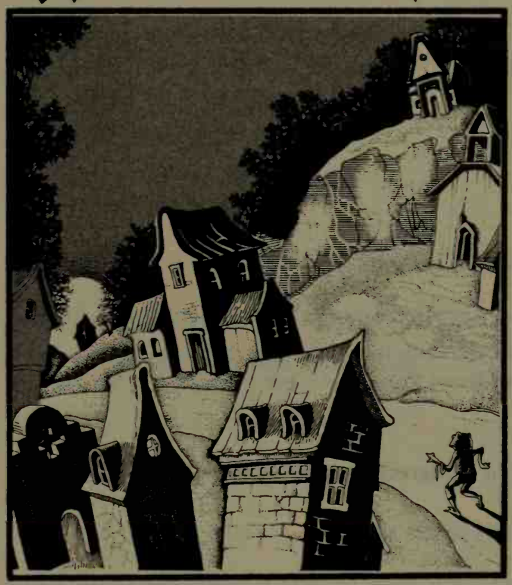
NEW TALES of the CTHULHU MYTHOS



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to the memory of August Derleth
whose idea this book was

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INTRODUCTION

What was the Cthulhu Mythos, to begin with?

The question needs to be asked for clarity's sake, for the Mythos has been so elaborated, overpopulated, reworked in attempts to give it unity, explained and contradictorily reexplained, that it is now impossible to distinguish a total structure—by no means wholly a bad situation, as I hope to show. So what was the Mythos in the first place?

August Derleth has pointed out that it was not a planned development on Lovecraft's part; indeed, Lovecraft never even gave it a name. Rather it was a step in Lovecraft's search for the perfect form for the weird tale. By 1923, in "The Rats in the Walls," Lovecraft had refined his method: the story's movement has far less to do with plot than with a gradual accumulation of telling detail, presented with relentless logic; the story moves single-mindedly toward terror. Yet in "The Shunned House" the search continues; the detective-story structure which Lin Carter has analyzed, and which has its roots in Machen's "Great God Pan," is yet more skillfully used, but Lovecraft is still seeking a background which will make his horrors both plausible and suggestive. He found it not in

occultism, which he thought banal, but in a subtle, often vague, blend of science fiction and the supernatural.

In "The Shunned House" it is the weakest element in a powerful story: the explanation of the haunting, with its "certain kinetic patterns" continuing to function in "some multiple-dimensioned space along the original lines of force," seems a muddle. But only three years later the same method, perfected, could produce a masterpiece in "The Colour Out of Space": the most subtle Mythos story—one that never mentions a Mythos name, which has led some commentators to exclude it from the listing—and, in my opinion, the finest. It is certainly the classic solution to Lovecraft's problem of combining the tale of terror with science fiction.

Lovecraft required a background against which to present his elements of terror, an accumulation of detail which needed only to sound convincing, and he found it in science. His Mythos was never coherent, nor did it need to be. Its function was to suggest something larger and more terrible than was ever stated.

In recent years the Mythos at times has seemed in danger of becoming conventionalized. This is ironic, since Lovecraft's intention and achievement was precisely to avoid the predictability and resultant lack of terror which beset the conventional macabre fiction of his day. I must own up to my share of the responsibility for this state of things; like many a beginner in this field, I found it easy to imitate Lovecraft's more obvious stylistic mannerisms and some of his ideas. But alas, few of Lovecraft's imitators—particularly in the fanzines—are influenced by his best qualities, his skill in organizing his material and in atmospheric preparation, or his originality. And it is all too easy to convince oneself that a tale that reads vaguely like Lovecraft is an achievement. In today's overcrowded Mythos it is nothing of the sort.

For this and other reasons, in this anthology I have tended to favor less familiar treatments or uses of the Mythos. There are a couple of traditional stories, one a completion of a Lovecraft fragment, but in the main these tales are contemporary. They contain few erudite occultists, decaying towns, or stylistic pastiches. They are themselves: new tales.

One—perhaps the only—merit of the overcrowding of the Mythos is that it is now impossible to devise a coherent pattern

linking all its aspects, even if anyone were foolish enough to try. This leaves writers free once more to return to the first principles of the Mythos—to give glimpses of something larger than they show, just as Lovecraft did. Indeed, one of our tales hints at the ultimate event of the Mythos without ever referring to the traditional names. I hope that readers will find in this book some of the sense of terror and awe that Lovecraft communicated so well.

RAMSEY CAMPBELL

NEW TALES OF THE CTHULHU MYTHOS

Crouch End

Stephen King

By the time the woman had finally gone, it was nearly two-thirty in the morning. Outside the Crouch End police station, Tottenham Lane was a small dead river. London was asleep—but of course, London never sleeps deeply, and its dreams are uneasy.

PC Vetter closed his notebook, which he'd almost filled as the American woman's strange frenzied story had poured out. He looked at the typewriter and the stack of blank forms on the shelf beside it.

"This one'll look odd come the morning light," PC Vetter said.

PC Farnham was drinking a Coke. He didn't speak for a long time. "She was an American woman," he said finally, as if that might explain the story she had told.

"It'll go in the back file," Vetter agreed, and looked around for a cigarette. "But I wonder . . ."

Farnham laughed. "You don't mean you believe any part of it?"

"Didn't say that, did I? No. But you're new here."

PC Farnham sat a little straighter. He was twenty-seven, and it was hardly his fault that he had been posted here from Muswell Hill to the north, or that Vetter, who was nearly twice his age, had

spent his entire uneventful career in the quiet London backwater of Crouch End.

"Perhaps so, sir," he said, "but, respectfully, I still think I know a piece of whole cloth when I see one . . . or hear one."

"Give us a fag, Farnham," Vetter said, looking a little amused. "There's a good boy." He lit it with a wooden match from a bright red railway box, shook it out, and tossed the match stub into Farnham's ashtray. He peered at Farnham through a haze of drifting smoke. His face was deeply lined and his nose was a map of broken veins—he liked his six cans of Harp a night, did PC Vetter.

"You think Crouch End's a very quiet place, don't you?"

Farnham shrugged. He thought Crouch End was suburban and, tell the truth, dull as dishwater. "Quiet, yes."

"And you're right. It is. Goes to sleep by eleven, most nights. But I've seen a lot of strange things in Crouch End. If you're here half as long as I've been, you'll see your share, too. There are more strange things happen right here in this quiet six or eight blocks than anywhere else in London, I'll take my oath. And that's saying a lot. It scares me. So I have my lager, and then I'm not so scared. You look at Sergeant Gordon sometime, Farnham, and ask yourself why his hair is dead white at forty. Or I'd say take a look at Petty, but you can't very well, can you? Petty committed suicide in the summer of 1976. Our hot summer. It was . . ." Vetter seemed to consider his words. "It was quite bad that summer. Quite bad. There were a lot of us who were afraid . . . they might break through."

"Who might break through what?" Farnham asked. He felt a contemptuous smile turning up the corners of his mouth, knew it was far from politic, but was unable to stop it. In his way, Vetter was raving as badly as the American woman had. He had always been a bit queer. The booze, probably. Then he saw Vetter was smiling right back at him.

"You think I'm dotty," he said.

"Not at all," Farnham protested, groaning inwardly.

"You're a good boy," Vetter said. "Won't be riding a desk here in the station when you're my age. Not if you stick on the force. D'you plan to stick it, Farnham?"

"Yes," Farnham said firmly. It was true. He meant to stick it even though Sheila wanted him off the police force and somewhere she could count on him. The Ford assembly line, perhaps. The thought of it curdled his stomach.

"I thought you did," Vetter said, crushing his smoke. "Gets in your blood, doesn't it? And you could go far. And it'll not be Crouch End you finish up in, either. Still, you don't know everything. Crouch End is . . . strange. You ought to look in the back file sometime, Farnham. Oh, a lot of it's the usual . . . girls and boys run away from home to be hippies . . . punks, they call themselves now . . . men who went out for a pack of fags and just never came back . . . and when you clap an eye to their wives you understand why . . . unsolved arsons . . . purse-snatching . . . all of that. But in between, there's enough stories to curdle your blood. And some to sick your stomach."

"Is that true?" Farnham demanded suddenly.

Vetter didn't seem offended by the question. He just nodded. "Stories very much like the one that poor American girl told us. She'll not see her husband no more, that girl won't." He looked at Farnham and shrugged. "Believe me, believe me not. It's all one, isn't it? The file's there. We call it the open file because it's more polite than the back file or the unsolved file. Study it up, Farnham. Study it up."

Farnham said nothing, but he intended to study it up. The idea that there might be a whole series of stories such as the one the American woman had told was . . . was disturbing.

"Sometimes," Vetter said, stealing another of Farnham's Silk Cut cigarettes, "I wonder about Dimensions. Science fiction writers are always going on about Dimensions, aren't they? Ever read science fiction, Farnham?"

"No," Farnham said. He had decided this was some sort of elaborate leg-pull.

"Ever read Lovecraft?"

"Never heard of him."

"Well, this fellow Lovecraft was always writing about Dimensions," Vetter said, producing his box of railway matches. "Dimensions close to ours. Full of these immortal monsters that

would drive a man mad at one look. Frightful rubbish, what? Except, whenever one of these people straggles in, I think it all might just be true. I say to myself then—when it's quiet and late at night, like it is now—that our whole world, everything we think of as nice and normal and sane, is like a big leather ball filled with air. Only in some places, the leather's scuffed almost down to nothing. Places where . . . where the barriers are thinner. Do you get me?"

"Yes," Farnham said. He did not get PC Vetter at all.

"And then I think, Crouch End's one of those thin places. Highgate's mostly all right, it's just as thick as you'd want between us and the Dimensions in Muswell Hill and Highgate, but now you take Archway and Finsbury Park. They border on Crouch End, too. I've got friends in both places, and they know of my . . . my interest in certain things that don't seem to be any way rational. Certain things related, we'll say, by people with nothing to gain by making up a crazy story. Did you ask yourself, Farnham, why the woman would have told us the things she did if they weren't true?" He struck a match and looked at Farnham over it. "Pretty young woman, twenty-six, two kiddies back at her hotel, husband's a young lawyer doing well in Milwaukee or someplace? What's to gain by coming in here and raving about monsters?"

"I don't know," Farnham said stiffly. "But there may be an ex—"

"So I say to myself," Vetter overrode him, "that if there were such things as 'thin spots,' this one would begin at Archway and Finsbury Park . . . but the real thin place is here at Crouch End. And I say to myself, wouldn't it be a day if whatever was left just . . . rubbed away? Wouldn't it be a day if even half of what that woman told us was true?"

Farnham was silent. He had decided that PC Vetter probably also believed in palmistry and phrenology and the Rosicrucians.

"Read the back file," Vetter said, getting up. There was a crackling sound as he put his hands in the small of his back and stretched. "I'm going out to get some fresh air."

He strolled out. Farnham looked after him with a mixture of amusement and resentment. Vetter was dotty, all right. He was also a bloody fag-mooch. Fags didn't come cheap in this brave new world of socialism and the welfare state. He picked up Vetter's notebook and began leafing through the girl's story again.

And, yes, he would go through the back file.

He would do it for laughs.

The girl—the young woman—had burst into the station at quarter past ten the previous evening, her hair in damp strings around her face, her eyes bulging. She was dragging her purse by the strap.

"Lonnie," she said. "Oh, my God, you've got to find Lonnie."

"Well, we'll do our best, won't we?" Vetter said. "But you've got to tell us who Lonnie is."

"He's dead," the young woman said. "I know he is." She began to cry. Then she began to laugh—to cackle, really. She dropped her purse in front of her. She was hysterical.

The station was fairly deserted at that hour on a weeknight. Sergeant Raymond was listening to a Pakistani woman tell, with almost unearthly calm, how her purse had been nicked on Hillfield Avenue. He half rose, and PC Farnham came in from the anteroom, where he had been taking down old posters (HAVE YOU ROOM IN YOUR HEART FOR AN UNWANTED CHILD?) and putting up new ones (SIX RULES FOR SAFE NIGHT-CYCLING).

Vetter nodded for Farnham and waved Sergeant Raymond back. Raymond, who liked to break pickpockets' fingers for them, was not the man for a hysterical woman.

"Lonnie!" she shrieked. "Oh, my God, Lonnie, they've got him—!"

The Pakistani woman turned the steady brown moon of her face toward the young American woman, studied her for a moment, and then turned back to Sergeant Raymond, her calm unbroken. Farnham came forward.

"Miss—" PC Farnham began.

"What's going *on* out there?" she whispered. Her breath was coming in quick pants. Farnham noticed there was a slight scratch on her left cheek. She was a pretty thing with auburn hair. Her clothes were moderately expensive. The heel had come off one of her shoes.

