"Yes. Such entities as Othuum lurk forever beyond the scope of Man's understanding. Ever since Paracelsus, since Trismegistus, Roger Bacon, Crowley—not to mention those seekers after forbidden knowledge whose very names are spoken in whispers, there have been men whose warped curiosities have brought them and our very solar system to the edge of disaster. This Othuum of yours is beyond human conceivability. You say he is knocking on the Gate. Yes. And has been for thousands and thousands and thousands of years. Man's existence in time and space is such a small thing! He is here and gone as the flutter of a moth's wing, compared to such as Othuum!"

"You are saying that we can do nothing! That man's span is so brief compared to Othuum's that we need not concern ourselves, since the entire scope of Man's existence, from gibbering ape-creature to moon walker, is as nothing to a presence as vast as Othuum!"

"Not quite," said the White Magician gravely. "Man is a wondrous thing within nature and the universe. A special thing, indeed. There are not many with his capabilities anywhere among the stars. He harms himself violently, and his environment worse. Yet there is something shining within his brain and soul which must be treasured and saved. It is to this end that I have dedicated my life."

"That's why we came to you, Chandra Mission!" Hieronymus cried. "Don't you see? It isn't a matter of thousands of years any more! According to Freeland's letter—and all other evidence I have been able to accumulate and correlate, by the use of computers such as have never been available for this purpose before, we don't have long! The Grinners at the Gate are almost ready! The Gate itself buckles! *The Time is Now!*"

Something within the very air seemed to churn and weave. The book-filled walls appeared to tremble in the silence that followed. Illusion? Ward's young face turned white; the Master's eyes, rimed with frost, said *no*. There was *something* among them, listening, aware of its name being taken in vain. Some mocking minion of Othuum.

Ward spoke first, in a tense wide-eyed whisper. "What can we do?"

"Find Freeland," Hieronymus said bluntly, taking out his pipe and gnawing on it. "Find out all he knows. Things he could not or dared not put in that letter."

"Yes," Mission said, nodding. "We must do that. I have known about Othuum all my life, yet in my concern with smaller matters I have thrust these thoughts from me. I have mentioned my implicit belief in Man's godhead, the wonderful seed that is slowly germinating within his mind. The splendid potential. It is this, no doubt, that Othuum desires. Nothing obvious, surely. He would not destroy our world out of sadistic pleasure. Indeed, to him it would be like stepping on an ant-hill. Why would he strive to open the Gate for so many thousands of years to do that? No. Othuum desires that within Man of which Man himself is only dimly becoming aware. As you say, what with journeys to the moon and all the rest, the time for Man's usefulness to Othuum is close at hand!"

Hieronymus shivered.

"You hinted that I wished to join the ranks of all those perverse genocides who sought to loose such forces as Othuum on the world through the ages. No, certainly not. Quite the reverse, in fact. As to all those others, what you just said suggests that Othuum *used* all of them toward this eventual Opening of the Gate. Since our concept of Time is so petty compared to Othuum, he could wait. Bide his time. *Use* all these misguided delvers into the dark unknown as wedges."

"Yes. The effect is cumulative, perhaps part of some monstrous Othuumic *plan*. We three here must not permit ourselves to be so used."

"What do you think of Dr. Oberson's occult computer?" Hieronymus asked.

"I am dubious about employing scientific devices in the exploration of the supernatural. For one thing, as you found out, such mechanical invocations of forces from Beyond are very difficult to control. There is such a wide diverence between the logistics of pure science and ancient magic. And yet—is there? Perhaps I am being pedantic and old-fashioned, after all. I mentioned the shining seed of glory that exists in the minds of all men. Perhaps the use of scientific devices such as Dr. Oberson's computer is *part* of all this. After all, what is a heuristic machine but an extension of Man's own mind? Like a pencil held between the fingers, or a mechanical arm. A tool. Why should not such a tool be used for exploring the preternatural and the occult, as well as for any other reason? It is the mind and the soul behind it that counts."

"Dr. Obeson is already working toward setting up controls and automatic barriers within his computer. Maybe it will prove useful against Othuum, after all."

"I wouldn't count on it too strongly. But—who knows?"

"Meanwhile," Hieronymus said, "we beg your help in—ah—more traditional terms. You will help? What about your trip to India?"

"I will forego it, of course. Individuals in need of my help will be harmed, they may even die. Yet individual death is not such a bad thing. Karma is eternal. We live on and on in other forms. The overhelming evil that is Othuum demands my full attention now."

"Becauses he denies Man the glorious fulfillment of his potential—that shining seed."

"Exactly."

They were thoughtful. Chandra Mission's supercharged mind seemed to be hard at work already. Hieronymus thought the Magician's handicap had served to his benefit, and the world's benefit; where others used their physical bodies, all too destructively at times, Mission more than made up for it in the total employment of his razor-sharp mind and his great psychic powers. Those forceful eyes gleamed out and once Mission shook his head as if to exorcise invisible demons.

"You've thought of something," Hieronymus said.

"All this has broken down barriers of my own making. You see, one who works constantly to save and protect must avoid the tainting preoccupations of evil. This I have done. Now it all rushes in on me."

"For example?"

"Think of the mundane horrors we find at work all around us in the world in this era. The senseless wars. the social outrages at both the top of the spectrum and the bottom. The pollution of our environment. The cynicism. The promiscuous use of drugs, which of themselves can conjure up demons. Is not all this Othuum at work—or at least are not all too many of us subconsciously working for

Othuum—helping him to open the Gate?"

Hieronymus nodded. "It certainly does seem, sometimes, as if some malignant outside force is edging us on to wilder and ever more self-destructive excesses."

"I would not say it was so, yet I would not deny the possibility. There seems to be an insanity abroad in the streets these days, more than ever before. If nothing else, this insanity sets the climate for Othuum's advent. It helps him in the completion of his terrible Plan. And perhaps the worse thing of all is the all-pervasive *fear*."

"Fear?"

"Fear is of itself one of the most deadly of forces. Men sicken and die of fear every day. And when it is so universal. . .Let me give a small example. Take an animal such as a dog. When a dog smells fear what does he do? He attacks! Human fear is fast reaching an unprecedented psychic level. The level of panic. I don't need to tell you what we are afraid of. The unleashing of atomic force to mass-kill at Hiroshima was only the beginning!"

"Lord! I see what you mean, all right! Human misbehavior and the consequental fear it engenders is setting the stage for Othuum. Making it all the easier for him to open the Gate. Our fear of each other and of the destructive attitudes all around us are like battering rams against that Barrier—as if fearful of human destruction, we almost welcome him!

"There's another factor." Chandra Mission indicated the great stack of letters on his desk. "Every day I receive them. Mountains of them, begging for some crumb of hope."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about *belief*. Who do you think I get all those letters from? Devotees? Occultists? Not at all. Most of them are from ordinary men and women, frightened creatures who find no answers in the normal channels of society and science and turn finally to the occult for some relief. They beg me to reassure them that the universe is a benignant place, that there is some point to continuing their existence. Think! The common man's interest in the occult has reached a fantastic level. Astrology is again admitted by scientists to have important validity. Books on every phase of the supernatural sell in the millions. Virtually everybody reads at least his sun-sign horoscope in the daily paper. What does all this mean?"

Hieronymous clamped down on his pipe grimly.

"It means people believe again, or half-believe. It means that the human race is rushing toward total belief in the dark forces. *And, combined with cogent fear, belief in Othuum can open the Gate to him from our side!*"

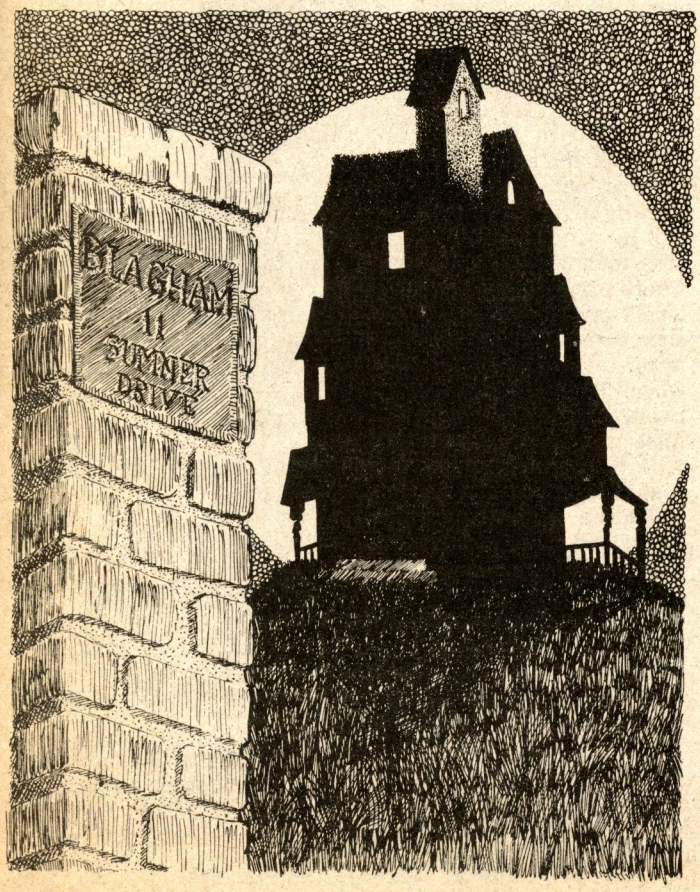
There was a cold wind out of nowhere and for a long moment none of them dared talk, scarcely dared breathe. Their own fear was a palpable thing. Willy-nilly, they were helping Othuum with their believing knowledge and with their fear. For moments they sat where they were, frozen by their knowledge of the *source* of the cosmic cold.

Hieronymus removed his empty pipe from between dry lips. "We must find Freeland," he whispered. "But *how?*"

"There are ways. Occult ways. I will try them all." The White Magician's eyes seemed to glow with a sudden, fierce self-demand. "But we must prepare ourselves for another crushing contingency, when we do find him."

"What——?"

"Remember what happened to Ward. Jamieson H. Freeland surrendered himself to Othuum voluntarily, at least for a time. And if, as we suspect, Adrian White—who gave himself to evil even more willingly—has taken psychical possession of his erstwhile friend——"



CHAPTER 4

The Gate Cracks Wider

By MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

"GO NOW," said Chandra Mission. To the eyes of both his visitors it became apparent that his immense mental and psychic powers bore heavily upon his feeble body. He would be needing the ministrations of his giant factotum.

"Find a place to spend the night, and come to me again tomorrow morning at ten," he told them.

Thorne booked rooms for them in a modest hotel—he disliked the pretension and formality of the big ones. There, over a Scotch and soda, he talked around the subject, more or less using his nephew as a sounding-board.

"You know," he said, "several things have occurred to me that I think I must take up with Chandra Mission tomorrow. To begin with, I wonder if we were not deliberately sent on a fool's chase by that letter of Freeland's."

"You mean——"

"I mean, *we* never saw his plane ticket to the United States, did we? Toward the end of the letter it became obvious that Freeland was feeling more and more heavily under White's power; the letter may have been started by Freeland himself, but finished by White's control of his hand. Suppose that was just a subterfuge to send us away from where White is actually holding his erstwhile friend in thrall?"

"That's true," said Ward. "For all we know, Freeland might still be in England—or anywhere else in the world, including India, which we have prevented Mission from visiting. But what about those rumors of his having been seen in New York?"

"Who set the rumors in motion?" retorted Thorne grimly. "And while we go without direction in a vain search, White with his unholy persistence may be actively forwarding Othuum's broaching of that great Gate."

Ward, who had felt at first hand the stroke of Othuum's far-reaching grasp, turned pale.

"We have so little time left!" He murmured.

"We must not and cannot let ourselves become discouraged," said his uncle. "As Mission put it, there are already too many working unconsciously to make Othuum's endeavors succeed. I ran across a quotation recently from Norman Mailer, which I think puts it in a nutshell: 'Magic, dread, and the perception of death are the roots of motivation.'

"But we few have something stronger than all this unconscious assistance to unspeakable evil; we have the firm knowledge of what is really happening and what it means, and we have the will to fight against it with every particle of strength we possess."

"If we are not too late," Ward lamented.

"We shall not be. Because our is the positive influence. and a grain of positive outweighs a pound of negative.

"Go to your room now, Ward, and try to get some sleep. In the morning we shall discuss all this with Chandra Mission and receive the invaluable benefit of his wisdom."

They arrived promptly at Mission's home at the appointed hour. The huge bronzed factotum, Rjam, opened the door. But now his bronze skin was grey and his dark eyes shone wildly.

"Mr. Thorne!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Christopher! Something terrible has happened!"

They gazed at him mutely.

"My master is gone!"

"Gone?" echoed Thorne roughly. "Do you mean he has died?"

"No, no—he has vanished. He is not here. When I went, as always, to waken him, his bed was empty. I have searched the house. He is gone."

Thorne pulled himself together. The first thing to do was to calm the frightened servant. "He may have received a message in the night," he said. "I don't mean a material message, but a signal from one of the many occultists and magicians with whom he is in alliance. And it may then have been necessary for him to let himself be transported elsewhere."

"Never," said the servant. "When he goes anywhere, it is like any other man. And I am always with him."

"How can you tell? Perhaps this has happened many times before, but this one time he has been late in returning. He might come back at any minute. Are you sure he left no note, since he expected our visit this morning?"

"No note. I have looked everywhere."

"There is nothing we can do to help you, I fear. But here is the address of the hotel where we are staying. At least we shall remain there all of today, in the hope of hearing from your master or from you; and before we leave I shall commuicate with you if you have not yet been in touch with me."

They left and went back to the hotel. Thorne was silent and deep in thought, and Ward had nothing to say that could be of any conceivable use.