"What's going *on* out there?" she repeated, and then she said it for the first time: "Monsters—"

The Pakistani woman looked over again . . . and smiled. Her teeth were rotten. The smile was gone like a conjurer's trick, and

she was looking at the lost/stolen property form Raymond had handed her.

"Get the lady a cup of coffee and bring it down to room three," Vetter said. "Could you do with a cup of coffee, mum?"

"Lonnie," she whispered. "I know he's dead."

"Now, you just come with old Ted Vetter and we'll see what this is about," he said, and helped her to her feet. She was still talking in a low moaning voice when he led her away, one arm around her. She was rocking unsteadily because of the broken shoe.

Farnham got the coffee and brought it into room three, a plain white cubicle furnished with a scarred table, four chairs, and a water cooler in the corner. He put the coffee in front of her.

"Here, mum," he said, "this'll do you good. I've got sugars if—"

"I can't drink it," she said. "I couldn't—" And then she clutched the porcelain cup—someone's long-forgotten souvenir of Blackpool—in her hands as if for warmth. Her hands were shaking quite badly, and Farnham wanted to tell her to put it down before she slopped the coffee and burned herself.

"I couldn't," she said again, and then drank, still holding the cup two-handed, the way a child will hold his cup of broth. And when she looked at them, it was a child's look—simple, exhausted, appealing . . . and at bay. It was as if whatever had happened had somehow made her roughly young; as if some invisible hand had swooped down from the sky and roughly slapped the last twenty years from her, leaving a child in grown-up American clothes in this small white interrogation room in Crouch End. Yes, it had been like that.

"Lonnie," she said. "The monsters," she said. "Will you help me? Will you please help me? Maybe he isn't dead. Maybe . . . I'm an American citizen!" she cried out suddenly, and then, as if she had said something deeply shameful, she began to sob.

Vetter patted her shoulder. "There, mum. I think we can help find your Lonnie. Your husband, is he?"

Still sobbing, she nodded. "Danny and Norma are back at the hotel . . . with the sitter . . . they'll be sleeping . . . expecting him to kiss them when he comes in . . ."

"Now if you could just relax and tell us what happened—"

"And where it happened," Farnham added. Vetter looked up at him swiftly, frowning.

"But that's just it!" she cried. "I don't know *where* it happened! I'm not even sure what happened, except that it was h-h-hor—"

Vetter had taken out his notebook. "What's your name, mum?"

"My name is Doris Freeman. My husband is Leonard Freeman. We're staying at the Hotel Inter-Continental. We're American citizens." This recital seemed to steady her a little. She sipped her coffee and put the mug down. Farnham saw that the palms of her hands were quite red.

Vetter was writing all of this down in his notebook. Now he looked momentarily at PC Farnham, just an unobtrusive flick of the eyes.

"Are you on holiday?" he asked.

"Yes . . . two weeks here and one week in Spain. We were supposed to have a week in Spain . . . but this isn't helping find Lonnie! Why are you asking me these stupid questions?"

"Just trying to get the background, Mrs. Freeman," Farnham said. Without really thinking about it, both of them had adopted low soothing voices. "Now you go ahead and tell us what happened. Tell it in your own words."

"Why is it so hard to get a taxi in London?" she asked abruptly.

Farnham hardly knew what to say, but Vetter responded as if the question was utterly germane to the discussion.

"Hard to say, mum. The tourists, maybe. And it can be specially hard around five o'clock. That's when they start changing drivers, you know. Day shift goes off, night shift comes on. Why? Did you have a problem getting someone who'd take you from in town out here to Crouch End?"

"Yes," she said, and looked at him gratefully. "We left the hotel at three and came down to Foyle's Bookshop. Is that Cambridge Circus?"

"Near there," Vetter agreed. "Lovely big bookshop, mum, isn't it?"

"We had no trouble getting a cab from the Inter-Continental . . . they were lined up outside. But when we came out of Foyle's, it was like you said. They went by, but their lights on top were always off

and when the first one did stop, when Lonnie said Crouch End, the driver just laughed and shook his head. Said it wasn't his cab."

"Aye, that's right," Farnham said.

"He even refused a pound tip," Doris Freeman said, and a very American perplexity had crept into her tone. "We waited for almost half an hour before we got a driver who said he'd take us out. It was five-thirty by then, or maybe quarter of six. And that was when Lonnie discovered he'd lost the address . . ."

She clutched the mug again.

"Who were you going to see?" Vetter asked.

"A colleague of my husband's. A lawyer named John Squales. My husband had never met him, but their two firms were—" She gestured vaguely.

"Affiliated?"

"Yes, that's right. And over the last four years Lonnie and Mr. Squales have had a lot of correspondence back and forth. And when Mr. Squales found out we were going to be in London on vacation, he invited us to his home for dinner. Lonnie had always written him at his office, of course, but he had Mr. Squales's home address on a slip of paper. After we got in the cab, he discovered he'd lost it. And all he could remember was that it was in Crouch End."

She looked at them.

"Crouch End. That's an ugly name."

Vetter said, "So what did you do then?"

She began to talk. By the time she finished, her first cup of coffee and another one were gone, and PC Vetter had filled up several pages in his notebook with his blocky, sprawling script . . .

Lonnie Freeman was a big man, and hunched forward in the roomy back seat of the black London cab so he could talk to the driver, he looked to her amazingly as he had looked when she had first seen him at a college basketball game in their senior year—sitting on the bench, his knees somewhere up around his ears, his hands on their big wrists dangling between his legs. Only then he had been wearing basketball shorts and a towel around his neck, and now he was in a business suit and tie. He had never gotten in many games, she

remembered fondly, because he just wasn't that good. And he lost addresses.

The cabby listened indulgently to the tale of the lost address after all of Lonnie's pockets had been duly investigated. He was an elderly man impeccably turned out in a grey summer-weight suit, the antithesis of the slouching New York cab driver. Only the checked wool cap on the driver's head clashed, but it was an agreeable clash; it lent him a touch of rakish charm. Outside, the traffic flowed endlessly past on Cambridge Circus; the theater nearby announced that *Jesus Christ Superstar* was entering its eighth year of continuous performances.

"Well, I tell you what, guv," the cabby said. "I'll take you out to Crouch End, but I'm not going to just put yer down there. Because Crouch End's a big place, en't it?"

And Lonnie, who had never been in Crouch End—or out of the United States, for that matter—in his life, nodded sagely.

"Yes, it is," the cabby agreed with himself. "So I take yer there, and we'll stop at a call box, and you check your friend's address, and off we go, right to the door."

"That's wonderful," Doris said, really meaning it. They had been in London six days now, and she could not recall ever having been in a place where the people were more polite, kinder, or . . . or more civilized.

"Thank you," Lonnie said, and sat back. He put his arm around Doris and smiled. "See? No problem."

"No thanks to you," she mock-growled, and threw a light punch at his midsection. There was plenty of room for even a tall man like Lonnie to stretch out; the black London cabs were roomier than the New York Checkers, too.

"Right," the cabby said. "Off we go, then. Heigh-ho for Crouch End."

It was late August, and a steady hot wind rattled the trash across the roads and whipped at the coats and skirts of the men and women going home from work. The sun had settled below the tops of the buildings, but when it shone between them, Doris saw that it was beginning to take on the reddish cast of evening. The cabby hummed. She relaxed with Lonnie's arm around her—she had seen

more of him in the last six days than she had all year, it seemed, and she was very pleased to discover that she liked it. She had never been out of America before, either, and she had to keep reminding herself that she was in England, she was in *London,* thousands should be so lucky.

Very quickly she had lost any sense of direction. Cab rides in London did that to you, she had discovered. The city was a great sprawling warren of Roads and Mews and Hills and Closes (and even Inns), and she couldn't understand how anyone could get around. When she had mentioned it to Lonnie the day before, he had replied that they got around very carefully . . . hadn't she noticed that they all kept the *London Streetfinder* tucked cozily away beneath the dash?

This was the longest cab ride they had taken. The fashionable section of town dropped behind them (in spite of that perverse going-around-in-circles feeling). They passed through an area of monolithic housing developments that might have been utterly deserted for all the signs of life they showed (no, she corrected herself to Vetter and Farnham in the small white room; she had seen one small boy sitting on the curb, striking matches), then an area of small, rather tatty-looking shops and fruit stalls, and then—no wonder driving in London seemed to produce such a disorienting round-and-round feeling—they seemed to have driven smack into the fashionable section again.

"There was even a McDonald's hamburger place," she told Vetter and Farnham, in a tone of voice usually reserved for the Sphinx and the Hanging Gardens.

"Was there?" Vetter replied, being properly amazed and respectful—she had achieved a kind of total recall, and he wanted nothing to break that mood, at least until she had told them everything she could.

The fashionable section with the McDonald's as its centerpiece dropped behind. Now the sun was a solid orange ball sitting above the horizon, washing the streets with a strange clear light that nevertheless made all the pedestrians look as if their faces were aflame.

"It was then that things began to . . . to change," she said. Her voice had dropped a little. Her hands were trembling again.

Vetter leaned forward, intent. "Changed? How? How did things change, Mrs. Freeman?"

They had passed a newsagent's window, she remembered, and the signboard outside had read SIXTY LOST IN UNDERGROUND HORROR.

"Lonnie, look at that!"

"What?" He craned around, but the newsagent's was already behind them.

"It said, 'Sixty Lost in Underground Horror.' Isn't that what they call the subways?"

"Yes," Lonnie said, "the underground or the tubes. Was it a crash?"

"I don't know." She leaned forward. "Driver, do you know what that was about? Was there a subway crash?"

"A collision, mum? Not that I know of."

"Do you have a radio?"

"Not in me cab, mum."

"Lonnie?"

"Hmm?"

But she could see that Lonnie had lost interest. He was going through his pockets again (and because he was wearing his three-piece suit, there were a lot of them to go through), having another hunt for the scrap of paper with John Squales's address written on it.

The message chalked on the board played over and over in her mind. SIXTY KILLED IN TUBE CRASH, it should have read. SIXTY KILLED AS UNDERGROUND TRAINS COLLIDE, it should have read. But . . . SIXTY LOST IN UNDERGROUND HORROR. It made her uneasy. It didn't say "killed," it said "lost" . . . the way sailors were referred to when they drowned at sea.

UNDERGROUND HORROR.

She didn't like it. It made her think of graveyards, sewers, and flabby-pale, noisome things swarming suddenly out of the tubes themselves, wrapping their arms (tentacles, maybe) around the hapless commuters on the platforms, dragging them away to darkness . . .

They turned right. Standing on the corner beside their parked motorcycles were three boys in leathers. They looked up at the cab

and for a moment—the setting sun was almost full in her face from this angle—it seemed that the bikers did not have human heads at all. For that one moment she was nastily sure that the sleek, flat, and sloping heads of rats sat atop those black leather jackets, rats with beady black eyes staring at the cab. Then the light shifted just a tiny bit and she saw of course she had been mistaken; there were only three boys in their late teens there, smoking cigarettes and standing in front of the British version of the American candy store.

"Here we go," Lonnie said, giving up the search and pointing out the window. They were passing a sign which read "Crouch Hill Road." Elderly brick houses like sleepy dowagers had closed in, seeming to look down at the cab from their blank windows. A few kids passed back and forth, riding bikes or trikes. Two others were trying to ride a skateboard with no notable success. Fathers home from work sat together, smoking and talking and watching the children. It all looked reassuringly normal.

The cab drew up in front of a dismal-looking restaurant with a small spotted sign in the corner of the window reading FULLY LICENSED and a much larger one in the center which informed that within one could purchase curries to take away. On the inner ledge there slept a gigantic grey cat. Beside the restaurant was a call box.

"Here you are, guv," the cab driver said. "You find your friend's address and I'll track him down."

"Fair enough," Lonnie said, and got out.

Doris sat in the cab for a moment and then also emerged, feeling like stretching her legs. The hot wind was still blowing. It whipped her skirt around her knees and then plastered an old ice-cream wrapper to her shin. She removed it with a grimace of disgust. When she looked up, she was staring directly through the plate-glass window at the big grey tom. It stared back at her, one-eyed. The rest of its face had been clawed away in some long-ago but gigantic battle, and all that remained was a twisted pinkish mass of scar tissue, one milky cataract, and a few tufts of fur.

It miaowed at her, silently through the glass.

Feeling a surge of disgust, she went to the call box and peered in through one of the dirty panes. Lonnie made a circle at her with his thumb and forefinger and winked. Then he pushed tenpence into

the slot and talked with someone. He laughed—soundlessly through the glass. Like the cat. She looked over, but now the window was empty. In the dimness beyond she could see chairs up on tables and an old man pushing a broom. When she looked back, she saw that Lonnie was jotting something down. He put his pen away, held the paper in his hand—she could see an address was jotted on it—said one or two other things, then hung up and came out.

He waggled the address at her in mild triumph. "Okay, that's th—" His eyes went past her shoulder and he frowned. "Where's the cab gone?"

She turned around. The taxi had vanished. Where it had stood there was only curbing and a few papers blowing lazily up the gutter. Across the street, two kids were clutching at each other and giggling. Doris noticed that one of them had a hand that was deformed into something like a claw—she had thought the National Health was supposed to take care of things like that. The children looked across the street, saw her observing them, and fell into each others' arms, giggling again.

"Well . . . I don't know," Doris said. She felt disoriented and a little stupid. The heat, the wind that seemed to blow constantly with no gusts or drops, like the draft from a furnace, the almost painted quality of the light . . .

("What time was it then?" Farnham asked suddenly.

("I don't know," Doris Freeman said, startled out of her recital. "Six, I suppose. No later than twenty past."

("I see, go on," Farnham said, knowing perfectly well that in August the setting of the sun would not have begun—even by the loosest standards—until seven o'clock or after.)

"Don't know?" Lonnie repeated. "What did he do, just pick up and leave?"

"Maybe when you put your hand up," Doris said, raising her own hand and making the thumb-and-forefinger circle Lonnie had made in the call box, "maybe when you did that he thought you were waving him on."

"I'd have to wave a long time to send him on with two pounds-five on the meter," Lonnie grunted, and walked over to the curb.

On the other side of Crouch Hill Road, the two small children were still giggling. "Hey!" Lonnie called. "You kids!"

"You an American, sir?" one of them called back. It was the boy with the claw hand.

"Yes," Lonnie said, smiling. "Did you see a cab over here? Did the driver pull away up the road?"

The two children seemed to consider the question. The boy's companion was a girl of about five with an untidy tangle of brown hair. She stepped forward to the opposite curb, formed her hands into a megaphone, and still smiling—she screamed it through her megaphoned hands and her smile—she cried at them: *"Fuck you, Joe!"*

Lonnie's mouth dropped open.

"Sir! Sir! Sir!" the boy screeched, and made an obscene gesture with his deformed hand. Then the two of them took to their heels and fled around the corner and out of sight, leaving only their laughter to echo back.

Lonnie looked at Doris, dumbstruck.

"I . . . I guess they don't like Americans," he said lamely.

She looked around nervously. The street appeared totally deserted.

He slipped an arm around her. "Well, kid, looks like we hike it."

"I'm not sure I want to, Lonnie," she said. "Those two might have gone to get their big brothers." She laughed to show it was a joke, but there was a shrill quality to it she didn't like. Come to think of it, the evening had taken on a decidedly surreal quality she didn't much like. She wished they had stayed at the hotel.

"Not much else we can do," he said. "The street's not exactly overflowing with taxis, is it?"

"Lonnie, why would he do that? Just—what do they say?—just scarper like that."

"I don't have the slightest idea. But John gave me good directions for the taxi driver. He lives in a street called Brass End, which is a very minor dead-end street, and he said it wasn't in the *Streetfinder.*" As he talked he was moving her away from the call box, from the restaurant that sold curries to take away, from the now-empty curb. They were walking up Crouch Hill Road again. "We take a right onto Hillfield Avenue, a left halfway down, then our

first right . . . or was it left? Anyway, onto Petrie Street. Second left is Brass End."

"Can you remember all that?"

"Try me," he said bravely, and she just had to laugh. Lonnie had a way of making things seem better.

There was a map of the Crouch End area on the wall. Farnham approached it and studied it with his hands stuffed into his pockets. The station seemed very quiet, now. Vetter was still outside—clearing some of the witchmoss from his brains, one hoped—and Raymond had finished with the woman who'd had her purse nicked.

Farnham put his finger on the spot where the cabby had most likely let them off (if anything about the woman's story was to be believed, that was). Yes, their route to the lawyer's house looked pretty straightforward. Crouch Hill Road to Hillfield Avenue, a left onto Vickers Lane, left onto Petrie Street, from Petrie Street into Brass End, which was no more than six or eight houses long. No more than a mile all told. Ought to have been able to do that walking on their hands.

"Raymond!" he called. "You still here?"

Raymond came in. He had changed into street clothes and was zipping up a light poplin windcheater. "Only just, my beardless darling."

"Cut it," Farnham said, smiling all the same. Raymond frightened him a little. He was one of those people you could take one look at and know they were standing close to the law-and-order fence . . . on one side or the other. There was a twisted white line of scar running down from the left corner of Raymond's mouth almost all the way to his Adam's apple. He claimed a pickpocket had once nearly cut his throat with a jagged bit of bottle. Claimed that's why he broke their fingers for them. Farnham thought that was shit. He thought Raymond broke their fingers because he liked to break them.

"Got a cig?" Raymond asked.

Farnham sighed and gave him one. His pack was becoming rapidly depleted. As he lit Raymond's smoke he said, "Is there a curry shop on Crouch Hill Road?"

"Not to my knowledge, love," Raymond said.

"That's what I thought."

"Has my poppet got a problem?"

"No," Farnham said, a little too sharply, remembering Doris Freeman's clotted hair and staring eyes.

Near the top of Crouch Hill Road, Doris and Lonnie turned onto Hillfield Avenue, which was lined with imposing and gracious-looking homes—nothing but shells, she thought, probably cut up into apartments and bed-sitters inside with surgical precision.

"So far, so good," Lonnie said.

"Yes, it's—" she began, and that was when the low moaning arose.

They both stopped. The moaning was coming almost directly from their right, where a high hedge ran around a small yard. Lonnie started toward the sound, and she grasped his arm. "Lonnie, no—"

"What do you mean, no?" he said. "Someone's hurt."

She stepped after him nervously. The hedge was high but thin. He was able to brush it aside and reveal a small square of lawn outlined with flowers. The lawn was very green. In the center of it was a black, smoking patch—or at least that was her first impression. When she peered around Lonnie's shoulder again—his shoulder was too high for her to peer over—she saw it was a hole, vaguely man-shaped. The tendrils of smoke were emanating from it.

SIXTY LOST IN UNDERGROUND HORROR, she thought abruptly.

The moaning was coming from the hole, and Lonnie began to force himself through the hedge toward it.

"Lonnie," she said. "No, don't."

"Someone's hurt," he said, and pushed himself the rest of the way through with a bristly tearing sound. She saw him going toward the hole, and then the hedge snapped back, leaving her nothing but a vague impression of his shape as he went toward it. She tried to push through after him and was scratched by the short, stiff branches of the hedge for her trouble. She was wearing a sleeveless blouse.

"Lonnie?" she called, suddenly very afraid. "Lonnie, come back!"

"Just a minute, hon—"

The house looked at her impassively over the top of the hedge.

The moaning sounds continued, but now they sounded lower—guttural and somehow gleeful. Couldn't Lonnie *hear* that?

"Hey, is somebody down there?" she heard Lonnie ask. "Is there—oh! Hey! Jesus!" And suddenly Lonnie screamed. She had never heard him scream before, and it was a terrible sound. Her legs seemed to turn to waterbags. She looked wildly for the entrance path through the hedge and couldn't see it. Anywhere. Images swirled before her eyes—the bikies who had looked like large sleek-headed rats for a moment, the cat with the pink chewed face, the small boy with the claw hand.

Lonnie! She tried to scream, but no words came out.

Now there were sounds of a struggle. The moaning had stopped. But there were sounds—wet, sloshing sounds—from the other side of the hedge. Then, suddenly, Lonnie came flying back through the hedge as if he had been given a tremendous push. The left arm of his suit-coat was torn, and the entire suit was splattered with runnels of black stuff that seemed to be smoking, as the pit in the lawn had been smoking.

"Doris, run!"

"Lonnie, what—"

"Run!" His face was totally devoid of color.

Doris looked around wildly, for a cop or anyone else. But Hillfield Avenue might have been a part of some great deserted city for all the life or movement she saw. Then she glanced back at the hedge and saw something else was moving behind there, something that was more than black; it seemed ebony, the antithesis of all light.

And it was sloshing.

A moment later, the short, stiff branches of the hedge began to rustle. She stared, hypnotized with dreadful fascination. She might have stood there forever (so she told Vetter and Farnham) if Lonnie hadn't grabbed her arm roughly and shrieked at her—yes, Lonnie, who never even raised his voice at the kids, had *shrieked*—she might have been standing there yet. Standing there, or . . .

But they ran.

Where? Farnham had asked her.

She didn't know. Lonnie was totally undone. He was in a hysteria of panic and revulsion. He didn't talk. His fingers clamped over her wrist like a handcuff. They ran away from the house looming over the hedge, they ran away from the smoking hole in the lawn. She knew those things for sure; all the rest was vague impressions.

At first it had been hard to run, and then it got easier because they were going downhill. They turned, then turned again. Houses stared at them, grey houses with high stoops and drawn green shades. She remembered Lonnie pulling off his jacket, which had been splattered with that black goo, and throwing it away. Then they had come to a wider street.

"Stop," she panted. "Lonnie . . . stop . . . I can't . . ." Her free hand was pressed to her side. There seemed to be a red-hot spike planted in there.

And he did stop. They had come out of the residential area and were standing at the corner of Crouch Lane and Norris Road. A sign on the far side of Norris Road proclaimed that they were but one mile from Slaughter Towen. Town? Vetter suggested. No, Doris Freeman said. Slaughter *Towen,* with an "e."

Raymond crushed out the cigarette he had "borrowed" from Farnham. "I'm off," he announced, and then looked more closely at Farnham. "My poppet should take better care of himself. He's got big dark circles under his eyes. Any hair on your palms, poppet?" He laughed uproariously.

"Ever hear of a Crouch Lane?" Farnham asked.

"Crouch Hill Road, you mean."

"No, I mean Crouch Lane."

"Never heard of it."

"What about Norris Road?"

"There's a Norris Road cuts off from the high street in Basingstoke—"

"No, here."

"Not by me, poppet."

For some reason he couldn't understand—the woman was obviously crackers—Farnham persisted. "What about Slaughter Towen?"

"Towen, you said? Not Town?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Never heard of it, poppet, but if I do, I believe I'll steer clear."

"Why's that?"

"Because in the old Druidic lingo, a touen or towen was a place for ritual sacrifice. That's where they took out your liver and lights. Sleep tight, love." And, zipping his windcheater up to the chin, Raymond glided out.

Farnham looked after him uneasily. He made that last up, he told himself. What a hard copper like Sid Raymond knows about the druids you could carve on the head of a pin and still have room for the Lord's Prayer. Right. And even if he had picked up a piece of information like that, it didn't change the fact that the woman was . . .

"Must be going crazy," Lonnie said, and laughed shakily.

Doris had looked at her watch earlier and saw that somehow it had gotten to be quarter of eight. The light had changed; from a clear orange it had gone to a thick and murky red that glared off the windows of the shops in Norris Road and seemed to face a church steeple across the way in fresh-clotted blood. The sun itself sat on the horizon now, an oblate sphere.

"What happened back there?" Doris asked. "What was it, Lonnie?"

"Lost my jacket, too. Hell of a note."

"You didn't lose it, you took it off. It was covered with . . ."

"Don't be foolish!" he snapped at her. But his eyes were not snappish; they were soft, shocked, wandering. "I lost it, that's all."

"Lonnie, what happened when you went through the hedge?"

"Nothing," he said briskly. "Let's not talk about it. Where are we?"

"Lonnie—"

"I can't remember," he said softly, looking at her. "It's all a blank. We were there . . . we heard a sound . . . then I was running. That's all I can remember." And then he added in a frighteningly childish voice: "Did I throw my jacket away? I liked that one. It matched the pants." He laughed suddenly, idiotically.

This was something new to be frightened of. Whatever he had

seen beyond the hedge seemed to have partially unhinged him. She was not sure the same wouldn't have happened to her . . . if she had seen. It didn't matter. They had to get out of here. Get back to the hotel with the kids.

"Let's get a cab. I want to go home."

"But John—"

"Never mind John!" she said, and now she was shrill herself. "It's wrong, everything's wrong, we're getting a cab and going home!"

"Yes, all right. Okay." Lonnie passed a shaking hand across his forehead. "But there aren't any."

There was, in fact, no traffic at all on Norris Road, which was wide and cobbled. Directly down the center of it ran a set of old tram-tracks. On the other side, in front of a flower shop, an old and rusty three-wheeled D-car was parked. Farther down on their own side, a Yamaha bike stood aslant on its kickstand. That was all. They could *hear* cars, but the sound was faraway, diffuse.

"Maybe the street's closed for repairs," he muttered, and then Lonnie had done a strange thing . . . strange, at least, for him; he was always so easy and self-assured. He looked back over his shoulder as if afraid they had been followed.

"We'll walk," she said.

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Away from Crouch End. We can get a taxi if we get away from here." She was suddenly positive of that, if nothing else.