"What shall we do now?" the young man asked at last.

"I am trying to make up my mind. I have a strong feeling that Mission's disappearance is connected with our problem. One of two things may have happened—or he may have gone in response to a sudden clue to Freeland's and White's whereabouts—or he may have been abducted, or even killed, by the servitors of Othuum."

The day wore on, without word. Thorne sent his nephew out on a sight-seeing tour; he wanted to be alone to think things out and to let supersensual impressions come to him.

Finally, when Ward had returned, full of enthusiasm over San Francisco from ocean to bay, Thorne had made up his mind.

"Pack," he said. "I am engaging two seats for the next flight east. Before we leave we shall call again at Mission's home."

"Are we going back to England?"

"Soon—and, you will not be surprised to hear, to Yorkshire. But first we must stop over in New York and see Dr. Oberson again."

They were due to leave at six. At five they were at Chandra Mission's house. The factotum opened the door to them in a state of profound gloom. He had heard nothing, good or bad, and had no idea what to do next. It was apparent that his function was a purely physical one; he enabled his crippled master to lead a normal life and get about, but had no connection whatever with his occult interests.

Thorne gave him Oberson's telephone number, good for the next few days, and then his own number in London. "If I am not there," he told the servant, "my answering service will take the message for me. Let me know immediately, collect, if you hear anything whatever, of any nature—— even gossip or a guess or a hunch that might come to you yourself." The man promised.

"Why are we seeing Dr. Oberson again?" Ward wanted to know as they flew eastward. "He won't have had time yet to develop any means of controlling his computer project, and until then he will not dare to use it again as he did so disastrously before."

"I want to make a suggestion to him, in his other capacity as an occultist, and see what he thinks of it. When we came to him, our one object was to find Jamieson Freeland. But all along there has been a dark horse whom none of us has considered."

"Who?"

"Do you remember Freeland's letter well?"

"Fairly so."

"Then do you recall where, in recounting the horrid experiments White had been conducting in his cave, Freeland mentioned another man who participated in them, was overcome by the terror and revulsion they aroused in him, and died—or seemed to die, Who was that man? Did he really die? Where is his corpse—or where is he—now? Is he somewhere as a galvanized dybbuk, fighting desperately to open the Gate to Othuum? Or is he perhaps—Freeland himself?"

"Freeland—how could he be?"

"Might this note not be another ploy in the complicated plot by which we are being sent all over the world in search of a man who, I am now inclined to think, could be anywhere except where he directs us to? Could this be Freeland's indirect way of indicating his own change from disciple to betrayer? Or he could have been honestly endeavoring to present the facts to me and put me on the trail, when White's devouring spirit, overtaking him again, twisted his confession so as deliberately to set me on a false road."

But at this moment the stewardess told them to fasten seat-belts; they were at Kennedy Airport.

Thorne had phoned Oberson before he left San Francisco, and the scientist was at the air terminal to meet them.

He looked thin and haggard; evidently his *faux pas*, which had deprived a large part of the eastern seaboard of electricity for long hours, had worn on his mind and conscience. And in reply to Thorne's query as to whether he had made any progress in his search for a control mechanism, he merely shook his head.

Nevertheless, he greeted the two Englishmen amiably, and drove them to his own bachelor apartment, where he offered them his spare bedroom. A daily woman who "did" for him had prepared dinner for them, then left until the next morning.

Over after-dinner brandy, Hieronymus Thorne told everything that had happened since he and his nephew had

left New York for San Francisco, and then went on to describe the idea he had outlined to his nephew on the plane—the mysterious participant in White's evil rites whose existence and end were described so fleetingly.

Dr. Oberson listened without interruption, until at last Thorne said, "What do you think?" and fell silent.

"This is all very interesting," he answered. "But under the circumstances, I'm afraid I cannot be of much use to you. I can work only in my own field, and you understand that at present I can't do even that satisfactorily."

"Granted. But as a student of the occult you can give me your personal reaction to this perhaps groundless idea."

"Not groundless. There is something very disturbing and mysterious about this aspect of Freeland's letter. The whole effect is to make it seem so slight and trivial that on first reading one would hardly notice it—as I confess I did not."

"Nor I," said Thorne.

"I am inclined to agree with you that the effect was intentional. I also agree that you were purposely sent on a wild goose chase. I don't think Freeland—or Freeland-cum-White—or this mysterious other man, either, has been in the United States at all. My advice would be for you and your nephew to return to England at once and to proceed immediately to the Yorkshire address given in the letter. I have a feeling that the real object of the letter was to get you out of England, and to discourage anyone from investigating the house at 11 Sumner Drive, Marske, Yorks."

Thorne cleared his pipe, refilled it, lighted it, and nodded reflectively.

"I fear you are right. We shall return as soon as we can get plane booking.

"But what do you think about Chandra Mission's disappearance?"

"I think Mission—who, whatever our own credentials in occult investigation are, is infinitely the superior of both of us—came to the same conclusion when he thought over the matter after you had left him. I should not be surprised if when you got to Marske you found him there before you—unless he is at Throdag House instead."

"How could he get to either place? He is physically quite helpless without the man who is his devoted servant and who knows nothing about his master's present whereabouts and is distraught in consequence."

"What means of transportation Chandra Mission may command in an emergency is probably beyond our understanding. And doubtless he left his servant in ignorance because he did not want the man to know or say anything that would give you a clue. My belief is that Mission thinks you would be in personal danger if you went on with this now, and he wants to protect you."

"Then he knows nothing about me," said Thorne. "I certainly shall not let any danger to myself interfere with this enterprise. Outside of you and Ward here and Mission, I am perhaps the only man on earth to know how imminent is the catastrophic cracking open of the Gate, or to be prepared to do anything within human power to prevent it."

"You are quite right, Herky, and I only wish I were in a position to go with you and help you. But——"

"Of course not; you have your own commitments here, and besides, it may become of extreme importance that there should be someone in New York who understands what is happening and can lend a hand if necessary."

"I guess you're right, though I feel as if I were letting you down. But listen, my friend, take my advice on one thing: leave our young colleague here behind you in London when you go to Yorkshire."

"Oh, Dr. Oberson!" Ward Christopher protested. "I don't agree to that at all. I insist on being at my uncle's side as long as this thing continues."

"No, Ward," his uncle said. "Dr. Oberson is right. It has been proved already that you are vulnerable to the malefic powers that are being broadcast to impede our quest. I don't think you realize how near you came to dying when you were overcome in the laboratory. Besides, you can be of more use to me back in London than if you were with me in Marske. Not only should I be free of responsibility for you, but also I need somebody trustworthy to hold the fort and to whom I can communicate and who will carry out any instructions I may have to give."

Reluctantly, the young man consented. It was arranged that he should stay in his uncle's London flat and that a code should be set up by which they could communicate with each other confidentially.

Dr. Oberson saw them off the next morning, and by evening they were home again. Thorne had been silent during most of the trip, and Ward respected his silence, thinking he was making plans for his invasion of Jamieson Freeland's balliwick. Actually, however, back in his flat that night, preparatory to leaving for Yorkshire the next day, he spoke his thoughts aloud to his nephew.

"Have you looked at today's *Times?*" he asked, lifting the newspaper from the pile of accumulated mail through which he had skimmed without finding anything needing to be opened immediately.

"No, I haven't as yet."

"Well, glance at the headlines. Since the paper stopped giving over its front page to classified advertisements, it is like all the others—a compedium of bad news.

"See here—wars, riots, revolts. Drug raids and gruesome murders. Earthquakes and floods and tornados. And the only news that isn't of crime or violence has to do with Man's escape from the Earth to the Moon."

"But hasn't that always been true, in a way? There is no time when violence has not been rife everywhere; we just bring it out into the open more than was once the custom."

"True; but there is a perverseness, an irrationality, today that I don't think any other era ever dmonstrated. Add the rape of our ecology all over the world, and the menace of man's desire to over-produce his kind. To me it is all evidence that Othuum is straining at the Gate, and that the bars are beginning to give way.

"Somehow, we few who realize what is happening must frustrate this ineffable force of evil, or go down with it, ending forever the upward march of man from the ape, and making impossible forever the burgeoning of that new spirit of brotherhood and reason that we are just beginning to perceive as an equal part of his spirit——equal to the impulse toward hostility and aggression. Love is more powerful than hatred, if only hatred can be prevented from overwhelming love before it has a chance to make its power felt.

"Well, there are frightening cracks in the Gate, but it still stands. And while we can, We must keep it from breaking open.

"Ward, bring me the road map. I want to look up Marske."

Marske, it seemed, did exist; it was a village not too far from Haworth, in the very heart of the moors. Thorne set out early in his Austin, and reached the place—it could hardly be called a town—without trouble, before noon.

He stopped for lunch at a neat-looking pub called the Cross-Keys, and as he downed his sausage roll and bitter asked the buxom barmaid the location of Sumner Drive.

She looked puzzled.

"Sumner Drive? There is no such street here."

"Have you lived here long? Are you familiar with the place?"

She laughed.

"I have never lived anywhere else," she said. "I was

born here. And I know every street, lane, and byway in the village. There is none called Sumner, I am sure."

"Then can you tell me where I can find Mr. Jamieson Freeland?"

"Freeland? I know of no one of that name."

"He is, I think, somewhat of a recluse. Perhaps he never comes into a pub. Is there someone here who might know more about the whereabouts of such a retired and retiring gentleman?"

"There is my father, who was born here too and who knows everybody in Marske at least by name or looks. But he is out just now—no, here he comes up the path. Perhaps he can tell you."

But the landlord, too, shook his head.

"I'm sure there isn't a man, woman, or child for ten miles roundabout that I wouldn't know, sir," he said. "But Jamieson Freeland I have never heard of. Are you sure it was Marske you wanted?"

"Yes, of course," said Thorne. He brought out Freeland's letter, folded it so that only the superscription and the signature showed, and displayed them to the landlord and his daughter. It drew a blank from both of them.

An inspiration came to him.

"Might there be," he suggested, "some local character, some eccentric whom nobody knows by name but who lives perhaps in some secluded house that people give a bad name to and avoid?"

Father and daughter looked at him as if he were demented; the girl could not keep from giggling.

"Nothing like that, sir," she said. "This is 1974, not 1774."

But then her father raised a forefinger.

"Wait a minute, Sue," he said. "What about Blagham House?"

"That old ruin that burnt down a few weeks ago? But nobody lived there—hadn't for years and years."

"Still," Thorne interposed eagerly, "somebody *could* have been holed up there without anyone in the village knowing about it, couldn't they? How did the fire occur?"

"Nobody knows. A farmer bringing milk to the village about 4 a.m. saw the flames and called the volunteer fire chief. But by the time the boys got to the blaze the whole house was afire and there was nothing much they could do but keep it from spreading."

"What about the ruins?

"It's just a mass of twisted stone and charred wood beams and ashes now. The house had been vacant so long I doubt if it even had furniture in it, let alone any living resident. It belongs to an estate which has been in litigation for years. The fireman raked over the ashes when they had cooled, and if they had found bones or any other evidence of a human victim they would have said so."

"Nevertheless, I'd like to take a look at it. Can you give me the directions?"

CHAPTER FIVE

The Doom That Came To Blagham

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

July 28, 1970

Dr. Delvin Oberson
1419 Justin St., Apt B
New York, N.Y.

My very dear friend:

A darkness and a chill silence is creeping across Shagh Moor as I sit here with pen in hand, wondering how I can tell you what must be said; but the darkness and chill in my soul is even greater. Oh my friend, it is as if a malignancy is spreading from me like an evil cloud to enclose all mankind in a doom such as you, and Freeland, and I, and, yes, Chandra Mission himself, could not envision! How little we all knew! How petty our conceptions, how single-minded our conceit that we understood the vast forces gathering beyond the buckling Gate!

I am not telling you that we failed in our endeavors. On the contrary, we succeeded!—but that success is burdened with new horrors that I can barely bring myself to relate to you. Yet I must do so, if only to preserve my sanity for a brief few hours before I understand fully the evil I have loosed. Pray that I am able to finish this missive and post it before I am enclosed in some merciful nighttime of the mind which will release me forever from my vision of myself as the destroyer of mankind's greatest dreams.

Yet there is one hope, and that hope—I say it fully realizing the terrible burden I place upon you—that hope is you and only you! Once before, by means of your brilliant technology, we all approached the Gate. My very dear friend, dare I ask you to approach it again? Yes, you *must* approach the Gate once more, and you *must* face its horrors, and you *must* have certain motives in mind! They must be the purest of motives, and you must not be afraid—

But now I steel myself to explain.

When I reached the tiny village of Marske, where it sits in the midst of greening furze and bracken on wind-swept Shagh Moor, I was alone in my Austin, for I had followed your excellent advice to leave my young nephew, Ward Christoper, in my London flat. I would be able to talk with him in case of an emergency. At the time, I did not know the far-reaching effect this was to have on all our destinies.

At the Cross-Keys, a well-shined pub in Marske, I went about the business of lunch, and after finishing off my sausage roll and bitter, I questioned the barmaid. She was a lass of good proportions, pleasing to such middle-aged eyes as mine, and I asked her outright the location of Sumner Drive.

"Sumner Drive? I recall no such street, sir, and I have lived here all my life." She was removing my dish and looked straight down at me. At the time, it seemed she was only puzzled by my question, but in the light of all that has happened, it is now so clear to me under whose influence she spoke.

I persisted. No, she was positive. Furthermore, there was and had been no one in the area who answered to the name of Jamieson Freeland.

"Well," I said somewhat desperate as I saw new barriers to Freeland's whereabouts being set before us, "perhaps he never ventures out. You would not see him yourself. Is there someone else about who might know more about such a recluse as Mr. Freeland.