"All right." Now he seemed perfectly willing to entrust the leadership of the whole matter over to her.

They began walking toward the setting sun along Norris Road. The faraway hum of the traffic remained constant, not seeming to diminish, but not seeming to grow any, either. The desertion was beginning to get on her nerves. She felt they were being watched, tried to dismiss the feeling, and found that she couldn't. The sound of their footfalls

(SIXTY LOST IN UNDERGROUND HORROR)

echoed back to them. The business at the hedge played on her mind more and more, and finally she had to ask again.

"Lonnie, what *was* it?"

He answered simply: "I don't remember, Doris. And I don't want to."

They passed a market that was closed—a pile of coconuts like shrunken heads seen back-to were piled in the window. They passed a laundromat where white machines had been pulled from the washed-out pink plasterboard walls like square teeth from dying gums—the image made her feel queasy. They passed a soap-streaked show window with an old SHOP TO LEASE sign in the front. Something moved behind the soap streaks, and Doris saw, peering out at her, the pink and tufted battle-scarred face of the cat.

She consulted the workings and tickings of her body and discovered that she was in a state of slowly building terror. It felt as if her intestines had begun to crawl slightly inside her. Her mouth had a sharp unpleasant taste, almost as if she had dosed with a strong mouthwash. The cobbles of Norris Road bled fresh blood in the sunset.

They were approaching an underpass. And it was dark under there. *I can't,* her mind informed her in a matter-of-fact sort of way. *I can't go under there, anything might be under there. Don't ask me because I just can't.*

Another part of her mind asked if she could bear to retrace their steps . . . past the empty shop with the cat in it (how had he gotten there from the restaurant by the call box? best not to think about that), the somehow oral shambles of the laundromat, the market of severed shrunken heads. She didn't think she could.

They had drawn closer to the underpass now. A six-car train lunged over it with startling suddenness, a crazy bride rushing to meet her groom with unseemly rapaciousness, trailing a train of sparks. They both leaped back involuntarily, but it was Lonnie who cried out aloud. She looked at him and saw that he had aged and turned into someone she didn't think she knew in the last hour . . . had it been an hour? She didn't know. But she did know that his hair looked somehow greyer, and while she told herself firmly—as firmly as she could—that it was just a trick of the light, it decided her. Lonnie was in no shape to go back. Therefore, the underpass.

"Doris—" he said, pulling back a little.

"Come on," she said, and took his hand. She took it brusquely so he would not feel it trembling. She walked forward and he followed docilely.

They were almost out—it was a very short underpass, she

thought with ridiculous relief—when the hand grasped her upper arm.

She didn't scream. Her lungs seemed to have collapsed like small crumpled paper sacks. Her mind wanted to leave her body behind and just . . . just fly. Lonnie's hand parted from her own. He seemed unaware. He walked out on the other side—she saw him for just one moment silhouetted, tall and lanky, against the bloody, furious colors of the sunset, and then he was gone. She had not seen him again since.

The hand grasping her upper arm was hairy, like an ape's hand. It turned her remorselessly toward a heavy slumped shape leaning against the sooty concrete wall. It leaned there in the double shadow of two concrete supporting pillars, and the shape was all she could make out . . . the shape, and two luminous green eyes.

"Got a cigarette, love?" a husky cockney voice asked her, and she smelled raw meat and deep-fat-fried chips and something sweet and awful, like the residue at the bottom of garbage cans.

Those green eyes were cat's eyes. And suddenly she became sure, horribly sure, that if the big slumped shape stepped out of the shadows, she would see the milky cataract of eye, the pink ridges of scar tissue, the tufts of ginger hair.

She tore free, backed up, and felt something part the air near her . . . a hand? Claws? A spitting, hissing sound—

Another train charged overhead. The roar was huge, brain-rattling. Soot sifted down like black snow. She fled in blind panic, for the second time that evening not knowing where . . . or for how long.

What brought her back to herself was the realization that Lonnie was gone. She had half collapsed against a dirty brick wall, breathing in great tearing gasps. She was still in Norris Road (at least she believed herself to be, she told the two constables; the wide way was still cobbled, and the tram tracks still ran directly down the center of the road), but the deserted, decaying shops had given way to deserted, decaying warehouses. DAWGLISH & SONS read the soot-begrimed signboard on one. A second had the name ALHAZRED emblazoned across ancient and peeling green paint. Below the name was a series of Arabian pothooks and dashes.

"Lonnie!" she called. There was no echo, no carrying in spite of the silence (no, not complete silence, she told them; there was still

the sound of traffic, and it might have been closer . . . but not much). The word that stood for her husband seemed to drop from her mouth and fall dead at her feet. The blood of sunset had been replaced by the cool grey ashes of twilight. For the first time it occurred to her that night might fall upon her here in Crouch End—if she was still indeed in Crouch End—and that thought brought fresh terror.

She told Vetter and Farnham that there had been absolutely no reflection on her part during that unknowable length of time between being dropped off at the call box and the final horror. She had reacted like a frightened animal. Stimulus was applied; they fled. And now she was alone. She wanted Lonnie, her husband. She was aware of that. But it did not occur to her to wonder much—if at all—about why this area, which must surely lie within five miles of Cambridge Circus, should be utterly deserted. It did not occur to her to wonder how the disfigured cat could have gotten from the restaurant to the shop-to-let. She did not even wonder much about the inexplicable pit in the lawn of that house, except as it bore on Lonnie. Those questions came later, when it was too late, and they would (she said) haunt her for the rest of her life.

Doris Freeman set off walking, calling for Lonnie. Her voice did not echo, but her footfalls seemed to. The shadows began to fill Norris Road. Overhead, the sky was now purple. It might have been some distorting effect of the twilight, or her own exhaustion, but the warehouses seemed to lean over the road now. The windows, caked with the dirt of decades—of centuries, perhaps—seemed to be staring at her. And the names on the signboards (she said) became progressively stranger, lunatic, and certainly unpronounceable. The vowels were in the wrong places, and consonants had been strung together in a way that would make it impossible for any human tongue to get around them. CTHULU KRYON read one, with more of those Arabian pothooks beneath it. YOGSOGGOTH read another. R'YELEH said yet another. There was one that she remembered particularly: NRTESN NYARLAHOTEP.

("How could you remember such gibberish?" Farnham asked her.

(And Doris Freeman had shook her head, slowly and tiredly. "I don't know. I really don't know.")

Norris Road seemed to stretch on into infinity, cobbled, split by

tram tracks. And although she continued to walk—she wouldn't have believed she could run, although later, she said, she did—she no longer called for Lonnie. She was now in the grip of the greatest fear she had ever known, a fear she would not have believed a human being could endure without going mad or dropping stone dead. Yet it was impossible for her to articulate her fear except in one way, and even this, although concrete, was not satisfactory.

She said it was as if she was no longer on earth. As if she was on a different planet, a place so alien that the human mind could not even begin to comprehend it. The *angles* seemed different, she said. The *colors* seemed different. The . . . but it was hopeless.

She could only walk under a sky that seemed twisted and strange between the dark bulking buildings, and hope that it would end.

And it did.

She became aware of two figures standing on the sidewalk ahead of her. It was the two children—the boy with the deformed claw hand and the little girl. Her hair was in braids.

"It's the American woman," the boy said.

"She's lost," said the girl.

"Lost her husband."

"Lost her way."

"Found the darker way."

"Found the way into the funnel."

"Lost her hope."

"Found the Whistler from the Stars—"

"—Eater of Dimensions—"

"—the Blind Piper who is not named for a thousand years—"

Faster and faster their words came, a breathless liturgy, a flashing loom. Her head spun with them. The buildings leaned. The stars were out, but they were not *her* stars, the ones she had wished on as a girl or courted under as a young woman, these were crazed stars in lunatic constellations, and her hands went to her ears and her hands did not shut out the sounds and finally she screamed at them:

"Where's my husband? Where's Lonnie? What have you done to him?"

There was silence. And then the girl said: "He's gone beneath."

The boy: "Gone to Him Who Waits."

The girl smiled—a malicious smile full of evil innocence. "He couldn't well not go, could he? The mark was on him. And you'll go. You'll go now."

"Lonnie! *What have you done with—*"

The boy raised his hand and chanted in a high fluting language that she could not understand—but the sound of the words drove Doris Freeman nearly mad with fear.

"The street began to move then," she told Vetter and Farnham. "The cobbles began to . . . to undulate like a carpet. They rose and fell, rose and fell. The tram tracks came loose and flew into the air—I remember that, I remember the starlight shining on them—and then the cobbles themselves began to come loose, one by one at first, and then in bunches. They just flew off into the darkness. There was a tearing sound when they came loose. A grinding, tearing sound . . . the way an earthquake must sound. And—something started to come through—"

"What?" Vetter asked. He was hunched forward, his eyes boring into Doris Freeman. "What did you see? What was it?"

"Tentacles," she said, slowly and haltingly. "I think . . . I think it was tentacles. But they were as thick as old banyan trees, as if each of them was made up of a thousand squirming smaller tentacles . . . and there were pink things like suckers . . . but sometimes they looked like faces . . . like Lonnie's face, some of them, some like other faces, all of them in agony . . . screaming in agony . . . but below them, in the darkness under the street . . . in the darkness *beneath* . . . there was something else. Something like great . . . great *eyes* . . ."

At that point she had broken down, unable to go on for some time.

And as it turned out, there was really no more to tell. She had no coherent memory of what had happened after that. The next thing she remembered was cowering in the doorway of a closed newsagent's shop. She might be there yet, she had told them, except that she had seen cars passing back and forth, and the reassuring glow of arc-sodium streetlights. Two people had passed in front of her, and Doris had cringed farther back into the shadows, afraid of

the two evil children. But these were not children, she saw; they were a teenage boy and girl walking hand in hand. The boy was saying something about the new Francis Coppola film.

She had come out onto the sidewalk warily, ready to dart back into the convenient bolthole the newsagent's doorway made—but there was no need. Fifty yards up on her left was a moderately busy intersection, with cars and lorries standing at a stop-and-go light. Across the way was a jeweler's shop with a large lighted clock in the show window. A steel accordion grille had been drawn across the window, but she could still make out the time. It was five minutes of ten.

She had walked up to the intersection then, and despite the streetlights and the comforting rumble of traffic, she had kept shooting terrified glances over her shoulder. She ached all over. She was limping on one broken heel. Somehow she had kept her purse. She had pulled muscles in her belly and both legs—her right leg was particularly bad, as if she had strained something in it.

At the intersection she saw that somehow she had come around to Hillfield Avenue and Tottenham Road. A woman of about sixty with her greying hair escaping from the rag it was done up in was talking to a man of about the same age under a streetlamp. They both looked at Doris as she approached them as if she were some sort of dreadful apparition.

"Police," Doris Freeman had croaked. "Where's the police station? I . . . I'm an American citizen and . . . I've lost my husband . . . and I need the police."

"What's happened, then, love?" the woman asked, not unkindly. "You look like you've been through the wringer, you do."

"Car accident?" her companion asked.

"No," she managed. "Please . . . is there a police station somewhere near?"

"Right up Tottenham Road," the man said. He took a package of Players from his pocket. "Like a cigarette? You look like you could use one, mum."

"Thank you," she said, and took the cigarette although she had quit nearly four years ago. The elderly man had to follow the jittering tip of it with his lighted match to get it going for her.

He glanced at the woman with her hair bound up in the rag. "I'll just take a little stroll up with her, Evvie. Make sure she gets there all right."

"I'll come along as well, then, won't I?" Evvie said, and put an arm around Doris's shoulders. "Now what is it, love? Did someone try to mug you?"

"No," Doris said. "It . . . I . . . I . . . the street . . . there was a cat with only one eye . . . the street . . . the street opened up . . . I saw it . . . He Who Waits, they called it . . . Lonnie . . . I've got to find Lonnie . . ."

She was aware that she was speaking incoherencies, but she seemed helpless to be any clearer. And at any rate, she told Vetter and Farnham, she hadn't been all *that* incoherent, because the man and woman had drawn away from her, as if, when Evvie asked what the matter was, Doris had told her it was bubonic plague.

The man said something then, and Doris thought it was: "Happened again."

The woman pointed. "Station house is right up there. Globes hanging in front. You'll see it." And very quickly the two of them began to walk away . . . but now they were the ones glancing back over their shoulders.

Doris took two steps toward them. "Don't you come near!" Evvie called shrilly . . . and forked the sign of the evil eye at Doris, simultaneously cringing against the man, who put an arm about her. "Don't you come near, if you've been to Crouch End Towen!"

And with that, the two of them had disappeared into the night.

Now PC Farnham stood leaning in the doorway between the common room and the main filing room—the back files Vetter had spoken of were certainly not kept here. Farnham had made himself a fresh cup of tea and was smoking the last cigarette in his pack—the woman had also bummed several—smoking op's, he believed they called it in the States.