The barmaid's father, who was the innkeeper, and a man of quiet, grave mien, certainly did not give the impression of one who would lie. And yet the information he gave me at the end was *blurred*.

His daughther laughed when he mentioned a burned mansion called Blagham. "That old ruin? But nobody lived there, poppa! Hadn't for years and years."

It was the only lead I had, however, and you may be sure I pursued my slim advantage. That persistence, I am sure, was just barely strong enough to break through their thralldom *to another will*. Father and daughter exchanged looks, and finally the inn-keeper said, "Yes...I can give you—directions."

You may imagine my astonishment upon arriving in the lonely area to which I was directed when I discovered the address given me was indeed a *blurred* one, as if the minions of Othuum could exert just so much influence, and no more, from their uncertainly maintained foothold on our world. Even before I reached the fictitious address, it was inevitable that I should see the street sign for Sumner Drive, and as inevitable that the gaunt apparition of burned

Bob
MAURUS

Blagham should make its assault on my senses.

Breathing those charnel odors and looking upon the dreary old hulk of fired timbers and scorched granite columns, I was seized with dread. Almost I felt against my skin the gelid fluttering fingers of questing creatures who knew that I was near, and who knew that I posed as malefic a threat toward them as they against me.

I parked the Austin in the shadow of a low, crumbling wall near a twisted iron gate. Golden furze and green blackthorn bloom thickly covered the tangled grounds beyond the wall. A canted headstone, blackened by drifting fumes, bore a name, and an address, in Old English lettering:

BLAGHAM
11 Sumner Drive

This, then, had been the mysterious abode of Jamieson Freeland after he burned Throdag but was it also Adrian White's abode?—and were *they*, in the single body, waiting here for me, ready with some foul plan that would forever remove me as Othuum's chief obstacle?

I could not believe it to be otherwise. As president of a society whose avowed purpose is the investigation and exposure, and if need be the exorcising, of occult influences, I was more to be feared by the dark insane forces which surround us than any other person in this world.

I, Hieronymous Thorne, thus saw myself pitted directly against Othuum—I, a pitful mortal seeking to joust in deadly combat with the most potent force this universe has ever known. So I thought then, not knowing where my error lay, so that I was to become even more evil than the forces I envisaged .

And so, sitting safely in the Austin, I paused in dread at the portals of that portentous burned house, breathing murky odors that seemed still to rise not only from its charred hulk, but from some deep cavern of filth that the exterior of the house did not reveal.

At this moment, an invisible force, call it what you will, seemed to warn me away from the ruins. I experienced an urgent desire to speak with Ward Christopher. Yes, I *must* talk with him! I therefore returned in the Austin to the nearest petrol depot, and while the attendant worked over my car, I dialed the London flat.

Ward Chrisopher answered. "I'm holding the fort, uncle," he said lightly. I told him of my adventures at the Cross-Keys, and of how the barmaid and her father had given me a bloody bad time of it; and I described Blagham House and my suspicions about the forces that seemed gathered there.

My young nephew whistled. "Oh, wow, that's Othuum at work, isn't it, uncle? He's doing his best to keep you away, even forcing you to leave the place and call me——" Suddenly there was strange silence, a loathesome gurgling sound that followed, and then the beginning of a laugh.

"Ward!" I said sharply. "What's wrong?"

The laughing and gurgling continued, and then became a monstrous muted yelping such as may have come from the hounds of hell themselves. I knew that I must have screamed into the phone, and rattled the receiver up and down. Then the station attendant was at my side, supporting me. "You're—you're white as frost, sir!" he stammered, leading me away from the phone and to a stool in the station. "Own up to it now, you shan't be in any shape to travel for a moment."

It was many moments before I could speak. "I have received very bad news from London," I then said hoarsely. "I must return at once."

I turned the Austin out of the depot in a wild curve, pointing north toward London. Then my foot jammed on the brake. I turned back into the depot.

"I will need an extra liter of petrol," I told the attendant.

Dubiously, the attendant secured a tin and filled it. Certainly it was a strange experience for him, for my demeanor by now had acquired a certain wildness. It did not matter. My purpose was becoming as steel. I could not help but remember that time in your laboratory when the demands of the computer sucked all the energy out of the Northeastern seaboard of the United States. At that time we were able to stave off the evil forces surrounding us with the elemental occult power of—fire!

Nor could I forget what was now so painfully obvious, that Othuum and his minions were doing everything they could to divert me? I forced myself to turn the Austin back toward Blagham. I must desert Ward Christopher even though it might mean his very life!

Now I again approached Blagham. A demented desperation was evident in my every act after this. First I secured my flashlight from the glove compartment. Then, remembering all too well the power failure in New Jersey, I secured several safety flares from the trunk of the car. Additionally armed with my tin of petrol, I stepped through the sagging iron gate of the burned mansion.

A thin, cool wind, precursor of the evening cold, was sighing off the moors at this time. Within view of the monstrous charred heap of stone and timbers were but two other houses, and they atop a rise some distance away. Down the winding, weedgrown path I proceeded, a Prometheus without design or reason.

In my demented state, the wind seemed to be pushing at me, attempting to force me back. Tiny whispering voices sounded in my ears, pleading, promising, and at the last threatening. But in this ambient evening, the Sun a desending ball of red fire, I saw nothing and knew I must be the victim of my imagination. And yet the desire to leave, to hurl myself to London to Ward Christopher's aid, was like a physical force which I could stave off only by an unimaginable effort of the will.

I would not let Othuum pervert me to his ends.

Now I came before the incredible ruined tangle of blackened beams and stone columns which bespoke the raging inferno striking at Blagham House. Why? Throdag House had met a similar fate. Could it be that Freeland for the second time had used the occult power of fire in a ritual of purification against the forces of evil? Or had Adrian White, in Freeland's body, burned this house down to hide the activities surrounding his obscene cravings for union with Othuum?

I entered the burned portals of Blagham. I found myself in an entranceway littered with stained glass fragments. The sagging floor beneath me suddenly crumbled, depositing me painfully on an earthen substructure. Now I was indeed enclosed in the ruined dwelling, a shadow among shadows as I forced my way under angled beams, making my way around all manner of cables and wires and tangled water and gas pipes as I pressed forward.

Then, before me and below me, yawning darkness. My beam speared out and lighted nothing. Now I was beginning to face that horror which I knew most truly when I listened to the mad gibberings of my nephew over the phone from London. Wailings and pipings and low moans seemed to issue from those noissome depths; from the dark caverns before me drifted such odors of nauseous and vomitous filth that it was incredible I dared breathe at all.

Trembling more with suspense and uncertainty than with fear, I lowered myself down a sloping earthern embankment. I stood in half-dark on dank earth. It was then I felt the fluttering of ghoulish cold fingers on my face and heard tittering laughter.

I screamed. At this moment, the flashlight lost its power, and I was enclosed in a darkness like that of the very nethermost regions of this Earth. Again that chilling hypophrenic laughter sounded in my ear and with another roar I lashed out. My fist struck something solid that gave before me.

I remember little of that awful struggle in darkness. I knew that I must have set my tin of petrol to the earthen floor of the cavern before I engaged the seeming-beast who was attacking me. I know that we grappled with each other, grunting and groaning and cursing all manner of wild oaths. Little by little it became apparent that I was winning, that my adversary was only a thing of skin and bones to be snapped in two should I wish. I finished him off with a blind slap at where I supposed his head was, and pinned him to the filth of the cavern floor. A whimper sounded.

"Who are you?" I cried.

The whimpering, as of a beaten dog, continued; then, in a great burst of fury, a cry came:

"Dr. Hieronymus Thorne, I am Jamieson Freeland!"

The revelation of that name, spoken by him who owned it, was a dizzying event. I could only gasp, and then release him who had involved us all in a fantastic man-hunt from England to New York to San Franicsco, and then to England again.

Freeland, an odorous creature of the dark where he had dwelled so long, lay supine and gasping in the filth of the cave under Blagham. Then I heard what seemed to be only madness issuing from his unseen lips.

"Fool," he mumbled. "Fool, fool! We tried to kill you once, Hieronymus Thorne—we lowered a replica of your screaming soul in an exorcising ritual into the ground near Chetwood's ancient church—yes, oh yes, it was you, and none other that *we* wrote you about! Why, why, did you not die then—for of all people White feared—you!"

He attempted to laugh. The laugh died in a choke. He gasped, "Why did you not understand—from our letter—that you were to remain in the United States—anywhere but England—until it was finished!"

I could hardly hear him now, and did not then believe what I thought I heard; or perhaps I refused to believe this story of the attempted murder of my soul. Freeland moaned as he sensed my revulsion, and grasped my wrist in his bony claw.

"You must go now, Hieronymus Thorne," he moaned, "and you must never again come near Blagham. Surely you know—the insane forces that have taken—control of mankind——"

"Yes," I cried. "Othuum is using the evil in mankind to help him batter down the Gate——"

A muttering sounded from deep in his chest. "No, no!"

"The Grinners at the Gate are ready!" I shouted down at him. "What are you trying to say? You, Freeland, who fought Othuum, who learned to fight Adrian White—"

Then I became equally mad with the thing on the floor of the cave. "You," I cried, "*are* Adrian White!"

"I am Adrian White." The voice was sepulchral. "I am Adrian White, and I too ask you to leave."

I struggled from my knees, and stood trembling. I was in the presence of the malefic genius himself. "You ask *me* to leave?" I laughed; then my voice raged. "You," I cried, "who made a pact with Othuum to loose evil unthinkable on our world, who cracked the Gate against which the Hordes of Darkness lean? Oh, Adrian White, I know of your kind, evil spirits who inhabit other bodies when theirs are gone."

Now my voice chanted; I was well aware of what I must do. "Already, Adrian White, you have stolen away the soul of this thing called Jamieson Freeland, and now you wish to aid Othuum in robbing man of his highest Essence, his own Shining Spirit which will carry him to a destiny none of us can see. You are a creature of Othuum, Adrian White, and I exorcise you herewith!"

I, too, knew of the Pentick Star, and in darkness I drew it on the floor of the cave, and made the necessary finger motions above it. Drawing on memory, I recited the Old Latin phrases which the priests of the Inquisition used in their attempt to draw forth evil demons from the afflicted. Accuracy was hardly necessary, so weak was the spirit of Adrian White in its poor material body.

"Adrian White!" I said sharply.

No answer. I reached forth a trembling hand. I touched the ragged arm of Jamieson Freeland. It was like touching ice. I fell to hands and knees, half with physical weakness, half with a loss of physical strength. I had little doubt that Freeland, and White with him, was dead. But I must go on, and I must hurry, for I must return to London to aid my helpless nephew.

I lighted one of my flares by scraping it on a fallen piece of masonry. Carrying my tin of petrol, I began my descent into Othuum's Hell. Oh, yes, every step of the way, I fought against Othuum, loudly—insanely!—chanting the protecting litanies I had learned in my years as champion of those oppressed by occult forces.

I descended, and I know now that I was truly mad, shouting my obscenities, holding a flare before me as if it were a Christian cross which had power against the demonic powers coughing and hawking in darkness about me. Before me as I lighted my second flare, an earthen stairway fell away into regions from which issued a promise of Hell's own heat. The crowding odor of beings beyond our ken issued from the hellhole, and the howlings and muted whinings that assailed me bespoke psychic dangers I must fight to keep from fleeing.

Vainly, I sought to define the perimeter of this deepening underground abode of Othuum, but even my own shadow climbed no wall, and my screaming voice echoed not.

Still I descended.

Then happened that which I can barely force myself to relate.

"Stay," a hollow voice said from the darkness before me. "Hieronymous Thorne, it is time for you to return."

"Indeed," I said.

I was quiet, standing before the source of that voice, waiting. Then an ambience grew from the dark. A pearly radiance as of the gates of heaven grew and spread and in the center of this effulgent stage sat Chandra Mission.

He was in repose, in full lotus position, his deformed limbs naked. He looked upon me from luminous dark eyes, and his expression seemed to be of compassion.

"You must return to London," he said, "to see that your nephew does not die. Surely, you do not wish to desert him."

"Of course not," I remarked, while I allowed my forces to gather within me. This was Chandra Mission, but it was of him only a shell. He was only a creature of light, drained of substance, little more than a similacrum of his real being. Radiances played about within his body. His skeleton was plainly seen. His viscera pulsed visibly. This was not the whole Chandra Mission.

"You must return," he repeated in that ineffably calm, yet strangely lifeless voice. "Think, Hieronymous Thorne. The world is gripped in evil such as man in his lifespan has never witnessed. But by the same token, mankind must experience the very worst in order to experience the very best. Evil, you must see, creates its own backlash of good. How else can Man see the Godhead within himself unless he understands his own base beginnings? Yes, mankind is now ready for the plunge through uttermost evil, for his Shining Spirit, Hieronymus Thorne, moves through evil with him——"

I lighted another flare, and in its first burst of brilliance Chandra Mission almost disappeared.

"You are a creature of Othuum," I said, with the same calm dispassion Chandra Mission used in addressing me. "And I know now that the Gate has cracked wider! I pray that I am not too late, Chandra Mission, but in any case I *know* that Othuum has transported you here—is using you against me, even as he is using Jamieson Freeman, and Adrian White's perverted soul. Chandra Mission, I shall not allow Othuum to pervert me."

"I talked on, lashing out, keeping Chandra Mission from speaking further. For did I not know that the Grinners were slavering in their lust beyond the leaning Gate? Yes, yes, I, in my faultless wisdom knew all! And I knew that so long as this holy man, this Chandra Mission, sat before me that my way was barred.

Then did I that which I had sworn never to do.