The woman had gone back to her hotel, in the company of the nurse Vetter had called—the nurse would be staying with her tonight, and would make a judgment in the morning as to whether the woman would need to go in hospital. The children made that

difficult, Farnham supposed, and where the woman was an American national (as she kept proclaiming), it became that much more complicated. And what was she going to tell the kiddies when they woke up? That the big bad monster of Crouch End Town

(Towen)

had eaten up daddy?

Farnham grimaced and put down his teacup. It wasn't his problem, none of it. For good or for ill, Mrs. Doris Freeman had become sandwiched between the National State and the American Embassy in the great waltz of governments. It was none of his affair; he was only a PC who wanted to forget the whole thing. And he intended to let Vetter write the report. It was Vetter's baby. Vetter could afford to put his name to such a bouquet of lunacy; he was an old man, used up. He would still be a PC on the night shift when he got his gold watch, his pension, and his council flat. Farnham, on the other hand, had ambitions of making sergeant soon, and that meant he had to watch every little thing.

And speaking of Vetter, where was he? He'd been taking the night air for quite a while now.

Farnham crossed the common room and went out. He stood between the two lighted globes and stared across Tottenham Road. Vetter was nowhere in sight. It was past three A.M., and silence lay thick and even, like a shroud. What was that line from Wordsworth? "All that great heart lying still," something like that.

He went down the steps and stood on the sidewalk. He felt a trickle of unease now. It was silly, of course it was. He was angry with himself, angry that the woman's mad story should have had even this slight effect on him. Perhaps he deserved to be afraid of a hard copper like Sid Raymond.

Farnham walked slowly up to the corner, thinking he would meet Vetter coming back from his night stroll. But he would go no farther than the corner; if the station was left empty even for a few moments, there would be hell to pay—if it was discovered.

He went up to the corner and looked around. It was funny, but all the arc-sodiums seemed to have gone out up here. The entire street looked different without them. Would it have to be reported, he wondered? And where was Vetter?

He would take a little walk up, he decided, and see just what was

what. But not far. It wouldn't do to leave the station unattended, that would be a sure and simple way of assuring an end like Vetter's, an old man on the night shift in a quiet part of town, mostly concerned with kids congregating on the corners after midnight . . . and crazy American women.

He would walk up just a little way.

Not far.

Vetter came in less than five minutes after Farnham had left. Farnham had gone in the opposite direction, and if Vetter had come along a minute earlier, he would have seen the young constable stand at the corner for a moment and then disappear from sight.

"Farnham?" he called.

There was no answer but the buzz of the clock on the wall.

"Farnham?" he called again, and wiped his mouth with the palm of his hand.

Lonnie Freeman was never found. Eventually his wife—who had begun to grey around the temples—flew back to America with her children. They went on the Concorde. A month later she attempted suicide. She spent a year in a rest home. She came out much improved.

PC Robert Farnham was never seen or heard from again. He left a wife and a two-year-old set of twin girls. His wife wrote a series of angry letters to her MP, insisting that something was going on, something was being covered up, that her Bob had been enticed into taking some dangerous sort of undercover assignment or other, like that fellow Hackett on the BBC. He would have done anything to make sergeant, she told the MP repeatedly. Eventually, the MP stopped answering her letters, and at about the same time that Doris Freeman was coming out of the rest home, her hair almost entirely white now, Sheila Farnham moved back to Sussex, where her parents lived. Eventually she married a man in a steadier line of work than that of policing London—Frank Hobbs worked on the Ford assembly line. It had been necessary to get a divorce from her Bob first on grounds of desertion, but that was no problem.

Vetter took early retirement about four months after Doris

Freeman had stumbled her way into the station in Tottenham Road in Crouch End. He did indeed move into council housing, a two-above-the-shops in the town of Frimley. Six months later he was found dead of a heart attack, a can of Harp Lager in his hand.

The hot end-of-summer night when Doris Freeman told her tale was August 19, 1974. Better than three and a half years have passed since then. And Doris's Lonnie and Sheila's Bob are together.

Vetter would have known where.

By the entirely democratic and accidental process of alphabetical order, they are together in the back file, the place where unsolved cases and tales too wild to bear any credence are kept.

FARNHAM, ROBERT is written on the tab of one thin folder. FREEMAN, LEONARD is written on the tab of the folder directly behind. Both folders contain a single page—a badly typed report by the investigating officer. In both cases, the signature is Vetter's.

And in Crouch End, which is really a quiet suburb of London, strange things still happen. From time to time.

The Star Pools

A. A. Attanasio

> There is a calling under the breath, a cry that goes on long as a vein. It is the last senseless moment of the organism, the instant of death that cries back through the narrows of air from the ferrous edge.
>
> —Schiavoni and Malamocco,
> *Voorish Rituals*

Pain which even the cold stream water couldn't numb, a brittle, ruby pain. Henley Easton shuddered, then sat down in the stream, up to his waist in water, his trousers ballooning. Slowly he lifted the sharp rock he had stepped on, squeezed it hard, pressed it to his forehead, his lips. In the water, a cloud of blood was swelling. The flap of skin on his foot winked open and closed. Seeing it and the blood holding back in the icy water, he thought he was going to be sick. But there were children looking on, so he clutched at the blade of stone until he came back.

He limped to shore and spotted the familiar silver lines of his car parked at the edge of an escarpment above the sand. He was still grasping the rock. There was no blood on its cutting edge, and he felt ashamed. With a lopsided heave, he sent it flying over the heads

of the fishing children and watched it arching alone above the reeds, falling into the shallows of the far bank.

He wrapped his foot in a rag he found in the trunk of his car and sat for a while on the hood, looking out across the swale to a clump of cedar pines where an hour before he had frantically dug up the mulchy earth. His cache was hidden in there.

Beyond the green colony of trees, the land was tortured and rose in great broken-backed steps toward a haze of iron-spined mountains. Nobody would be coming out here to look for anything but steelheads.

Reassured, already mindless of the itching throb in his foot, Henley Easton got into his car and swung out onto the highway. By dusk he was in New York City. He had a leisurely dinner at Shakespeare's and decided to limp across Washington Square Park to find a doctor he knew. At the corner of MacDougal and Fourth, a rush of dizziness staggered him. It happened so quickly there was no time to cast about for support. He staggered on the curb, tried hard to make it back to the sidewalk. But his eyes glared dark, and he siled to his knees. A moment later he was sprawled in the gutter, his awareness sinking into the shadows of his body.

It was an endless dream. He wandered through dank, night-lighted corridors that stank of rime and something burnt. He was alone in the darkness, feeling his way along greasy walls and abrupt corners that mule-stepped down into smoky grottoes. The air was murmurous with the sound of purling water and a rumble like distant voices or the far-off seethe of ocean rollers steaming to shore.

He wandered it seemed for days, unable to wake. The winding corridors were interminable, and after a long while he forgot that he was dreaming. All that seemed to matter was that he plod on through the labyrinth, feel his way through darkness to freedom. But was he going the right way? Or was he coiling deeper into the maze? Later, even that anxiety withered. He became, simply, movement, no longer human.

It didn't matter where he was going. Space flitted in every direction. Movement had become his identity in the continuum, so he walked and walked, letting the echoes ring in his ears cluelessly.

Eventually his helplessness overwhelmed him, and he realized that he wasn't moving at all. Motion was an illusion. He was still. All things moved through him. And thinking that, he squatted in the black corridor and sang of the past lives twined in his brains: the memories of the wet humus, the mindless, gutless lives that led to the first howl among the fronded swamp-ferns. And his singing became laughing and screaming which got tangled in the shadows with his hearing so that when the first memories of fur and warmth arrived, his mind was so numb with the nightmares of sharks and cephalopods that he continued speechless through the mauled, blood-plastered recollection of his evolution, only occasionally letting a blind cry flap hopelessly away.

For an interminable time, he limped through the dark passages, once coming within a few meters of the exit, but because he had long ago forgotten just who he was and what he was looking for, he ran back into the confusion of the maze to escape the shadows that he saw fuming away into an unbearable brightness. It was a long time later, after he had distilled all the memories from the blood-wallow of mammals, that he again approached the exit of smoking light, his flesh shining with pain, and remembered with a shudder of horror that he, too, was a mammal whose loops of blood held him like a garotte.

Dragged under by the weight of his guts, clubbed witless by the stark remembrances of the earth devouring the earth, deafened by the terrible echoes of weeping, he staggered through the mouth of the labyrinth and howled a bowel-emptying cry into the sear of the sun.

Then he was awed to silence, for the landscape he had entered was familiar enough to remind him that he was dreaming. There was a white horse nearby, corralled, standing still as rock, its eyes an evil pink. Ashy sea grapes and palmetto hung limp from long trellises above shocks of colorless grass. To the left was the sea, silver as mercury around a small boat with a black stick of a man standing in it, waiting. Three white huts squatted on the right, each with a vacant window. Everything was perfectly still and white. Even the sky was white—except for the sun. It was black. Seeing it, Henley felt his muscles melt, and he dropped to his knees. It was a fibrous black, an immense spore, too painful to stare at. He rubbed

his eyes and blinked. He blinked. Nothing changed. The silver sea was steaming beneath the virus star, a black phage meshed to the sky.

A thin breeze picked up, and Henley watched several ashy leaves littering away toward the ironwood posts of the corral. The white horse remained motionless, but its pink eyes were staring. Closer now, the boatman's features were visible. They were bristly and thick, dully gaping. The puffed lips moved, but Henley heard nothing. The face was moronic, the forehead round and bulging, filling up the sockets so that the eyes had to stare up from under the skull. An idiot's face. The lips continued to move in a whisper. And then the breeze shifted and was full of patterns as it pressed by. The silky curves of air carried a voice, scrawny and wicked: *Shut your ears big, let the darkness come unrolling from your eyes and your fingers blow longer all in the stillness. Shut your ears big, Henley.*

Henley straightened as if struck. The voice was horrible. He tried to heave himself to his feet, but the effort collapsed him, and he squelched into the mud. The heat of the black sun thudded against the back of his neck. He squeezed his eyes tight and tried to will himself awake, but the dream was unbreakable.

So there he lay, feeling as if he were wrinkling smaller in the alien light, drying out to a dusty char that whispered away in the breeze, scattering through an incommensurable darkness.

Black.

A darkness that was palpable. Thick oozing masses of black. Immense galleries of space, choirs of distance, and at their center, a mountain of black convulsion gulfing all sound, all light.

With a terrible shriek, Henley wrenched his body awake. He was in a bed in a darkened room. That was all he could sense at first. His eyelids tugged open, their mineral stare facing a wall. Gradually sounds sifted through, and he heard footsteps, sensed a faint medicinal stain on the air. He was in a hospital, and that realization calmed him. Yet there was no chance to wonder what had happened because it was still happening. The very air around him seemed to pulse with the massed blackness of his nightmare—

No—not a nightmare. Reality!

He had been gangplanked into a perpetual nightmare. Sitting perfectly still in his hospital bed, Henley felt utterly transformed.

The room was empty, but that was only an appearance that confuted reality. The darkness of the room was cellular and shifting, its relative silence humming—a mockery of the void, the absolute emptiness that he had just risen from. That supreme deadness was still there, but it was disguised, lurking as an emptiness at the center of all things, voracious black holes invisible behind reflecting surfaces: walls, a night table, a window . . .

At first light, a doctor came in with his medical chart. Henley could see through him, sensed the doctor's surprise at finding him awake, saw his body resolve into a cloud of atoms, a confusion of energies temporarily united, and, at their center, blackness, the void.

The doctor unwrapped Henley's foot, and for the first time since waking, Henley stared at his own body. He could see through it as well, but at the foot there was something different—it was leaking darkness. Threads of blackness radiated from it, shafted up along his leg to his knee. Seeing it, he remembered the sharp rock, remembered hiding the cache beneath trees, remembered . . .

Henley Easton snapped awake.

"Christ! Where am I?"

The doctor looked up with a benign but puzzled expression. "Relax, Mr. Easton. You're in good hands."

Mike Rapf prowled the carpet of a consultation room in St. Vincent's Hospital. He was exhausted, having been able to sleep only in snatches for the last week. There were fever sores at the corners of his mouth, and he walked with a slight limp. Nervous as a rat, he shuffled from corner to corner, hands deep in his pockets. He was of average height with flat downward-slanting snake eyes and a pachuco haircut. Beneath his madras shirt he carried a butterfly switchblade, and strapped to his leg under his trousers was a specially modified bayonet. His face was smooth as porcelain, sun-dark and scribbled with many fine blond wrinkles.

When he heard the scream, he stopped in his tracks, and his charred eyes narrowed. It was Henley. He was sure. Though he had known him only briefly, he was certain that he recognized something about that cry—a whimpering quality that he associated with the boy. It wasn't a scream of pain. It was fear.

An hour later, a doctor came in—young, thin-boned, with long intelligent hands. "He's come around."

"What's wrong with him?"

The doctor shrugged. "No idea. It's the zaniest catatonia I've ever seen. He sent off theta waves the whole time he was out—the EKG of an alert person. Yet he refused to respond to any form of stimulation, his eyes were dilated, his blood sugar way down. In some way, it's all related to the wound on his left foot. That thing simply refused to start healing until about forty-five minutes ago. Fibrinogen was actually dissolving at the wound site."

"But he's going to pull through, isn't he?"

"I think so. His vital organs, nervous and lymph systems, are all unaffected."

Rapf released an audible sigh, ran a hand over his face. "When can I see him?"

"Now, if you like. He's remarkably alert for all he's been through."

Henley Easton was sitting up in the bed of his private room, and when Rapf entered, he essayed a smile. Rapf went over to him directly, without smiling, and leaned close to his face. "Where is it, coconut?"

Henley kept smiling. He made a small feathering gesture with one hand and stared remorselessly into the flat dark eyes. He was good-looking, with flame-bright hair, jawline clean as a knife, and grey glass-splinter eyes that looked a little crazy from the medication. "Since when did they start letting baboons in here?"

"Don't loose-lip me, Easton."

"How'd you find me, Rapf?"

"When you didn't show last week . . ."

"Last week? How long I been?"

"Don't you know? You been out nine days. The only good thing that happened to you is that I ten-twentied before Gusto or his bad boys did. They'd have left nothing for the hospital but a cleanup bill."

Henley closed his eyes and shook his head. A weight heavy as heat lay on the back of his neck. And there were memories, ugly nightmare memories, of darkness, a maze, a black sun, a horrible whispering . . .

"I laid out a lot of coin to get you this private box," Rapf went on. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a jangle of dog tags. "Your brother's plates. I figured they'd do more good here than they would where he's trashed. I used them to convince the meds that you and I are kin. It was the only way of taking charge."

"What about Gusto?"

Rapf shook his head, contentious. "He wants your ears, clown. He figures you ripped him. What else is the stooge to think after more than a week? The best thing for you to do is to tell me where that skeejag is so I can tighten him up."

Henley rubbed the back of his neck. A retinal afterimage of the black sun seemed to be hovering before him. Everything looked dark, outlined by a soft mystical shine. "No way, huckster. You'd just run it."

"What?" Rapf's face darkened with indignation. "I'm your cover man."

Henley looked cool and arrogant. "You were my bro's cover man, and he was minced at Ngoc Linh."

Rapf's emotional valence swung from indignation to fury and then to remorse with unnatural swiftness. "Yeah. Well, budroe, you'll be on your way to a family reunion if you don't gratify Gusto. He wants those two kilos."

"And he can have them. I'm in this for the payoff. I'm not going to run it."

"Fine. Then tell me where I can cop."

"Forget it. Only I know where it's hidden. We go together or not at all."

"Sure, and just how long before you're mobile? I could be so much fish chow by then."

"We go tomorrow."

"You think you'll be all right? These meds don't even know what's wrong with you."

Henley nodded, but his eyes were glazed over, his face distracted. The afterimage of the black sun had expanded so that it covered everything like a grey film. Rapf's face was a reflection in a dark mirror wormed with far-off, unaccountable lights. The room suddenly seemed foreshortened, and Henley was staring through mistings of shadow. A blue light whose source seemed to be

somewhere behind the bed suffused his vision, and movements other than what he knew were there attracted his attention. Another scene was superimposed on the room. It was a pedestrian landscape—a parking lot. Henley recognized Rapf's car and watched dumb-faced as a black man in duck trousers unholstered a pistol and knelt down in the back seat of an adjacent white Chevy. Then, just as swiftly, the image splintered.

Rapf laid a callused hand on Henley's shoulder. "You need rest, kid."

Henley blinked, rubbed his temples. With cold objectivity, every rift and flaw in the opposite wall, every pore on Rapf's face, stood out sharp as glass. For a moment he had felt as if he was leaning outside himself, teetering on the brink of a nightmare cliff that mawed beyond the particled world. Now he was himself again, and it was difficult to imagine that what he had seen was real. But he couldn't take the chance—

"Hold on, Mike. There's a goofer waiting for you in a white Chevy wheelside of your car."

"Huh?"

"Call it a case of the dread. Fever jitters. But stay sharp."

"Yeah. Sure."

When Rapf left, Henley leaned back and closed his eyes. A cold magnetic brilliance was running along the surface of his skin, and he seemed to sense that eerie whispering he had heard in his nightmare, sensed it the way the deaf hear sounds through the small bones of their heads. Somewhere deep within himself the nightmare was continuing, an evil pushing out into the world. He had a feeling that if he let himself he could fall toward it, that it was pulling him.

He stared at the wall directly opposite, tried to root himself in its cracks, but it was beginning to shimmer. He was certain that it was starting all over again. Then, just as he was reaching for the call switch, it solidified. He was suddenly warm, and the sunlight slanting through the blinds was reassuring, yellow as wine.

After a moment's thought, he reached out, and this time he pressed the buzzer. When the nurse arrived, he was sitting at the edge of the bed, wearing, he hoped, his most alert and gracious

smile. "Would you mind getting my clothes, please? I'm signing out."

Rapf left the hospital through the service garage and emerged at Twelfth Street and Seventh Avenue. His car was parked in the Waverly Building's lot, and he approached it the long way. When he got to the corner of the lot, he froze. There was a white Chevy parked near his car.

Without hesitation, he circled the lot and approached the Chevy from behind. When he was within four cars of it, he lay down and bellycrawled until he was alongside its left rear door. From where he lay, he could see the latch was up. He surveyed the surrounding cars as best he could. No one was in sight. In one fluid movement, he unsprung his butterfly blade and jerked open the door.

There was a black man inside who was peering through a drillhole on the opposite door. Rapf burst in, and the man swung around with a Walther automatic in his right hand.

Rapf was quicker. He chopped the gun out of his hand with a slash of his arm, then pulled him into a sitting position and boxed him on the side of the head. With a fierce tug, he dragged him out of the car, waved the butterfly under his nose. "All right, rughead, no more surprises. Who put you on me?"

The man rubbed the side of his head and looked up with a scowl. "Gusto wants his scag, plain-brain. What you expect—CIA?"

"Yeah, well you tell Gusto it's his soon as I cop it. My touch was laid up or he'd have had it by now."

"He wants it right away, marshmallow."

"Sure, sure. Everybody's double-time. You think I'd still be in the country if I was running it? Come on!" He pulled the man to his feet, pushed him back a pace, and retrieved the Walther. "Tell him he can have it tomorrow," he said, backing up to his car. "Same drop." Rapf threw the gun under the seat, slid behind the wheel, and drove off.

For nine days, since Henley turned up at St. Vincent's in a coma, he'd kept on the move, not daring to return to his flat. He knew Gusto would kill him. The man had a notorious temper. But handling the hit man gave him some confidence, and he decided to

get back to his apartment. He circled the block slowly once and scoped the lobby cautiously. Nonetheless, as soon as he put his key in the latch, he realized that he had blundered.

The door of the opposite apartment burst open, and two men pounced on him, shoved him into his rooms. One of them handcuffed him immediately. The other bolted his door and led him by the nose to the bathroom. They were big, wild, mongrel blacks with natty denims, their hair twisted into spikes. One had a beard and was missing half of his left ear. The other wore dark wraparound glasses and a pink hat with a tight brim cocked low. He was carrying a shopping bag. In the bathroom, they knelt him down before the toilet bowl.

"Hey, cool out," Rapf pleaded. "I'm clean with Gusto."

The bearded one laughed, said, "My name's Duke Parmelee. And that's Hi-Hat Chuckie Watz. We the boys goin' to take your face apart."

Hi-Hat Chuckie Watz took four cans of drain cleaner and a bottle of Clorox out of the shopping bag and emptied them into the bowl. The Duke continued, "Gusto wants you to know, he's hurt you ignored him."

Hi-Hat grabbed Rapf behind the neck and shoved his face toward the fuming water in the bowl. The acid vapors seared up into his sinuses and scalded his eyes.

"Yaww!" Rapf bawled. "Don't! Please! Don't! I got the stuff!"

Hi-Hat eased up, and Rapf pulled back with a gasp. His face was slick with tears, and he was quaking.

"Where is it?" the Duke asked.

"My touch has it stashed. Tomorrow, I'll lift it tomorrow."

Hi-Hat steered Rapf's face toward the blue burning water. Rapf screamed, but the fumes gagged him, and he went into a glide.

The Duke pulled him back and slashed him across the face with a sharp-ringed hand. "Cry for me, mama. Cry and I won't make you drink that soup."

Rapf was crying, his whole body was shuddering with sobs.

"Just you remember," Duke Parmelee said, "you a juke and everybody knows you a juke. If you don't have that H tomorrow, you goin' to suffer. Mister, you goin' to suffer."

They uncuffed him and were gone before he could get to his feet. All things considered, they had been practically cordial.

Henley Easton took a cab from St. Vincent's to Pennsylvania Station. From there he rode the L.I.R.R. to Garden City where he rented a car. After eating at a McDonald's, he had fifty dollars left. The nightmare hadn't recurred, and he was beginning to feel confident. It was his plan to get to his cache and head west. He didn't want to burn Rapf, but he felt that he had no choice. The coma he had been in changed everything. No doubt Gusto and his black mafia felt ripped after a nine-day delay. They would be too suspicious to make him a good deal. It would be best now, Henley figured, to find another market and leave Rapf behind to answer questions.

Henley spent the night in a motor inn where he inspected his foot for the first time since leaving the hospital. There was no swelling, but the lips of the wound were a scaly black. Just looking at it made him feel drowsy. He put his sock on, lay back, and slid off into a dark sleep.

The next morning he went down to the stream early. After he uncovered his cache and secured it inside the car's spare tire, he got behind the wheel to go, but something stopped him. He stared through the windshield at the larkspur, the myrtle, and the great bellowing fireweed that dotted the slopes like embroidery. He felt woozy suddenly, as if he were swaying with deep sea rapture out over whispering distances—becoming no one, everything, endless space.

Come alive! he snapped at himself and jerked upright behind the wheel. But it was no good. He felt that he had to get out of the car, and when he did it was like moving in a dream. He felt light as a cloud beginning to vanish. A shadow was spreading its anonymous dark over everything, and the air was becoming soft as rock seen underwater. His limbs were remote and rubbery and seemed to be moving by their own will. He let them guide him down the slope and through a swatch of burned reeds. When he stopped moving, he looked down, and there, huddled among crusts of dirt like a stunned animal, was the stone that had cut him.

It came away from the ground easily, and the dry dirt crumbled revealing a palm-sized green rock. When he had first seen it, wet, he thought that color was moss. But the green and the oily shine were its own strange attributes, and when he saw them again, the dizziness and the nausea returned.

Henley moved to heave it away, but something about the patterning on the rock stopped him. Looking closely, he saw that it was engraved with sharp cuneiformlike designs. He ran his fingers over them, studied again the fine cutting edge, and turned to take it back with him.

The return walk to the car was uneventful. His body no longer felt light. It was hungry, and he decided to find a restaurant and eat. On the highway, he turned toward the city impulsively. He wanted to wheel around and go west, but it was impossible to do more than speculate about that. He felt stoned and uneasy, and he stopped several times to question his motives, but each time he stopped an overriding urgency, razor-apt, urged him back into his car. When he arrived in New York, his clothes were soaked through with a cold sweat.

He returned the rented car and took a room at the Elton on East Twenty-sixth. There he unbagged the heroin and repeatedly touched it with his fingertips. It had become the primary purpose in his life, yet he was doing everything with it wrong.

He took a pinch of it, divided it into two thin slivers, and used his thumbnail to snort them. A few moments later, he was drifting slowly and powerfully through the cool red light of day's end. He mastered a small spasm of nausea and floated to the corner of his cot where he sat down, all of the day's problems already on the point of an energetic solution.

An hour later the room was darkening. Stern shadows, deep as oil, gloomed on all sides. Everything seemed immense, and the apprehensions of the nightmare began to feel real. The cutting stone, propped up on the windowsill, pulsed a dull incandescent green. *It's drug-action,* he reassured himself, but he wasn't confident. Fear hazed around him like a thunder charge. He realized that at any moment the horror could begin again. Something dark and cold as an ocean current was tugging at him, pulling him away.

He touched the bedspread to reassure himself. It was death-cold flesh! He hopped off the bed in terror before he saw that he had touched the metal backpost.