The exorcising spell I cast upon Chandra Mission came from a book I knew well, and which Freeman-White had spoken of—the dread catechism of Othuum himself, the *Othuum Omnicia*. I shall never use those foul curses again, if I live, nor shall I divulge them here. A startled fume of yellow fire grew in Chandra Mission's luminous eyes.

"My friend——" he began. The fuming yellowness, Hell's own fire, consumed him. He was gone. Oh, I wasted no time in tears or remorse; that would come later. I plunged forward into a new cavern which was lighted with its own radiance.

It was quiet here. Piping voices spoke plaintively. Whirring shapes drifted about the room. Now and then one came near me, peered into my face with eyes of yellow fire, and then drifted away. Before me on a black dais sat an idol.

It was not a large idol, but it was quite black, and it was alive. It gazed upon me impassively. I was trembling violently, from a combination of overriding terror and dank cavern cold. I was shouting out my curses and my protecting chants. How did I know I was in the underground lair of Othuum himself? I do not know how I knew, but I knew.

The living idol sat lifeless, inspecting me. Its fat arms, double in shape, were folded in its capacious lap. It too sat in lotus position, but an extra set of legs—as febrile as those of Chandra Mission—were intertwined about the others. Its plump face was expressionless, as it gazed upon me from heavy-lidded, disinterested eyes. I do not know how long we inspected each other; I, a small, half-mad human being buried an unknown distance under ruined Blagham, facing the similacrum of Othuum.

Othuum! How the name singes my brain as I sit here at the Cross-Keys and write. Dear God, had I only . . . but my course was set before me. I must return to London, and quickly! Thus I was driven by my fear for my nephew's life, and my need to destroy Othuum, if such were possible.

There is little doubt that Othuum fought me, by extending his power beyond the trembling Gate. I must force myself toward that black altar, surrounded with *shapes* of such ghoulish madness that would turn back any sane person. I was not sane, for I screamed in demented fashion, cursing Othuum, cursing his Dark Hordes, vilifying the Grinners at the Gate who sought to work their foul will on all mankind. I ascended the double set of blackened, well-worn steps before the idol, opening the tin of petrol as I did so. Then, "Die, Othuum!" I cried, "*Die*," and poured the petrol in gurgling stream over him.

Then, turning, I leaped from the altar where White must have worshiped, and landed as nimbly as any schoolboy on the earthen packed floor of Othuum's cave. Standing well back, I hurled the second to last of my flares.

The flame struck the idol; instantly, the purifying fire gushed up. A sighing whir filled the cavern. A whining, as of creatures in pain, cut through the crackling hellish yellow and red glow of the burning idol. And it was Othuum who burned. Yes! It was Othuum, Othuum! Othuum, trapped by the opening Gate itself, trapped halfway between his own world and ours. It was Othuum, Othuum who died!

Then I saw that which I would have given all the years of my life not to see.

A shape was forming within the flames. I cowered back, not believing my eyes. Then I began to weep; in my madness, I fell to my knees. "No!" I choked. "Oh, God, no—!"

Surely, I shall never remember the details of my nightmare plunge to the world outside. I had one flare left, so I must have used it to light my way. I did not see either Freeman-White, or Chandra Mission again. Perhaps they are truly dead, having laid down their lives in their attempts to stop me. I do not even remember bursting from Blagham's ruins into the deep nighttime outside. But I do know that behind me in burned Blagham there was a monstrous shaking of the earth, whereat the whole ruined mass sagged almost flat, and gushes of earth and dust rose from it. Then, as I found myself behind the wheel of the Austin I noted a faint, yet violent red glow which seemed to emanate from the very bowels of our planet, heralding a far greater devastation underneath than I had planned.

The Gate was closed.

. . . . I sit here at the Cross-Keys now. Ward Christopher is well; for that only can we give thanks. But oh my friend, I would now gladly trade all the years of my life for a reversal of those events which led to the destruction of Othuum and the closing of the Gate. Truly it was buckling. Truly it was about to swing wide—and now *you* with your technology must create the similacrums of the spells and incantations which will cause it to swing wide again—to swing wide and *open*!

Yes, my dear friend, *the Gate must open!* Mankind was ready for that new and shining step in his evolution which will make him one with the angels. Do you not see it now, that Othuum was swinging wide the Gate, with what poor powers he had, with the conscripted help of Freeman and White, *not* to infuse and fester within Man's Godhead, but that we might rise to that high state of Being spoken of by all the great Teachers? The Gate was being opened, not that Othuum might enter our world with his Dark Hordes, but that *we* might return through the Gate—to Paradise!

Oh, my friend, my madness has almost overtaken me. I have tried too hard to forget the flaming idol. I have tried to forget that as the flames rose the idol unfolded like a living thing on a burning pyre. It rose, arms outstretched, head canted forward, legs croossed. It seemed to hang in the smoke-filled air, burning burning burning like a Christian cross!

And, God help me, the eyes of Othuum sorrowful upon me as he died.

Hieronymus Thorne

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JADE PAGODA

JACK WILLIAMSON

Early in 1931, W.K. ("Kirk") Mashburn and I teamed up to welcome Jack Williamson and Edmond Hamilton to New Orleans, the end of their skiff cruise down the Mississippi. My memories of this event are blurred. I do, however, recall that we sat in the pleasant chilliness of the Green Mint Patio, in the five or six hundred block of Governor Nichols Street, down in the *Vieux Carre*.

Ever since that pleasant meeting, I had planned to see the Williamson lands in Eastern New Mexico. We discussed this when he and Hamilton covered the San Francisco Bay area, autumn of 1940. Finally, early spring of 1941, I turned my back on New Orleans, where Wanda and I had spent the winter, to head west and homeward.

Some twenty miles due south of Portales, the Peanut Capital of the World, was Pop, New Mexico. Two or three stores lurked in the enormous desolation. A wagon track reached eastward, apparently leading to something, somewhere. If in fact it led nowhere, we had only to backtrack, find another road, and repeat.

Presently, we learned that instinct, honed fine, had served us well. This was the road. A windmill tower rose high above a cluster of peach trees in blossom. Near that tower was a corral, with cow critters--red ones, white-faced. The payoff was the small new building a hundred yards from the weathered ranch house--Jack's studio, with mast and mini-mill, to drive the generator which charged the storage battery of the lighting system. We had read of this in letters. The workshop was also the guest cottage.

Tall, and lean as ever, Jack had nevertheless changed, and conspicuously. As guest, a sitter in the silence--as host, he was almost talkative. His welcome made us glad that we had nowhere to go for the next few days.

Correction: Jack and I did have an immediate destination. We drove 50 miles across liquor-less wastes, all the way to Clovis, famed for groggeries and Billy the Kid legendry. The Texas Bible Belt, unhappily, had slopped over and into the Sandhills of New Mexico. Local option blighted the land. I have nothing against Bibles, Belts, or Texas. However, the combination can be sticky.

Returning with a gallon of port and a bottle or two of bourbon, we had nothing to do but hoist a few, in what Jack termed "The California Tradition." This tradition apparently had made a deep impression on Jack when he and Hamilton roved the Pacific Coast.

The Williamsons fattened cattle. On the face of things, this was hard to believe. Far as one could see, there was nothing beyond the few peach trees except mesquite brush, and "shin" oak. The latter was so called because, shin high and with three leaves and one full-grown acorn, each of the far spaced trees had many roots, each thick as a man's forearm. These reached on and on, twenty--thirty feet or more, sometimes buried in sand; again, exposed as the wind changed the shape of a dune.

Neither Indians nor Mexicans had ever been able to live in the sand hills. It remained for the Anglos to drill wells from 300 to 600 feet deep. The limestone water, an abomination for shaving, washing, or laundry, was so larruping good that one relished it even without whiskey.

Jack's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Asa Williamson, had accumulated years, but no excess weight. Fattening was for cattle, not for humans. This was incredible. For supper, by kerosene lamp light, there were pork chops and home canned beef; pinto beans with *chili con carne*; potatos, corn, squash, string beans; gravy; biscuits, bread, corn muffins, pie; each and other preserves; syrup, honey, molasses. . .

The prodigies of western gun fighters should be ignored. Not enough has been said of eating in the Old West.

Breakfast was very much like supper, or mid-day dinner, except that this first meal of the day included eggs, bacon, ham, flapjacks, but omitted vegetables. *Chili con carne* was lacking. Just plain beans . . .

As a hard-working writer, Jack ate all these things.

So did I. Accordingly, Mr. Williamson regarded me with favor somewhat more than the standard guest rated. It was my third helping of *chili con carne* with pinto beans which did the trick, although several slabs of pie contributed to prestige.

For awhile we sat by lamplight, while Mr. Williamson conducted a general conversation, some of which was keyed to current events brought in by radio. Although most informal, the family circle had a touch of the patriarchal. Younger members and females spent more time listening than running off at the mouth. It was exceedingly good to be in this place where Old Times still persisted.

I was then forty-three years old, and entitled to sit in the presence of Grown Men, and to wear a beard without inviting scorn, open mockery, and deserved contempt. Nonetheless, I deferred to the Patriarch. This was not required. It was spontaneous.

Asa Williamson had come up out of Mexico, where he had raised cattle. His wife rode with him when they drove their herd into the States. She carried a small son in each saddlebag. I was among folks who antedated *Lard Bottom Americanus*, the slave of ease, indolence, and ultra-convenience. These were the people who had demonstrated that a man had more endurance than a horse. Those who drove a car relied on their own power to steer, and a hand to shift gears. . .

In 1941, this was good for the soul. Today, this is only an ancient memory, a tale no one can believe.

Presently we left the Patriarch, and went with Jack to his cabin. Whether he would find a bunk in the ranch house, or roll up in his blankets, in wagon shed or fodder pile, was his business. Meanwhile, we settled down to gossip and some after-dinner drinks.

We had seen Kirk Mashburn in Houston. In New Orleans, we'd met two of the Hamilton sisters, on the prowl in the *Vieux Carre*. But the talk soon came to Farnsworth Wright, whose death the previous June still darkened us. Robert E. Howard--H.P. Lovecraft--and now Wright, Mr. Weird Tales, the Grand Master of the Cult, had gone his way, and would not be seeing us again.

We were quite young, those days. We had not become inured to the loss of friends and associates. The death of Henry S. Whitehead, late 1932, had been the first of those catastrophes.

Jack wondered whether I'd met him. "No, but we corresponded since 1926. And HPL told me much of him. So did Robert Barlow, who knew him well. . ."

Each briefed the other. Jack became ever more articulate. Finally, "Your idea of writing these memoirs before you forget too many details--why not? At your place, and on the drive to see Clark Ashton Smith, you spoke of writing sketches of the. . . ah. . ."

"Turn out the guard! Deceased comrade!"

"Deceased comrade. And your title was good. *Book of the Dead.*"

"Mmm. . . *Book of the Dead,* and not Egyptian, not Tibetan. I'll do it. I really will."

Whether it was that limestone water from a very deep well, or Jack Williamson's earnest words is immaterial. I did compose a memoir of Farnsworth Wright, and one of Robert E. Howard, for *The Ghost*, published by the late W. Paul Cook, HPL's good friend. There were subsequent memoirs, some of which appear in Arkham books. Others were printed in amateur magazines. And finally, *Jade Pagoda* is continuing what came to life, that night as the wind whined among the hills of eastern New Mexico, driving sand to slash against pane and patter on roof.

. . . James Ferdinand Morton. . . Otis Adelbert Kline. . . Clark Ashton Smith. . . Seabury Quinn. . . Kirk Mashburn. . . Barsoom Badigian. . . Hugh Rankin. . . for these memoirs, thank Jack Williamson, the first undeceased comrade to be sketched.

Finally, I asked, "Ever try any westerns?"

"Nothing to write about."

Couple months later, I wrote a yarn about Simon Bolivar Grimes, who combined gun fighting and windmill-greasing. No windmill, no drink for the cattle. Jack saw and conceded the point, but stuck to fantasy and S.F. Time proved that he was quite right.

Nearly thirteen years elapsed before I found my way back to Portales. I had bailed out of the fiction business. The final five years had been a tax-free, non-profit enterprise. Jack, now married and living in the city, had got the message well ahead of me. Whether he was preparing his Master's or his Doctoral thesis, I don't recall. Suffice it to say that he had already begun a new career, culminating in his present position as Professor of English at the university in Portales.

We went south, to Pep, and the old home.

Mr. Williamson was not on the ranch, nor would he return before I left the region. This I regretted.

Mrs. Williamson, however, was at home, and happy about the face-lifting and paint job which had made the ranch house unrecognizable. It was noon. Only a lout would arrive at an hour other than meal time.

Mrs. Williamson regretted that she'd been caught short. Not a scrap of food in the house. I heard, and without apprehension. Pausing at the pinnacle of disaster, she wondered whether I could put up with fried apples.

"Fried apples? M'am, it's full forty years since I've heard the words, much less eaten the substance. Please do fix a mess of them."

She did so.

Nothing to eat but ham--canned beef--eggs--potatos--biscuits--peach preserves--and, a platter of fried apples. No beans. Skimpy going. . .

I persuaded her to step from kitchen and out of doors, to face the new Leica. Tall and thin and smiling at the years, she did so. I value the several snapshots which commemorate Fried Apple Day.

We never again met, though Mrs. Williamson and her husband carried on until each had attained more than ninety years. They still live in my memory, these durable pioneers, of a substance almost alien in contemporary America.

There may be a few survivors, younger than Jack's parents. If I hear of any such, I'll seek them. When I find them, I'll bow three times.

Never think that I glorify, or set these Old Timers on pedestals. That generation had its quota of slobs, as has ours. The only difference, really, is that the human garbage was not coddled. It was permitted to perish. Those who neglected, unduly, their opportunity, were aided--by a rawhide *riata*, or leaden pellets or slugs. . .

In recent years, I've met Dr. Williamson and his wife, Blanche, at conventions, where he was guest of honor. Better yet, in their home in Portales, we have been their guests of honor. There has been an extra dividend, that of getting acquainted with Jack's brother and family.

Late in 1960, in the Los Angeles area, there was a memorable reunion: Jack, Edmond Hamilton and I, the three of us, meeting for the first time in the twenty years since we'd gone to sit and hoist rum and wine with Clark Ashton Smith and the Turkish Well Digger.

Jack had become loquacious. In another couple of decades, he'd be downright talkative. He was no longer quite so lean. His hair was graying slightly. There was, finally, that indefinable quality which I call "presence." This cannot be concealed, however unobtrusive one may be. Jack has gained more than academic status. He is one of the pioneers of fantasy and of science fiction, long established as such, and not to be swamped by the flood of newcomers operating in the paperback field.

Jack's first appearance in *Weird Tales* was in 1932. I don't have the data on his gate-crasher. When we met in 1931, he was already a professional.

The professional writer mocked the so-called "Depression." Some outwitted the woes of that period during which Socially Oriented saints became wealthy by flogging the typewriter of despair. I was booted into the ranks of those who wrote for fun, and never mind Social Awareness. Nevertheless, I missed something--and whenever I hear Edmond Hamilton speak of the days when he and Jack lolled around Key West, or rode among the dunes of the shin oak region and chinned themselves at the Williamson table, I know full well that I missed the richness which Jack discovered.

Setting down these words tempts me to ride my credit all the way to Portales, and never mind that novel devoted to a study of Lilith's home life and bedroom manners . . .

It would be good for the soul, hearing the whine of wind and the dry rustle-whisper of sand. *Blessed be*, as I think the witch cult folks way in giving thanks. But this could never match the tremendous hours when, by lamplight, the Patriarch presided at the after-supper table. I realize now as I could not then, that *a shred of time is worth a bar of gold*. . .

In those days, we had so much time, so little gold.

And now, little of the one, and none at all of the other . . .

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INTO THE BLUE FOREST

BY LEO TIFTON

Into the Blue Forest rode Sir Hardeval to find and kill the Ogre. He was armed with lance and sword, and man and horse alike were bedecked with scarlet. Past the small homes of the elf-folk they went, past the littered bones of other men who had sought and found the Ogre. Through darkened corridors of the forest rode Sir Hardeval to a small pool.

Here he dismounted and, removing his helm, stooped to drink. When he looked up across the water, he saw an elf.

"A finely armored hero you appear," the elf said in a small, piping voice. "Come to rid our wood of the Ogre, have you?"

Sir Hardeval brushed wheat-blond hair from his eyes and nodded. "That's right."

"Many heros have come for that. You passed their bones."

"Then I'm in the right part of the forest," Sir Hardeval said.

The elf laughed, then said, "Perhaps not. It is said that the Ogre scatters its leavings far from where it eats."

"Then you know where I can find it? If I kill it, your people are free of it."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

Hardeval mounted his steed again. "Does not this Ogre feed upon your people as it feeds on mine? It's time to be rid of it. Show me where it is."

"It's where it wants to be found," said the elf.

"Fair enough. I hunt the ground of the Ogre. Were it not reported that it shows itself only to the knights who hunt alone, I'd have an army with me. Still I fear it not, for the ways of the Ogre say only that it has much to fear. Lead me to it and tell me what it looks like, small one."

"And what should an Ogre look like?"

"It should be big," the knight replied, after a moment's pondering. "An Ogre should be big and gnarled, a loathsome thing to match a loathsome appetite."

"As I have seen only this Ogre in my lifetime," the elf said, "I guess it looks much like any other Ogre."

"You're the only elf I've ever talked with," replied Sir Hardeval. "But I've no doubt there are more civil ones among your folks."

Thus Sir Hardeval, led by the small elf, rode into a deeper part of the forest where the trees closed in. After a time the trail was too narrow for the horse, so the knight continued on foot among the brush and bramble, between close growing trees, through thickets and over small, meandering streams. Overhead, the leaves at the top of the trees drank so thirstily of sunlight that few drops of it remained to touch the forest floor. All about Sir Hardeval was cathedral darkness, but he could see the small, darting form of the elf.

Then ahead Hardeval saw a clearing and against a tree, a girl.

Light streamed into the clearing and touched her face. Her body was in shadow so that he could not tell if ropes or chains held her to the tree. But he could tell that she was slender and lovely of form. Her face, framed by sun-golden hair, was the most beautiful face he had ever seen.

"So—the Ogre's meal is planned and waiting, is it?"

His sword slashed out, chopping aside a sapling that barred his way to the clearing.

"You've come, " she said. "I knew you'd come." Her voice was like music.

He moved to her side, sheathing his sword and reaching out his hands to find and loosen the bindings that held her to the tree. But his hands touched only her supple waist.

"You're free," he said, astonished. "Then the Ogre did not leave you here?"

"I knew you would come," she said. Her arms circled his neck. Her face floated toward him and her lips pulled back. And Hardeval saw—and knew. But it was too late.

When he was dead, she removed his armor and clothing. She looked up and saw the elf standing on the root of a gnarled tree. She smiled with small, gleaming, pointed teeth. "They keep coming," she said. "They always keep coming."

As if her words were a cue, the elves started arriving, singly or in groups, expectant and hungry. For there was much more here than any one Ogre could eat.

There are some men who can do no wrong...

the man With the aura

by

R.A. LAFFERTY

Illustrations by Bob Maurus

NOR IS THAT THE WORST of my troubles, James, said Thomas Castlereagh. "Not only has my conscience begun to gnaw me, but my doctor tells me that I will be dead within a month."

"Good God, Thomas! I thought you were in perfect health," his friend James Madigan cried out in real alarm.

"Not perfect, but James, I'm of sound body for a man of my age."

"But your doctor said——"

"That he intends to kill me. I've given him reason."

That was the evening that Thomas Castlereagh told his full story to James Madigan. Halfheartedly he had tried to tell it several times before. He hadn't been believed. He had only gained the reputation of being a delightful man with a certain outre humor.

He wasn't. He had no humor at all.

But he had everything else: robust pink-faced health; gold edged security and impregnable wealth; familial abundance in his later years as recompense for his earlier sorrows; and the glowing regard of every person in America.

Castlereagh served on many committees and national forums. His heading-up of any body guaranteed its integrity and success. No president felt properly inaugurated unless Castlereagh stood by his side. His was the most sought-after endorsement in the country. He was Respectability.

Any description of the man would be trite beside the man himself. His face had become the Face of America at its best.

Rumley had done him. Cassell had done him in the magnificent portrait now in the Great Portraits Room of the Tate Gallery. Arestino had done him. But the finest portraits could give no real indication of the man himself. Anyone in his presence was always pleasantly shaken by the experience. Words cannot give an account of it, though the Castlereagh voice and words were a large part of the effect.

Castlereagh's three sons were respected and notable. Charles had much of the father's business ability and of his pervading charisma. John Thomas was a doctorate professor, and the author of an exciting text, *Theoretical Extrapolated Mechanics*. Robert Adrian was a gifted artist. All inherited in part from the father's amazing gifts, but all would stand in his shadow forever.

And Castlereagh's wife was Letitia, an international beauty known equally for her wit and sparkle and for her nearly too perfect beauty.

And the graciousness and grace of the man failed in nothing. He had brought a new dimension to goodness. He was perfected in fame and fortune; and perfection is not perfect if it ever fail in anything.

Castlereagh's visitor of this night was James Madigan, a Cabinet Member, Secretary of Crime Prevention. But Madigan was in a bleak mood, even in the golden presence of Castlereagh.

"Thomas, the country, the society, is in the worst shape ever," he deplored. "The very idea of honesty has become comical. We have been afraid to publish the revised crime index for the last six months; I doubt if we will ever publish it again; it's horrible. The very appearance of character has all but vanished from the human face. Perhaps that is why you yourself are so remarkable, Thomas."

"Coals of fire, James! But they don't burn me much. I'm well insulated.

"What, Thomas? I believe that I catch a glint of your fine humor there, and I certainly need it tonight. How the crimes do weigh on me!"

"Ah, the crimes!" said Castlereagh. "Murder and arson aren't important in themselves. The effect on a man becomes serious only when followed by a certain hardening. But a man who has done these things to the point of ennui and who has built upon them may eventually become a little coarse. I've seen it happen to others. Who can say that I am immune? Drink, James."

They were drinking brandy together. The words of Castlereagh seemed delightfully humorous. It was the puckish twist of the mouth, it was the laughing eyebrows, it was the dancing gray of the eyes, the complexity of the voice.

"I enjoy your piquant humor, Thomas,," said Madigan as he savored and sipped the drink that has an aura byond all others. "There is something beyond hilarity in the idea that you could ever be criminal, or coarse. But even your drollery can hardly distract me tonight. When I was younger I believed that there was nothing darker than a crime of sheer passion. Now I know that there is something much worse. Do you know what it is?"

"I know it as well as I know the face behind my face, James. But it is you who are in full eloquence. Go on."

"It is the crime without passion, Thomas, the crime almost without interest. The most vile things are done daily in the most offhand manner. It is a thing colder and more horrifying than sadism. If only I could discover the roots of it! If I could find one clear stripped-down example to study, Thomes, I might develop a specific against this venom."

"I can give you one, Madigan. I will give you a chance to study at close range a man who has had more opportunities for evil and has made more use for them than anyone in the world. Listen, and believe. It is important to me that someone finally believe.

"Madigan, I am about to tell you the story of my life. I realize that those are the most fearsome words that one man can ever say to another, but do not be alarmed; I have the virtue of brevity.

"I was named Tom Shanty, James, and not Thomas Castlereagh. I've come a ways from the shanty to the royal castle, which is the meaning of Castlereagh. The name, you see, James, is one element of the aura. I was a sickly boy and the most luckless ever; and perhaps the most dishonest. The police suspected me of every misdemeanor in our neighborhood, and they were right to suspect me. My appearance was against me. I was a fox-faced sneak."

"You, Thomas? Mr. Distinction himself? This is good. On with your tale."

"I was fox-smart and fox-mean. But a fox is hunted uncommonly, James, before he learns his trade. I was unsuccessful in all my jobs and all my thieveries, and was always poor. I worked for a dishonest photographic portraitist. We collected for these, but we did not deliver them. The samples I showed always made the sale. And this mean experience was the beginning of my success. The touch-ups really were fabulous. My employer was a genius at this—when he chose to work at it. I myself am now a compendium of his best touchups. I learned what the face of respectability and distinction looked like.

"I worked for a dishonest electronics man. We did bad work for high prices on TV, VVV, and Replica sets. Being fox-smart I picked up technical knowledge. I learned what things may be translated into waves, including things not commonly thought to be so translated.

"I worked for con men. I was bad at this, and my masters were good. I undersood quickly why this was so. They had natural advantages for it, and I did not. I had decided to create these advantages for myself unnaturally. More brandy, James?"

"Thank you. It's a droll old brandy you serve, and a droller tale you serve up. Go on, Thomas."

"I spent time in pokey. My face and my aspect were always against me. They drew the finger of suspicion correctly to me every time. Then I became that lowest life form, an unsuccessful inventor.

"I married a quiet and rather short-witted girl who was quietly repelled by me. My luck worsened. There came the day when there was no prospect of any job, honest or dishonest; and there was nothing to eat in the house. Little fox-face had come to the bottom of his burrow.

"But on that lowest day I had completed a crude moudel of my oddest invention. I named it the aura machine."

"An odd name, Thomas. And you sold the invention and began your rise?" Madigan asked.

"No, I didn't sell it. I never did sell it, for it's priceless. It's made me quite rich. I installed it and let it work for me."

"Just what did you do with your invention, Thomas?"

"Oh, when my device seemed to be working all right, I went out and forged five large checks in the crudest possible manner. That was the first test of my invention, and it stood up well."

"Thomas," smiled James Madigan, "I feel better already. There is something in your goblin humor that always sets me up."

"With the funds acquired from the forged checks I took out twenty thousand dollars insurance on my wife," Castlereagh said. "I waited three days for the papers to clear. Then I killed her."

"You are the most amazing man, Castlereagh," Madigan said. "You are the cathartic I need. No man but you, even in the retrospect of forty years, could jest about such a matter without crudity. But coming from you, it is the all-saving humor."

"I have no humor, Madigan."

"I've studied that early case, Thomas. I'm as baffled by it as you are. There was no clue at all to the murder of your young wife, and no suspect. You and she were alone in the house, and nobody could have entered. It remains one of the classic puzzles to this day."

"It puzzled me a little too, James, until I looked in the minror again. My device was working remarkably. My face no longer resembled that of a fox-faced sneak. It was my same face, and yet how different! My luck had changel. had been changed by a fairly simple device. The tide has been running for me ever since."

"But later, Thomas, you suffered great disasters that would have sank a lesser man."

"All the disasters suffered were tricks of my own. and all turned me a profit. With the funds from my wife's death I started a business. It was a crackpot business and it should have failed, for I was and am incompent. But I had my new contrived luck that made competence unnecessary."

"Thomas, you pile drollery upon drollery. You're a bright patch in my life."

"My invention was working well for me. No, James, the business was in no way concerned with its manufacture or sale. By a series of clumsy frauds I prospered. It was a proud milestone in my life when I caused my first suicide. one of many I was to cause."

"Humor is the key, Thomas. Let our bleakest moods be bathed in its golden light and somehow we will find the strength to go on. The tale becomes richer and richer."