He breathed deeply to calm himself. It came to him that the nightmare was still there, somewhere deeper, much deeper than awareness. It was continuing. It had never stopped. Like the thunder beginning too late to remember the light, his mind was shivering in the afterfall of an intractable doom. Clearly, he saw that it was only a matter of time before the darkness welling within, surged up. He sat shivering in the twilight and resolved to contact Rapf. He had to unload the heroin. If he went into a coma and was found with it, it would be better if he never woke up.

There was a pay phone in the lobby. Henley called Rapf's apartment, and the phone rang a long time before it was answered by a basso-rumble voice he didn't recognize. Henley hung up immediately. His hands were trembling so violently that it took him five minutes to dial correctly an alternate number Rapf had given him. A woman answered and said she hadn't seen Rapf in days and had no idea where he was. Henley told her his name and where he was staying and then hung up.

He went back to his room and closed, bolted, and chained the door before he noticed the green luminance glowing in the darkness. It pulsed brighter as he turned, and he saw that the cutting stone was emitting a haze of light. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust and to recognize that it wasn't light at all but a gas or a vaporous plasma that was deliquescing as it sublimed from the rock.

Henley stood for a long time, mesmerized. It was a tricky gas. Against the dark windowpanes, it was feathered and iridescent. Along the ceiling, it was billowing in small dark streams. But Henley was watching the stone. There the vapor was folding over on itself slowly, like a flower blossoming. It entranced him, and he kept his gaze fixed on it until something of another texture altogether appeared in its depths. There against the surface of the jade-colored rock, a shiny wet substance was oozing. Slowly a knob of clear jelly striated with smoky colors bulbed out. It extended a pseudopod and slimed along the edge of the sill.

The light switch was to his left, and Henley snapped it on. Nothing happened. The tungsten coils glowed red in the light bulbs, but the room stayed semidark, crepuscular in the thin vapor light of the stone.

A cold finger touched Henley between his shoulder blades, and he shuddered and spun about to leave. As his hands fumbled with the dead bolt, a horrible thing happened. The idiot's voice, scrawny and demonic as in his nightmare, called out from behind: *Fear arrives like a runner. Shut your ears big, Henley, and look—shadows go by long after the bodies have passed. Your eyes blow backward.*

Henley whimpered and turned from the door. The ichor squeezing from the stone had stretched into a membrane and was quivering in the air like a sea plant. It was still pulling from the rock, and in the half-light Henley thought that he could see a net of fine blue capillaries webbed over it. He was overwhelmed by a frantic urge to flee, but the voice, booming in his head, held him fast: *Dark carries you, broods like wells in the deep ground. You can't run, nowhere to run, for you and I are the same.*

A soft moan forced itself out of Henley's lungs, and he pivoted to run. The dead bolt clanked open, and the chain lock jangled free before there was a loud popping noise behind him followed by a frying sizzle. Henley glanced over his shoulder as he fidgeted with the door latch. The viscous protoplast had snapped free, and it was swimming through the air toward him, a small shimmering mass the size of his fist. Curly-edged feathers of flesh trailed below it, as from a jellyfish, and the whole bulk, dimpled with blood spots, arrowed for his head.

Henley swung the door open and bolted into the corridor just as the tendrilous thing caught up with him from behind. Icy snug fingers wrapped around the back of his head and over his ears. Something hard and needle-sharp was pressing against the nape of his neck, forcing the base of his skull. He scrambled for the stairway, stumbled, and fell. The corridor went suddenly white, as if blasted by lightning. There was a hot piercing pain between his eyes, and Henley understood, with a spasm of terror, that the thing had punctured his skull!

He lurched to his feet, jerked forward a pace, and plunged over the stairwell with a stammering cry. He bounced off the top steps and went careening over the banister into space. There was an awful moment when it felt as if his head were rupturing at the seams, and then the blur of steps braked. Henley could see the yellowed flower wallpaper spin off gracefully to one side as the stairs swung up from below. He was floating. The hug of gravity was strong around his waist, and he sensed something within him pushing out, buckling space around him so that his descent was very slow. Only the piercing ivory pain that pithed him through the back of his neck to a point between his eyes, kept him from marveling.

Abruptly, the pain cracked, shot down his spine, and cramped his bowels. There was a terrifying explosion, and the stoop of stairs that he was settling toward banged apart and splintered across the vacant lobby like a broken vase. Henley slapped to the ground amid a patter of dislodged plaster and lay there stunned, trying not to faint.

His stomach muscles knotted again, and he was hoisted to his feet by a powerful surge of strength. There was some movement down at the opposite end of the lobby, but he couldn't make sense out of it in the whistling deafness. Mechanically, his body turned, swung over the blasted stoop, and lumbered up the stairs. In his room, Henley collapsed.

On the floor, some sense of self-control returned. His head was throbbing, and there were trickles of dark, almost black blood dripping over his cheeks from the back of his head. With one finger, he felt the nape of his neck. There was a deep hole in it, too painful to probe. He swayed to his feet and leaned against the wall. People were scurrying up and down the hall.

Gradually, one thought cleared itself from the terror trilling through him. It was his cache. Despite the horror, he had to think about his stash. Quietly and quickly as possible, he shuffled over to the night table and sealed the cotton ditty bag with the heroin in it. He debated for a moment about flushing it down the toilet and getting himself to a hospital, but that idea was too closed. He felt trapped and terrified. There was the smell of something broken in

the air, and he knew that he had to get away and think all of this through.

There was a fire escape outside his window, and he clambered down it to the street. Two cop cars had pulled up in front of the Elton, so he skipped down the alley and jumped a fence to Twenty-seventh Street. He was glistening with sweat and shaking ferociously. Whatever it was that had leaked out of the rock and attacked him, it had burrowed into his skull. He could feel part of it quavering at the mouth of the puncture wound it had made. It sickened him with despair, and he wanted to get help immediately, heroin or no, but he couldn't stop walking. His body marched on mechanically, sleepwalking. His eyes were glazed like small brown fruits, and those that saw him approaching gave way, widely.

The moon sang down around him, grim and cool, and he walked on and on, sticking to the darker cross streets. Finally, hours later, he stopped. He was on a tiny side street, virtually an alley, whose name he hadn't seen. A shopfront door with iron bratticing opened and an old, old man, skin grey and hackled as bark, urged him in. The old man leaned forward like a dead tree and studied him with eyes as bright as pins. Visions had made his face unearthly, scorched-looking, between the silver wires of hair. He wore a mantle sewn with seashells and porcupine-quill scrollwork, and he stood still, hooded like a cobra, silent, beckoning Henley with a sway of his head to enter.

Henley stepped a pace into the shop, faltered a moment as he surveyed the place. One wall was covered with the wing-feather fan of an eagle. A stuffed monkey hung by its genitals from the ceiling, which was crusted with black mussel shells. The odor of the room was sticky. In a polished clawfoot burner with talons spread, an orange lump of olibanum squatted, and as Henley slowly pivoted to view the coils of a white python on one of the rafters, the hognose head watching him with dusty eyes, the old man lit the incense coals. The yellow vapors wafted over the rickety shelf, seethed over husks of seahorses, the molt of a tarantula, red-speckled seabird eggs, and amber and green bottles stoppered with the thumbs of apes.

The room was glimmering with the trills of canaries. The lizards that would eventually devour them drowsed below in cages crafted

from twigs. A yellow and papery light, filtered through tall lanterns stained with images of serpents and squids, gave everything an umber cast. In that light the old man, who had closed the door and was now motioning Henley to sit, looked ageless.

Henley sat in the corner and watched anxiously as the old man approached, his trouser legs hissing. He held a thin bone whistle to his lips and blew a brittle note. "I been waitin' a long time for you." With a womb-soft tread, he stepped closer. *"Cthulhu fhtagn!"* he spit, and Henley felt a surge of strength. The old man was wrapped in a cloak of shadow. "You knaw nuthin' 'bout what has you. Well, I got to say, dat is best." He leaned far forward out of the shadows, and Henley saw that he had only one eye. The other had been replaced by a shard of mirror, and seeing his reflection in it, he grew faint. Henley's eyes were so widely dilated, there were no whites showing, and around the corners of his mouth a scaly blackness was crusted. "You knaw nuthin' 'bout de way dat has you. And dat be good. Dat be best good." He pulled the bone whistle to his parched mouth and sucked a sea chant, a modal hymn, through it that seemed to come from all around, like a sound heard underwater. Listening to it, Henley felt both as if his life were a small animal dying in a bottle and as if he would live forever in the open spaces of lone birds.

Rapf's head was going bad. There had been too many lousy breaks, and he was getting to feel threatened. When he learned that Henley had signed out of St. Vincent's, he went to a gunshop and got several extra clips for the Walther automatic. It was too heavy to stay in the city, so he drove out to his sister's place in Stony Brook. By the time he got there, Henley's message had come through, and Rapf wheeled back into New York. At the Elton the cops had left, but there were several people in the lobby, grouped together, mumbling. Nobody had any idea what had happened.

Henley's door was unlocked, and Rapf entered without knocking. Except for a squelchy odor in the air and several drops of dark blood on the floor, the place was vacant as a sucked egg. The lights were on, and the window was open. When he went over to check the fire escape, he spotted a small dull rock with curious etchings on it. Rapf at first thought it was a paperweight, but when

he examined it more closely, he recognized that it was like nothing he had ever seen before. He pocketed it, searched the bathroom scrupulously, and left.

He rarely got drunk, but when he did he became so tight that only violence could unspool him. He went down to the Red Witch and got skunked enough to call his old field captain. The last time he had seen Vince Pantucci was in Can Tho when they were spreading a little lead around some of the villages, hoping to enrage the Cong. Shortly afterward, Rapf was caught smuggling M-16s out of the country. Pantucci was the ring's honcho, but Rapf did two years in the clam without fingering him. Since then, Pantucci had completed his tour and walked. Rapf knew he was in the city. He had been hearing tales about him for over a year. The man was mean. He was the only person that Rapf knew who could really move weight—other than Gusto. And he wasn't talking to Gusto.

Getting in touch with Pantucci was difficult. He was big time now, and he stayed low. Eventually Rapf had to drop a few lines about gun running to make contact. An hour later, Pantucci stalked into the Red Witch. He was big, wide as an oven, with arms like dock ropes and tight brass-red curls that boiled up around his neck from under his silk shirt. His dark cave-sitter eyes spotted Rapf instantly, and he muscled into the booth where he was sitting, said, "What's the take, clothead?"

"I need a favor."

Pantucci rolled his eyes. He had the face of an Etruscan—ethereal cheekbones, high flat forehead, and skin the color of baked earth pulled tight over his skull. "What's it gonna be, monk? Cash?"

"Look, captain . . ."

"The captain *is* looking, Rapf, and he don't like what he sees. You're strung out, ain't you?"

"Nah, cap. I'm clean, but I got caught sidewise in a sour deal."

"Dope?"

"Yeah."

"What? Ganja?"

"Another class. Schmeck."

"How much?"

"More than two kilos."

Pantucci made a face like he smelled something disgusting. He slapped Rapf on the cheek and twisted his ear till it hurt. "You jooch." He pulled Rapf by his ear halfway across the table until their noses were practically touching. "You move dub with strangers until you get boxed. Then you cry for me. Right? Why didn't you come to me in the first place?"

Rapf pulled himself away and slumped in the corner, looking vaguely disgruntled. "Didn't know you moved it."

"You bullshit so much your molars are brown. Thought you'd get more play elsewhere, eh? Or was it that two years in the can made me look ugly? Who's the muscle?"

"Gusto."

Pantucci coughed up a thick salty wafer of phlegm, let it lay hot on his tongue for a moment, then hawked it into the sawdust. "What a weasel you are. What'd you expect from woolheads? You think you're a brother?" He stared for a moment into the thin cold eyes opposite him, engaging the emptiness he saw there. They were the most remote eyes he had ever known. They reminded him of Ia Drang Valley and long swamp roads. He shook his head and looked away. "Give me the plot."

"Easton's brother Henley copped in Seattle and crossed to the city while I lined up Gusto. Along the way something happened. He went into a coma. None of the meds could pin it. By the time I found him in St. Vs, Gusto was working on me. Now I know Henley's got the stuff, but he lit out. I guess he still thinks I was responsible for his brother getting blown away at Ngoc Linh. We patrolled together. I don't know. I was thinking you might find him."

"So you can cop and deliver to Gusto? I don't work for nates, mongoose."

"Yeah, well I do." The wings of Rapf's nostrils whitened. His hands were under the table. "My ass is on the line. You going off on me, captain?"

"How do you even know Henley has it?"

"I don't. But I got to ride something."

Pantucci looked down at his hands, which were barked with callus. He liked Rapf. He looked intense, but he knew he could trust him. "Give me the man's profile."

"You think you can find him?"
"It's on the rails."