"Then I embarked on arson, that most hare-brained and easily detected of frauds, on a large scale. I acquired a block-long warehouse, an ancient shanty of a building, and filled it with old crates and trash. I insured it heavily. I had twenty drums of kerosene openly hauled in one night

and strategically placed. And after dark I upturned them all, gave them a quarter of an hour to soak the timber. and walked out the front door. James, that was the crudest piece of arson ever pulled, and it was not even suspected. My invention was working fine for me now. I collected. I had made my first milliion dollars; and the story went out that I had suffered the loss of five times that amount."

"Castlereagh, you are better than this old brandy. You warm my cockles and give new life to my tired heart. Your 'invention' I know will be a wowser when you come to your punch line. No tongue but yours could twist out so delightful a rhapsody."

"It is my invention again that makes you find the story delightful. When I look at my reflection, James, I am even able to hoodwink myself. The man behind such a face as mine cannot be other than a great and respected man."

"Richer and richer," chuckled Madigan.

"I married again," said Castlereagh. "Hers was not really a great fortune, but it was a comfortable seven-figure accumulation. I saw it comfortably settled on myself. I gave her half a year, for she was a pleasurable creature. Then I killed her."

"Ah, you hide that old tragedy behind your mocking humor also, Thomas. I am familiar with the case. It was one of the most baffling——"

"Sure. No clue at all, and no suspect. I was alone in the house with her, and nobody could have entered. There were no finger prints but mine to be found anywhere, even in the powder on her throat. She was throttled by persons unknown. Quite an impossible murder."

"Well, James, I stayed with proven methods, but always on an expanding scale. Who would suspect a man whose face mirrored the integrity of Lincoln, the clear fire of a young Jefferson, the humor of Lamb, the honest thoughtfulness of Browne, the scope of Plutarch, the urchin-humanness of Francis, the serenity-in-power of Octavius? My next arson concerned eighty acres of surplus government buildings acquired for a sour song and a sweet face. It took me thirteen days and three thousand drums of kerosene to set that one up properly. But I collected fifty million dollars worth of insurance on it. It was bruited about, however, that I had lost half a billion; and the nation almost went into mourning."

"I well remember my personal desolation at your great loss," said Madigan. "I doubt if any other man would have had the heart to surmount it, or the grace to joke about it later on."

"One more grand trick, and then I'd have all the money that mattered. I built me a nation-wide all-embracing fraud. I cleaned thirty million investors, small, medium, and large on that one. Then, as an experiment, I let my mask slip a trifle, muted my peculiar device a little. A few of the fish saw behind it then. They even took me through a series of courts."

"I well remember those craven character assassins. Castlereagh," Madigan said. "No man but yourself would be able to find humor in it, even now."

"Oh, they had me cold at every turn, James. The transparency of my fraudulent machinations was breathtaking. But I turned my device on to the full. My invention, ah, luck, working again at full efficiency. And once more I had my wonderful face. It had gone so far that it had to go all the way, and of course I won. There were tears in the eyes of the Chief Justice when he embraced me after it was all over. I had tears in my own eyes, but I would not want to have the salt in them publicly analyzed."

"The entire nation wept in gratitude at your vindication; and now you are able to joke absurdly about it. Ah, deep humor and tears are very close together, are they not, Thomas?"

"Jerked by the same pair of strings, James. Then I put the cap on it. I set up the Castlereagh Fund for the Study of Bott's Disease."

"Kicked off by an *anonymous* contribution of thirty million dollars! *Anonymous*! But, of course, everyone knew that the contribution was yours."

"Sure, everyone knew it was mine, even if it wasn't. It was my own publicity that pointed the big finger at me. But it wasn't mine. The man who gave that thirty million was rather a shy fish about giving. He gave in the dark through me. By an irony, his name has come to be a by-word for miserliness. By a double irony it was myself who hung that tag on him. But I treat that fund with respect; I only milk it for the earned interest every year. I call it my toothpick fund. If anything named Bott's disease really comes around, maybe I'll be able to run the trick through again.."

"Thomas, what a fund of deep drollery you have! My fit of depression is all but gone. But seriously, Castlereagh, what is this business about Doctor Forester? He must be unbalanced. You mean he has actually threatened you?"

"Forester has done a little work in emanations himself. I went to him for a skin rash, and he discovered parts of my device embedded under my hide. He caught on pretty fast. He learned that my projected personality was an artificial one. He learned a few other things as soon as he started thinking. Now he says he's going to kill me. I've been fooling around with his wife pretty seriously, you know."

"You and Maisie? Oh, that is the joke of all jokes. For a moment I thought that you were serious."

"I am. Madigan, if a man says he will kill me, then that man is already dead. If I have any talent at all it is for anticipating an event. The murder of Dctor Forester in this present month will be a curious one, and it will reach to the level of your own office; but you will not be there for it. It will be a crude one. I always kill crudely. James, I talk and talk, but you have no ears for what I say."

"No ears for your humor, Castlereagh? I haven't enjoyed anything so much in months. I am rejuvenated and recharged. Thomas, come to the high point of it! What is your 'Wonderful Invention'?"

"Wait, James, I must make a phone call. And then I must mix for you a special brandy." And Thomas Castlereagh went to do so. He returned after a short interval. He gave Madigan the brandy.

"And what did you add to my brandy to make it special, Thomas?" Madigan asked.

"Oh, the oldest venom of all, *conium maculatum*. It goes well with all wines and brandies. Strikes direct to the heart. Taste it and thank me for it."

"I taste it. I thank you for it," said Madigan.

"Thank me that I have spared you the burnt almond taste, at least. I hate such clichés in poisonings. Ah, the marvelous invention? It is simply the Aura Machine. I was fooling around with electronics which I luckily misunderstood. And I was studying bodily emanations and auras as the expression of personality. I stumbled on a way of modifying my own aura.

"I found that the aura, and its great effect upon the ambient, were really very simple things that might be simply reproduced. Those who speak of personal magnetism are correct. There *is* a strong magnetic element; also a strong element of the electrical corona effect; and there is another emanation that works on the sublimal sense of smell. Quite simply, I could make my own aura! I could make it to project any personality and appearance that I wished for myself... I made it to project the personality and appearance of Respectability, Distinction, and Utter Rectitude. I fabricated such an artificial personality for

myself that nobody, under any conditions but the most fantastic, would ever be able to believe any evil of me.

"Could such a simple thing work, James? It could. A duck-call is a simple device, and a duck is a complex one. Yet a duck will be fooled by a duck-call sounded by a man. A duck will even come to the artificial call in preference to the real, if the artificial is made with sufficient care. I employed all the art I was capable of in making my own device; and mostly it has sufficed.

"It didn't take much: a subcutaneous device which I inserted myself; a selenium plate set into my head by a quack butcher; an apparatus embedded in my throat to give my voice what I wanted; a power pack; a harmonic booster. I tried it on my lowest day, as I have told you, and it worked. "At first I was a little afraid of overdoing it. Then I discovered that there is no way of overdoing the respectability bit. People saw my face, not as it was, but as a respectable one. I became the man who could do no wrong. It was a grand trick, and I worked it down to the nub."

"Thomas, you slay me!"

"True. You finally understand. No, you do not. We both forget that I have no humor. Madigan, my device was so good that it could even fool an ordinary camera. However, I devised a camera with an astatic filter that cuts the emanating aura. It's good for a man to remember sometimes what he really looks like. I still have the face of a fox-faced sneak."

Madigan's chuckle had become like an earth-wave. "It's like something out of those odd little magazines with the surrealist covers, Thomas. Have you insured that your—ah—marvelous invention will not die with you?"

"Sure. I've willed the secret to a small group of cutthroats sometimes in my employ. Their looks are against them. They remind me of me. They need it. And when I am gone, they will carry on the evil work that is so close to my heart."

"What a wonderful man you are," said James Madigan. "From what deep well do you draw your flowing humor? Thomas, I feel giddy! I'm suddenly ill. Call my man for me. I'll not be able to get home alone."

"I did call your man, James just before I poisoned you. I told him that you were dying. He'll be here shortly. I had to tell my story to someone, and I could not let that someone live if he believed it. And after all, who will suspect me of poisoning you, just because we were drinking together with no one else present when you were given the needled brandy? My thing will hold. It will be another of those most baffling crimes ever."

"Ah, your wonderful humor, Thomas! But I am quite sick."

"Dying, I tell you. Dammit, man, can't you get it through your head that you're dying before you die? *I want you to believe me!* It's less fun when you don't believe me. James, I kill you! Act like a man being killed!"

"You are such a wonderful man, Castlereagh. If I am somehow called away, and it seems that I am, I'll miss you woefully."

"Believe me that I kill you, Madigan! It's no fun if you don't believe."

But James Madigan died with a blissful smile, happy in the presence of his golden-hearted friend. It was enough in life to have known him.

"I had better take the other one tonight also, and have it done," Thomas told himself. The fox-face flickered there for a brief instant, as it sometimes did when he was alone. "And then I'll turn it up as far as it will go, and damn the headaches. This one will take everything I've got."

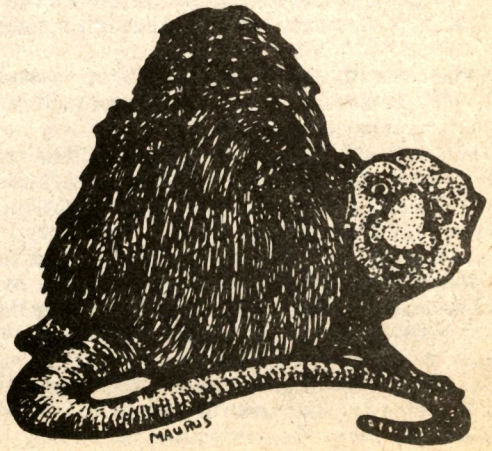
These were two of the most mysterious murders ever. The poisoning of Madigan was clearly murder; and the bloody bludgeoning of Doctor Forester could have been nothing else. And yet they seemed impossible of solution. There was no clue. No nothing.

The drink of Madigan had been poisoned, that of Castlereagh had not been. And yet they had been together for the long evening, and no one had intruded. And the affair of Doctor Forester was truly weird. Thomas Castlereagh, taken by a strong premonition, had gone to the home of his close friend the doctor and been admitted. Something happened then, a thing so shocking that Castlereagh does not retain the memory of it. From his attempt to intervene, apparently, he was covered with the doctor's death blood, and he held the death weapon in his own august hands. Whatever fell intruder did the thing remains a mystery.

These foul murders cry to Heaven for vengeance, but we of Earth are baffled when we try to answer that cry. All is riddle.

A certain commentator bests encapsuled the feelings of all of us:

"The sympathy of the nation and the whole world goes out to Thomas Castlereagh. So great and good a man, and he has suffered such sorrows in the past! And now to be deprived of his two closest friends in a single night! The heart groans."



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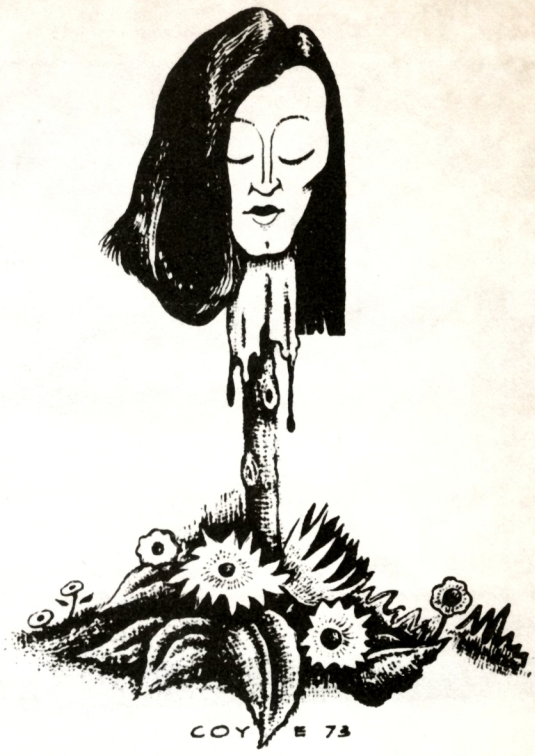

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Here kitty, kitty...

PURR

by Len Wilburn

Illustration by Jeff Jones

THE ROOM, SMALL AND DRAB. Unwarm in winter, stifling in summer, unfriendly and depressing at the best of times. The room, sparsely furnished. There was a chair, a rickety refuge from some tenement kitchen, in need of repainting like the room itself. Near the small window, a chest of drawers filled with his few cheap belongings, mostly clothes in need of repair and a few books dogeared with rereading. There was a small table on which sat a lamp. There was a small bed that in the daytime, with its lone blanket pulled over it and its pillow shoved aside, served as a sort of couch. On the bed a cat lay, purring softly.

It was a gray cat, streaked over with black soot-like markings. Somehow he always found something to feed the cat yet it was lean and gaunt. There were times when he realized it was foolish to own a cat when there was such a problem in merely keeping himself fed but the cat was a comfort to him at times like now when it would sit proudly, issuing forth its regally contented purrs. Comfort. Comfort and luxury, at times his only luxury. But not alawys.

In the cup in his hands, in the tea that was in the cup, his other luxury. He swirled the cup and watched the dissolving powder move within the tea. In a place like this you need all the comfort you can get. He had got his comfort and now it was dissolving in a cup of tea.

When it was dissolved, he drank the tea.

Drank and waited.

He waited and the cat waited with him, purring on the bed that was pretending to be a sofa. How much time passed, he could not say. He never knew, he never measured.

It passed and a better time came.

And the better time brought with it another outlook.

And another room.

This room brightened. Colors flowed across the walls and down them like cascading water. A smile touched his lips and wonder filled his eyes as he turned in the rickety chair to look around. How strange it was, how grand—and always different. Never the same.

The colors. A collage of colors, translucent and vivid,

not like colors thickly painted on but like colors that stain church window glass—colors in a television image—colors through which light passed, giving fire.

There was no thought of the room's drabness now, no depression. Only joy. No repainting of the room could equal this.

Never.

The drab musty smell of his room was gone away and exotic perfumes touched his nostrils, the scent of flowers from bloom and each was pouring forth its scent and its color and its sound.

For there was a sound. He could hear it plainly. But he could not tell himself what it was; he did not know.

He fell from the chair and touched the floor and the splintery wood was soft, yielding lawn.

He looked at the table with its battered lamp and saw a fountain spurting golden water to the air.

He laughed and the sound of his own rasping voice was music.

He rolled and sat up and looked around at the universe he was in. At the colors, the brilliant cascade of church-window colors. He felt the soft comfort of the floor beneath him; smelled the perfume that weighted the air.

And heard the sound——

What was that sound? What the hell was it?

He got to his feet and looked around. The room was aflame with wonders. The colors falling against the walls, the fountain of gold. On a hillock of bright flowers, reclined the cat.

Of course: that was it. The cat.

He sat down. He laughed a chorus of soft music into the air and heard the notes fall and break upon the soft floor. Of course. The cat.

As he watched the cat woke up. It stretched itself and came to a sitting position. Still purring, it eyed the man.

"Cat," he said. "Old cat. You're the same cat. The very same, why don't you change?"

The cat yawned and the man found that funny, very funny. Again music poured from him and fell, to break fragilely against the ground.

"The very, very same," he said again.

Perhaps the cat took that as a cue.

It rose and stood, eying the man. And it changed.

It seemed to grow. The man watched, fascinated as the cat became larger. He listened as the volume of the purring increased. It was almost like thunder when the cat leaped down from the couch and started toward him. He laughed with delight...

They found him the next day. They never found what killed him.

It was strange and never satisfactorily explained. A man in a locked room, clawed to ribbons by some animal. All the police could say was that the animal had to be much larger than the cat they found seated on the small cot, purring.

****

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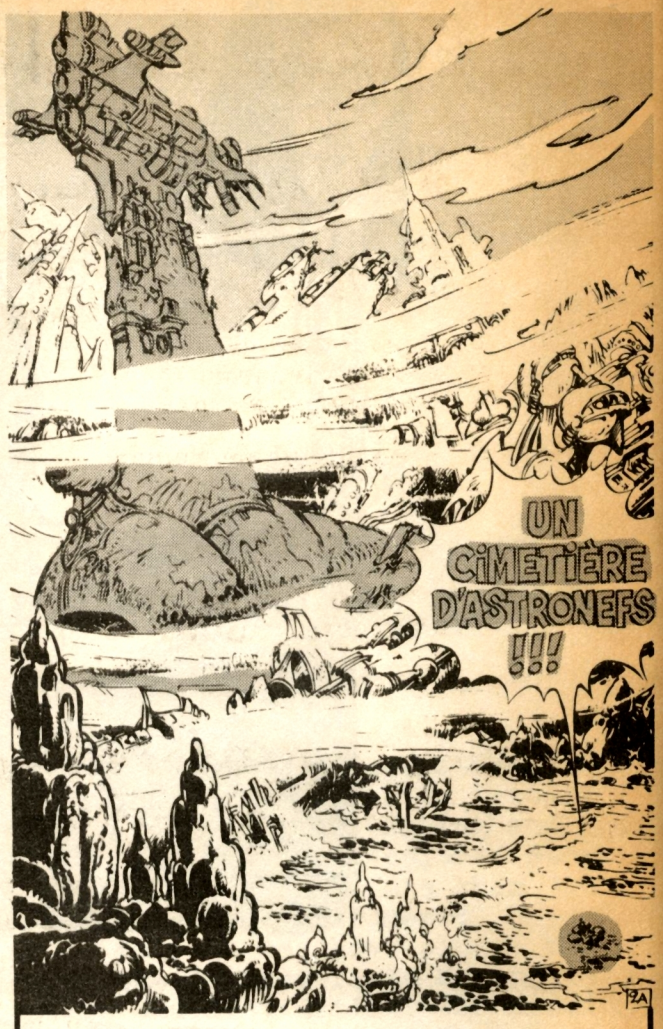

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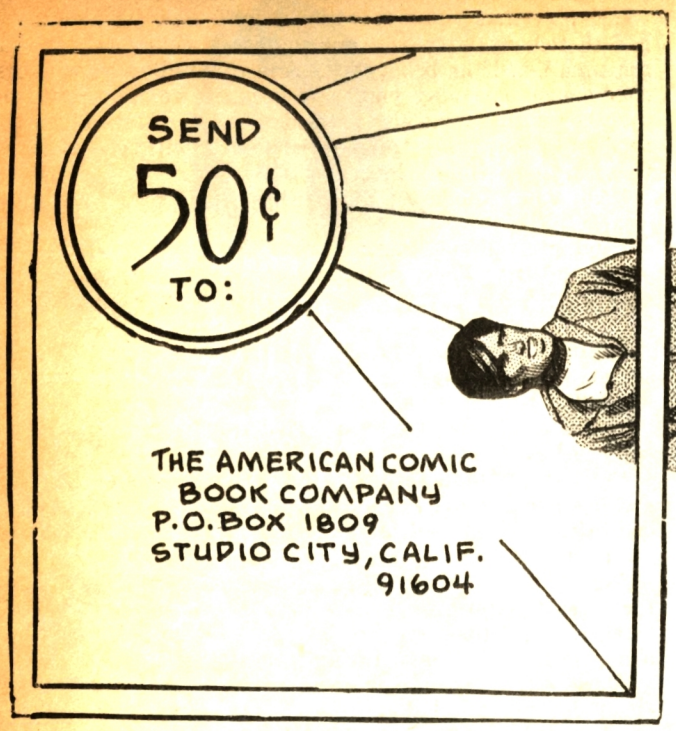

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RESTLESS WATERS

BY ROBERT E. HOWARD

Illustration by D. Bruce Berry

AS IF IT WERE YESTERDAY, I remember that terrible night in the Silver Slipper, in the late fall of 1845. Outside, the wind roared in an icy gale and the sleet drove with it, till it rattled against the windows like the knuckle bones of a skeleton. As we sat about the tavern fire, we could hear, booming above the wind and the sleet, the thunder of the white surges that beat frenziedly against the stark New England coast. The ships in the harbor of the little seaport town lay double-anchored, and the captains sought the warmth and companionship to be found in the wharf-side taverns.

There in the Silver Slipper that night were four men and I, the tap boy. There was Ezra Harper, the host; John Gower, captain of the *Sea-Woman;* Jonas Hopkins a lawyer out of Salem; and Captain Starkey of *The Vulture.* These four men sat about the heavy oaken table in front of the great fire which roared in the fireplace, and I scurried about the tavern attending to their wants, filling mugs, and heating spiced drinks.

Captain Starkey sat with his back to the fire facing a window whereon sleet beat and rattled. Ezra Harper sat at his right, at the end of the table, Captain Gower sat at the other end, and the lawyer, Jonas Hopkins, sat directly opposite Starkey, with his back to the window and facing the fire.

"More brandy!" Starkey roared, hammering the table with his great knotty fist. He was a rough giant of a man of middle life, with a short thick black beard and eyes that gleamed from beneath heavy black brows.

"A cold night for them that sail the sea," said Ezra Harper.

"A colder night for the men that sleep below the sea," said John Gower moodily. He was a tall rangy man, dark and saturnine of countenance, a strange wayward man of whom dark tales were told.

Starkey laughed savagely. "If you're thinking of Tom Siler, you'd best save your sympathy. Earth is the gainer for his going, and the sea is no better for it. A vile, murdering mutineer!" He roared the last in a sudden fury and smote the table resoundingly, glaring about as if to challenge any to dispute him.

A mocking smile flitted across the sinister countenance of John Gower, and Jonas Hopkins leaned forward, his keen eyes boring into Starkey's. Like all of us, he knew the story of Tom Siler, as told by Captain Starkey: how Siler, first mate aboard *The Vulture,* had sought to incite the crew to mutiny and piracy, had been tricked by Starkey and hanged at sea. Those were hard days and the captain's word was law at sea.

"Strange," said Jonas Hopkins, with his thin colorless face thrust at Captain Starkey. "Strange that Tom Siler should turn out bad, and him such a law abiding lad before this."

Starkey merely grunted disdainfully and emptied his cup. He was already drunk.

"When does your niece, Betty, marry Joseph Harmer, captain?" asked Ezra Harper, seeking to change the subject into safer channels. Jonas Hopkins sank back in his seat and turned his attention to his rum.

"Tomorrow," snarled Starkey.

Gower laughed shortly. "Is it a wife or daughter Joe Harmer wants that he's marrying a girl so much younger than he?"

"John Gower, you'll oblige me by attending to your own cursed business!" roared Starkey. "The hussy should be overjoyed to be marrying a man like Harmer, who is one of the wealthiest ship owners in New England."

"But Betty doesn't think so, does she?" persisted John Gower, as if intent on stirring up trouble. "She's still sorrowing for Dick Hansen, isn't she?"

Captain Starkey's hairy hands clenched into fists and he glared at Gower as if this questioning of his private affairs was too much. Then he gulped down his rum and slammed the mug down on the board.

"There's no accounting for the whims of a girl," he said moodily. "If she wants to waste her life lamenting a wastrel who ran away and got himself drowned, that's her business. But it's my affair to see she marries properly."

"And how much is Joe Harmer paying you, Starkey?" asked John Gower bluntly.

This passed the point of civility and discretion. Starkey's huge body heaved up out of his seat and, with a bellow, he leaned across the table, eyes red with drink and fury, and his iron fist lifted. Gower did not move, but sat smiling up at him, slit-eyed and dangerous.

"Sit down, Starkey!" Ezra Harper interposed. "John, the devil's in you tonight. Why can't we all take our liquor together friendly-like——"

This philosophical discourse was cut short abruptly. The heavy door was suddenly thrown open; a rush of wind made the candle dance and flicker wildly and in the swirl of sleet that burst in, we saw a girl standing. I sprang forward and shut the door behind her.

"Betty!"

The girl was slim, almost frail. Her large dark eyes stared wildly, and her pretty pale face was streaked with tears. Her hair fell loose about her slender shoulders and her garments were soaked and battered by the gale through which she had battled her way.

"Betty!" roared Captain Starkey. "I thought you were at home in bed! What are you doing here—and on a night like this?"

"Oh, uncle!" she cried, holding her arms out to him blindly, oblivious to the rest of us. "I came to tell you again! I can't marry Joseph Harmer tomorrow! I can't! It's Dick Hansen! He's calling to me through the wind and the night and the black waters! Alive or dead, I'm his till I die, and I can't—I can't——"

"Get out!" roared Starkey, stamping and brandishing his arms like a maniac. "Out with you and back to your room! I'll attend to you later! Be silent! You'll marry Joe Harmer tomorrow or I'll beat you to death!"

With a whimper she sank to her knees before him, and with a bellow he raised his huge fist as if to strike her. But with one cat-like movement John Gower was out of his seat and had hurled the enraged captain back upon the table.

"Keep your hands off me, you dammed pirate!" shouted Starkey furiously. Gower grinned bleakly. "That's yet to be proven," said he. "But lay a finger on this child and we'll see how quick a 'damned pirate' can cut the heart out of an honest merchantman who's selling his own blood and kin to a miser."

"Let be, John," Ezra Harper interposed. "Starkey, don't you see the girl's in a fair way to collapse? Here, honey," he bent and lifted her gently, "come with old Ezra. There's a warm fire in an upper room, and my wife shall give you some dry clothes. It's a bitter night for a girl to be out in. You'll stay with us till morning, dearie."

He went up the stair, half carrying the girl; and Starkey, stared after them for a moment; then returned to the table. There was silence awhile, and then Jonas Hopkins, who had not moved out of his seat, said:

"Strange tales making the rounds, Captain Starkey."

"And what might they be?" asked Starkey defiantly.

Jonas Hopkins stuffed his long slim-stemmed pipe with Virginia tobacco before he answered.

"I talked with some of your crew today."

"Huh!" Starkey spat out an oath. "My ship makes port this morning and before night the gossips are at work."

Hopkins beckoned me for a coal for his pipe. I obliged, and he took several long puffs.

"Mayhap they have something to work on this time, Captain Starkey."

"Speak up, man!" said Starkey angrily. "What are you driving at?"

"They say on board *The Vulture* that Tom Siler was never guilty of mutiny. They say that you trumped up the charges and hanged him out of hand in spite of the protests of the crew."

Starkey laughed savagely but hollowly. "And what basis for this wild tale?"

"They say that as he stood on the threshold of Eternity, Tom Siler swore that you were murdering him because he had learned what became of Dick Hansen. But before he could say more the noose shut off his words and his life."

"Dick Hansen!" Starkey's face was pale, but his tone still defiant. "Dick Hansen was last seen on the wharfs of Salem one night over a year ago. What have I to do with him?"

"You wanted Betty to marry Joe Harmer, who was ready to buy her like a slave from you," answered Jonas Hopkins calmly. "This much is known by all."

John Gower nodded agreement.

"She was to marry Dick Hansen, though, and you had him shanghaied on board a British whaler bound on a four year cruise. Then you spread the report that he had been drowned and tried to rush Betty into marrying Harmer against her will, before Hansen could return. When you learned that Siler knew and would tell Betty, you became desperate. I know that you are on the verge of bankruptcy. Your only chance was the money Harmer had promised you. You murdered Tom Siler to still his mouth."

Another silence fell. Outside in the black night, the wind rose to a shriek. Starkey twisted his great fingers together and sat silent and brooding.

"And can you prove all this?" he sneered at last.

"I can prove that you are nearly bankrupt and that Harmer promised you money; I can prove that you had Hansen done away with."

"But you can't prove that Siler was not contemplating mutiny," shouted Starkey. "And how can you prove Hansen was shanghaied?"

"This morning I received a letter from my agent who had just arrived in Boston," said Hopkins. "He had seen Hanson in an Asiatic seaport. The young man said that he intended deserting ship at the first opportunity and returning to America. He asked that Betty be acquainted with the fact that he was alive and still loved her."

Starkey rested his elbows on the table and sank his chin on his fists, like a man who sees his castles falling about him and red ruin facing him. Then he shook his mighty shoulders

and laughed savagely. He drained his cup and reeled to his feet, bellowng with sudden laughter.

"I've still a card or two in my hand!" he shouted. "Tom Siler's in Hell with a noose around his neck, and Dick Hansen's across the world! The girl's my ward and a minor, and she'll marry whoever I say. You can't prove what you say about Siler. My word's law on the high seas, and you can't call me to account for anything I do aboard my own ship. As for Dick Hansen—my niece will be safely married to Joe Harmer long before that young fool gets back from his cruise. Go tell her if you like. Go tell her Dick Hansen still lives!"

"That's what I intend to do," said Jonas Hopkins, rising. "And should have done so before now, had I not wished to face you with the facts first."

"Great good it will do!" yelled Starkey like a wild man. He seemed like some savage beast at bay, defying us all. His eyes flamed terribly from under his craggy brows, and his fingers were crooked like talons. He snatched a goblet of liquor from the table and waved it.

"Aye, go tell her! She'll marry Harmer, or I'll kill her. Contrive and plot, you yellow-spined swine, no living man can balk me now, and no living man can save her from being the wife of Joe Harmer!

"Here's a toast, you cringing cowards! I'll drink to Tom Siler, sleeping in the cold white sea with the noose about his traitor's neck! Here's to my mate, Tom Siler. a-spinning and a-whirling from the cross-trees——"

This was insanity; I shrank back from the blast of the man's hideous triumph, and even from John Gower's face the smile was missing.

"To Tom Siler!" The winds answered the roar. The sleet drummed with frantic fingers on the window as if the black night itself sought entrance. I shrank near to the fire behind Captain Starkey's back, yet an unearthly coldness stole over me, as if through a suddenly opened door, a wind from some other sphere had breathed upon me.

"To Tom Siler—" Captain Starkey's arm went up with the goblet, his eyes, following the motion, rested on the window that separated us from the outer darkness. He froze, eyes starting from his head. The goblet dropped unheeded from his hand, and with one deathly scream he pitched forward across the table—*dead!*

What killed him? Too much drink and the fire in his evil brain, they said. Yet—Jonas Hopkins had turned toward the stairs and John Gower's eyes were fixed on Starkey's face. Only I looked toward the window and saw there what blasted Captain Starkey's brain and blew out his life as a witch blows out a candle. And the sight has haunted me to this day and will haunt me to the day of my death.

The window was rimed with frost and the candles gleamed illusively against it, but for a moment I saw it clearly; a shadowy, nebulous shape that was like the reflection of a man's form in restless water. *And the face was that of Tom Siler, and about the neck was a shadowy noose!*

FROM THE COVEN—con't from page 3

In any round robin, the next to last chapter requires the skills of an inordinately accomplished writer because the plotlines must be gathered up and made ready for the ending; if this isn't done the writer who gets stuck with the last chapter will find himself too busy explaining things to tell an entertaining finale. We chose Miriam Allen de Ford for this because there is no better craftsman in our field. Miriam's career is long and distinguished, featuring a number of short stories in the science fiction, fantasy and crime fields, some non-fiction (including some fascinating articles about Charles Fort), and the editing of anthologies.

To provide us with a smash ending we went to Ross Rocklynne, who in the pulp days was known as one of the most reliable writers of super science type stories in the field, an idea man from the pre-Campbell days of *Astounding*. Rocklynne was also one of the writers who provided *Planet Stories* with a type of fiction they generally labeled 'off-trail'—the other writers of off-trail stories being, usually, Ray Bradbury and Leigh Brackett. Ross has returned to the field in the past few years after a long absence and distinguished himself all over again with stories that show none of the dated quality of a good many of the writers who started well after him. His recent paperback, *Daughter of Darkness* is highly recommended. *Gerald Page*

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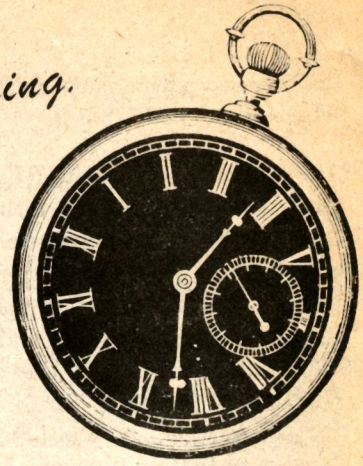

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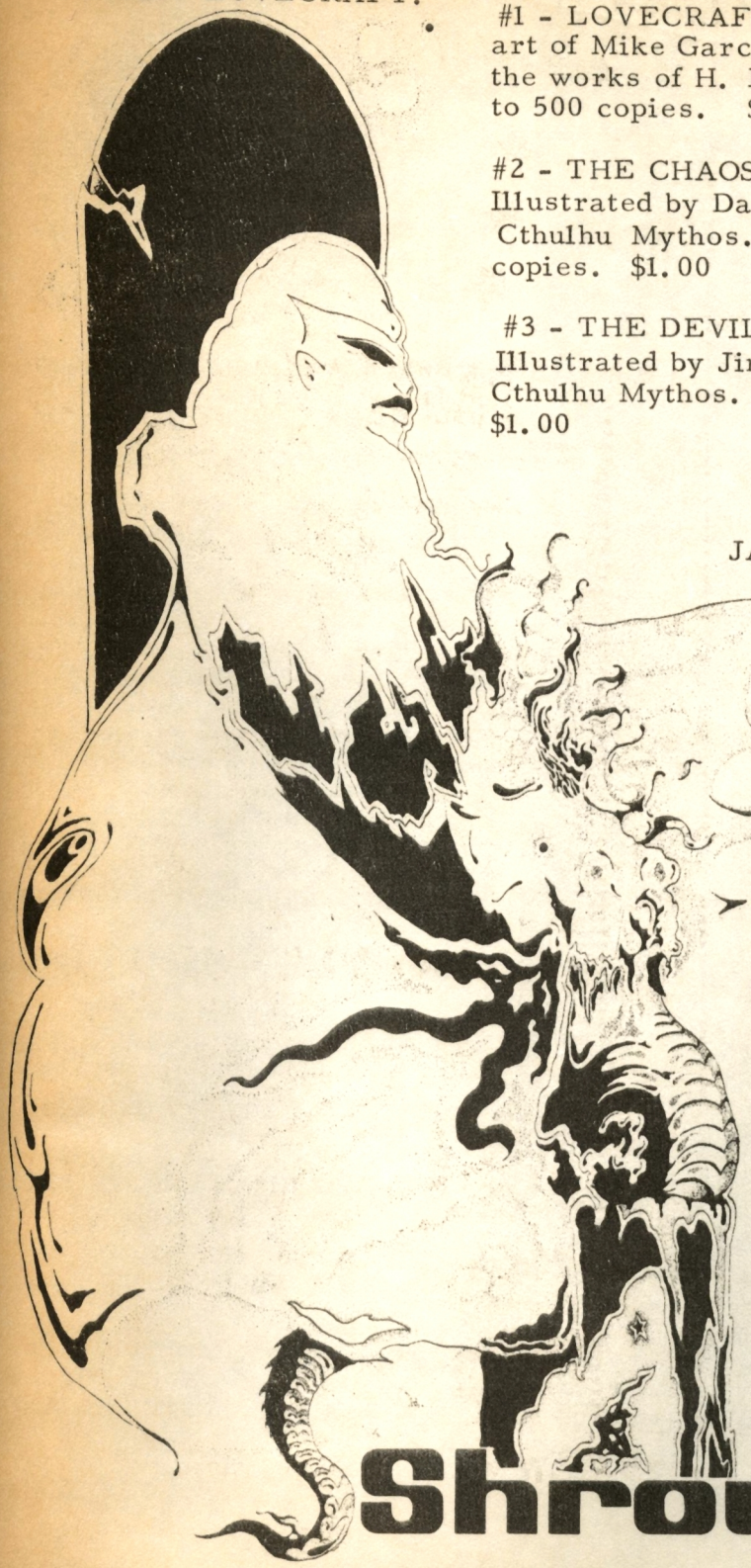

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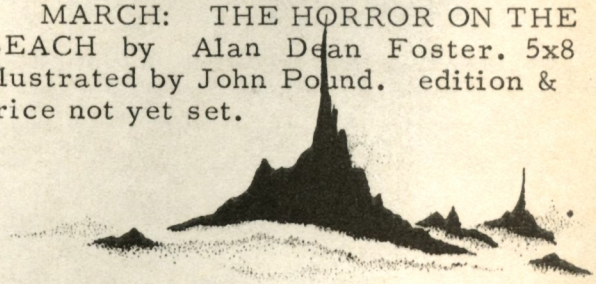

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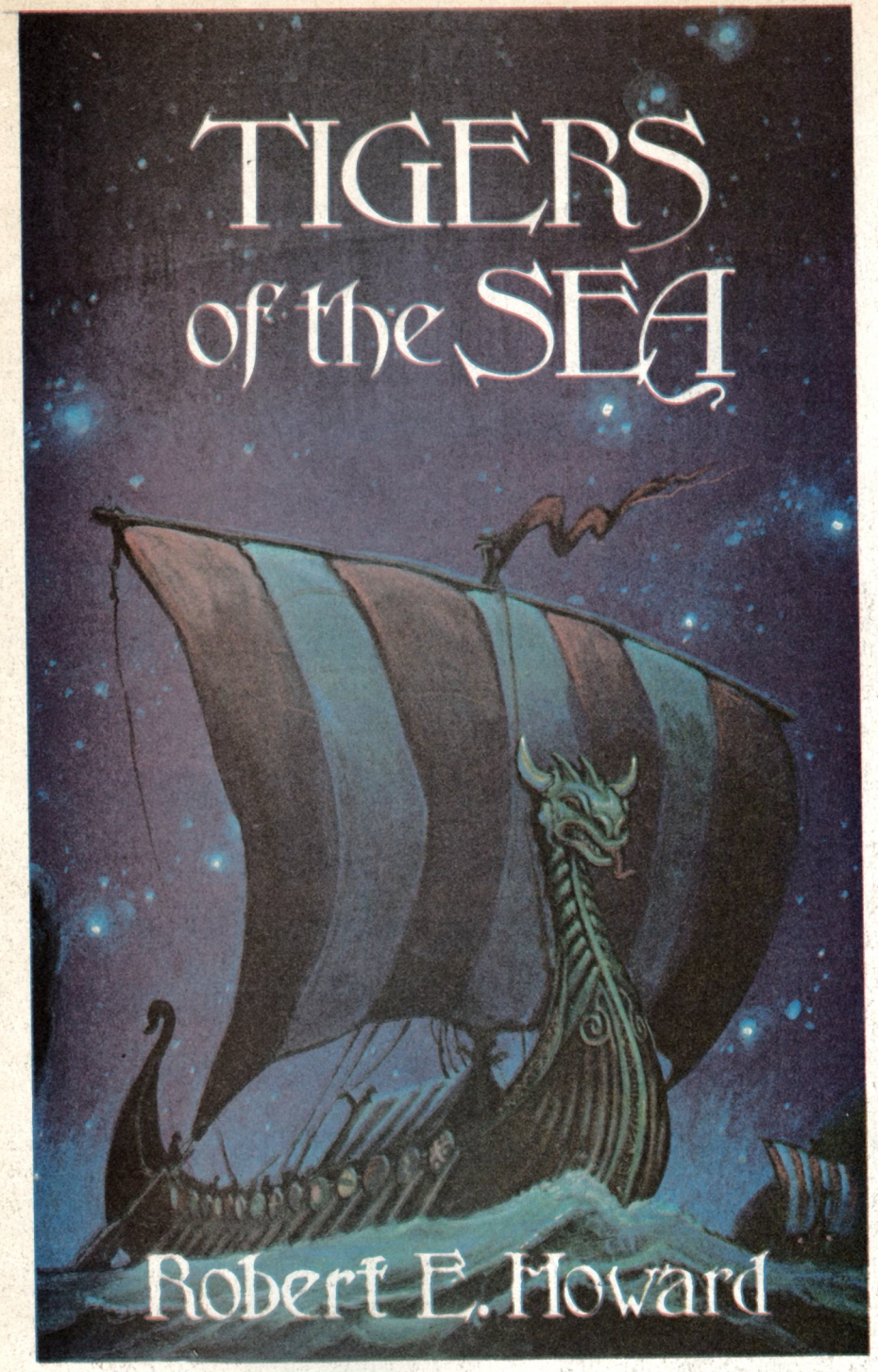

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The People of the Black Circle

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There is little that needs to be said about the Robert E. Howard tale, THE PEOPLE OF THE BLACK CIRCLE. It's a Conan story, of course, and as such you may well have read it in some appearance or other over the years. What is different about it is its presentation, for it is a book designed for booklovers by booklovers. And all the best ingredients have gone into what we think is just an incredible book.

THE PEOPLE OF THE BLACK CIRCLE is magnificently illustrated by the young artist, David Ireland, who is certain to gain a substantial reputation as a result of his efforts. His work for the book includes: 4 full-color tip-in illustrations, one of which is reproduced here; 8 full-page line drawings; a double-spread illustrated title page covering facing pages; and 10 circular illustrations preceding each chapter.

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