Pantucci had a villa in the mountains where he set up Rapf. There was an indoor swimming pool there and a live-in maid and cook. There was also a metalworking shop for retooling stolen goods. Rapf spent a few hours in the shop trying to bore a hole in the strange rock he had found in Henley's room. It was no good. The rock was harder than any known substance. An automatic drill press with a diamond bit didn't even scratch it. Rapf was amazed but too preoccupied with evening the score with Henley to think much about it. He liked the rock. He liked its heft and its silky texture. It was the size of his palm with a few natural holes on its edge. Eventually he was able to thread some wire through one of the holes, and he wore the rock around his neck like a talisman.

A few days later, Pantucci found Rapf catnapping on the veranda beneath a vine-tangled trellis. Trembling smells of cedar bark and pine riffled in the air. Sunlight buzzed off dusty rocks. "I found him," Pantucci whispered.

Rapf leaped out of the sunchair. "Where?"

"He left an hour ago for Haiti." He waved a packet of paper slips. "Here's your ticket and passport. There will be money at the airport—and a gun permit. Go in peace, jooch. And remember. We're even."

Rapf arrived in Port-au-Prince wearing dark glasses, a USMC muscle shirt, and black flight pants tucked into steel-tipped boots. He carried an attaché with a few changes of underwear, twenty-five hundred dollars in traveler's checks, five hundred dollars cash, and his Walther automatic. On the flight, he'd taken his butterfly out of the attaché and slipped it into one of the many pockets on his trouser leg.

As he was deplaning, Rapf scanned the crowd, but there were so many black faces, it was impossible to eye any of Gusto's goofers. It wasn't until he was shouldering through the mob in the pavilion that he was sure they were laying for him. He felt hard metal pressing against his spine.

"Awright, pogue, you're comin' with me."

He recognized the voice. It was the hit man he had tumbled in the parking lot. He was nudging Rapf out of the crowd with the barrel of his gun. Rapf groaned loudly and dropped to the ground. As he fell, he palmed the butterfly, sprung it open under his chest, and swiveled his attaché to block the gun. The goofer turned and bent down to free his gun for a shot. As he did so, Rapf rolled and stood up quick, forcing the barbed end of the blade between the man's ribs. With a neat twist, he severed the aorta and yanked his knife free by pushing the man away.

The crowd was dispersing fast, and Rapf lost himself in the knots of scurrying people. A few minutes later, he was in a cab heading into town. He booked into a cheap hotel in the East End and began asking around for Henley. No one in the city had seen him, and on his second day he went out to the dirt-farmer markets near the shantytowns. He had bought a white jellaba, and, despite the heat, he wore it so that he could carry his Walther inconspicuously. It was only a matter of time before Gusto's men would hunt him down.

In the native-dominated marketplaces, the talisman drew a lot of attention. No one would touch it, but everyone wanted to see it. Three boys with the feral air of bay pirates—brash gold teeth, oil-soaked T-shirts, reversed crucifixes—tried to tug it off his neck. They questioned Rapf about it first, mumbled something in a language he didn't recognize, and then, just when he realized that he had missed some sort of cue, one of them snatched at the rock. The wire cord it was on bit into Rapf's neck and held. His eyes tightened to a squint, and he elbowed the boy in the mouth. The other two drew long cruel knives from their thigh sheaths.

Rapf spun on his heels and spartled in and out between the stalls heading toward the alleys of the shantytown. The boys ran after him, whooping and throwing fruit and rocks. In the alley, Rapf stopped short and curled around, both hands holding his Walther automatic way out in front. The boys fell over each other trying to pull up. They backpedaled slowly, and at the mouth of the alley one of them made a gesture Rapf didn't understand and cried, *"Cthulhu fhtagn!"* The sound of his voice had a shrill, frightening

quality that unsettled Rapf more than the sight of their knives had. He decided to call it a day.

Henley Easton had lost complete control of his body. It moved by another will, and he merely observed. The last days that he spent in his body were riddled with madness. The body itself began to alter rapidly after he found his way to the old man in New York. The old one's name was Autway, and he was a sorcerer, that is, he was a Voudoun *gangan.* He carried a calabash filled with snake vertebrae, and whenever he rattled it, the men in his presence responded. He never had to speak directly to them. The sound of the calabash was sufficient instruction.

When Henley's body began to change, Autway provided loose-fitting white trousers and a wide-sleeved anorak with a hood that allowed him to move freely and didn't chafe his sensitive skin. A black squamous growth that had begun around his foot wound and his mouth spread quickly over his limbs and torso, itching terribly and emitting a thick putrefying odor. Autway salved his flesh with the pulp of crushed roots, and that somewhat eased the discomfort.

For over a week, they kept him in a spacious cellar hung with draperies of dark nubbling. Autway came down frequently with younger men, all of them dark with wide faces that had the cast of full-blood Indians. For hours at a stretch, they rattled gourds and chanted, *"Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn."* The sounds they intoned had a peculiar effect on Henley. Hearing them, he felt star-calm, crazy-alive, glittering with energy. The rhythms were a vortex around him. It was a mutable, luculent sound, sometimes dark as the sea, sometimes streaming fire. Often, it would charge him so full of power that his body would rise and move about in lithe, sleek movements. The others would imitate him best as they could, but none could match the demonic fury with which his body wheeled and careened.

By the time they left for Haiti, Henley's face was darkened with scales. The ears, cheeks, forehead, and scalp were still clear, but he had the mouth of an iguana, and his eyes were ringed with black circles. There were some febrile explanations at the airport about how sickly he was, but no one made a big fuss.

On the island, Autway brought him far out to North End to a trench hut on the mountainous outskirts of the slums. There the chants continued, only now there were many more people, kettle drums, torch parades, and the ceremony of *zilet en bas de l'eau,* the worship of an undersea island. At the peak of the ceremony, elderly devotees gouged themselves to death with sharp stones. Henley watched on in horror as his body danced its insane, impossible movements. His fingers were gradually becoming webbed, and his joints rearranged so that he could move his body as could no other human.

During the days, he walked about restlessly. With the anorak pulled up over his head, his body swayed through the shantytowns. He seemed to hover over the ground, shifting his weight like so much smoke. The breeze wherever he went was full of patterns, and there were always shadows flitting around him without any apparent source. Seeing him coming, workers stopped in the fields and blew high lonely notes on whistles made from the wing bones of seabirds.

Once, as he drifted down the back road of a slum, a very tall woman with yellow eyes and wild crow-feather hair came out of a shack carrying a child. She laid the infant in the white dust, stood before Henley, and lifted her skirts. Her eyes were charged with sorrow like a dying horse, and Henley understood that the baby was dead. With long fingers, she touched her breast, then slowly, slowly, her sullen eyes staring, she glided the tips of her fingers down over her belly to the cloud of hair below. That moment, a swirl of shadows like a shifting pattern of clouds played around the small corpse, and it stirred. There was a muffled outcry from the onlookers who had stayed hidden in their huts. The woman fell to the side of her child, her face slippery with tears of joy. But Henley could see there would be a horrible price to pay. The baby was looking up at him not with the wonder-bright gaze of an infant but with a fully alert, seductive stare that promised violent knowledge deeper than innocence or guilt.

Another time, on a side street in North End, two blacks wearing cutoff denims and bulky pajama-striped jackets over clean white T-shirts confronted him. They looked malicious. One was missing

half of an ear. The other had on a large hat and dark glasses. The one with the glasses had grabbed his arm, but when he felt the spongy consistency of it, he let it go like a hot wire and jumped back. The abruptness of his action spun Henley around to face them and dropped back the hood of his anorak. The two men gaped slack-faced, unable to move for a long moment. Then the one with half an ear drew a gun out of his jacket. Henley's stomach muscles tightened in a spasm, and the gunman was blown backward, tumbling to the ground. Henley drew his hood up, walked down the street, and turned a corner. In the secluded alley, his stomach knuckled again, and he was hoisted into the air, light-stepping over tin roofs until he settled into a garden patch several houses away.

Henley was no longer awed by such feats. The terror of being dislocated from his will had numbed him to all surprise. The memories of his previous life were remote, and he watched the events shaping themselves around him as if in a dream. Even when Autway led him up into the mountains to see the star pools, he was unmoved.

Beyond the spectral shapes of moss and fern and tall cypresses that spired above enchanted swamps, far up in the smoky hills, they came to a series of large ponds devoid of all vegetation. The sides were banked with hewn logs and packed gravel, the work of many generations. On their shores at irregular intervals were monoliths of black rock, the inscriptions carved into them exhausted by time.

Standing there, beneath a quail's-breast sky, with the wind blowing in off the pools and swirling around their heels like a discarded garment, Autway let out a low moan and began chanting. The red light of dusk was moving as it if were a breeze on the water. They stood facing east until darkness had settled around them. Henley's body was becoming very excited. He felt a ringing in his collar bones at the sound of the old man's droning voice, and the thick muscles massed in his legs were stirring. Barely able to remain still, his shuffling feet sounding like breath, his breath like a forgotten language, he watched the stone star, the moon, rise over the black water.

By moonlight, he could see something stirring under the water. There were many shapes, massed as one shadow. They were

moving closer beneath the surface, and the expectation of their arrival nailed his breath. A splash sounded far to the left followed by a loud scuttling noise on the rocks. Something was approaching.

Henley's body unsealed its breath and breathed deeply. Slow as a planet, it turned to face the darkness. Labored wingbeats sounded from a distance. A hulk loomed on the dark edge of the pool. Outlined in moonlight, Henley couldn't make sense of it. It was writhing gouts of flesh, a tangle of limbs, and then, abruptly, it narrowed and slipped back beneath the glass-grained water.

A torpid languor overcame Henley's body. It felt heavy, tired. Autway took him by the elbow, which was gelatinous and limp, and steered him away from the shining water. He felt wrong. His body had never felt so weary before. By the time they got back to trenchtown, he was stiff, almost rigid with exhaustion.

The next day, Autway led him out to a remote channel where the shore was thickly covered with limestone dust that fluffed in from the quarries. Three white huts squatted on the shore, and, beyond them, an albino horse was corralled. Henley's curiosity about the previous night dissolved in a fright of recognition. To his left, drifting in the lazy current, was a white catboat with one man standing up in it.

Autway rattled his calabash, and the boatman steered toward shore. With great trepidation, Henley watched him moor his boat and remove a black jug.

"De lurkers will naw come until we purge you," Autway said.

Purge me! Henley thought with terror, watching the white horse's pink eyes staring at him while it champed. He wanted to face Autway, but his body wouldn't move.

"Yas. We must make room for de Host. We gone take you out. Too bad we can't kill you, but dat dere is bad for de Host. You naw get with your bruthers, *les morts*. Nyarlathotep cotch you and now let go. De *l'eau noir,* de black waters cotch you. You gone dere. You gone to go."

The boatman was approaching with the jug in his hands. His face was cretinous, blank and washed as the sky.

Autway stepped closer, whispered in his ear. "If even de earth itself knew. But dere is naw way to know. Speak to de dead and what do dey say? 'I can be anyone you need.' Give up de terrible

arrogance of de past, give up de root of de present, and all dat de future can tell you is where it is you was never goin'."

Henley's bones filled with a cold mist as the idiot offered Autway the jug. The *gangan* took it reverently and turned to face Henley. His face was a crust of harsh planes, and the shard of mirror was clouded. He spoke, and there was steel in his voice. "Silence be your shepherd. What is beneath you be triumphant."

Autway tilted the jug so that its mouth gaped before Henley's eyes. Its darkness mawed and he felt himself leaning out of his body toward it. He looked down, and there were lights, tiny and dim, moving there. They swung closer, and he saw that they were swirls of stars, galaxies, misty ballerinas flying apart through a dread night. He was falling, baffled, booming with fear. The midnight black gulfed him, and there would have been a scream, a yowl, but for the soundlessness of those blind depths.

Rapf rounded the corner of the scabrid hotel where he had left his attaché. He peered through a chink in the wall that he had made with his knife when he first moved in. There was movement within, and he cursed under his breath when he saw that it was Duke Parmelee and Hi-Hat Chuckie Watz. They had scattered his underwear on the floor and were cutting open the mattress of his bed.

Rapf entered the hotel and edged up to his door. He unholstered his Walther, touched the body-warmed metal to his lips, and banged into the room.

Crouched in the doorway with his gun swinging from man to man, he hissed, "You move, screwfaces, and I'll kill you!"

Rapf entered and closed the door behind him. Quick as wit, he had the two men sprawled against the wall while he removed their weapons. The Duke was carrying a forty-five Magnum, a switchblade, and a pair of handcuffs. Hi-Hat had handcuffs, a thirty-eight, a serried blade in a sleeve-harness, and a hand-grip fitted with razor blades. "Feisty," Rapf said, waving the knuckle-grip. He threw it down on the bed with the other weapons and made the men crouch down with their heads between their knees. With his foot, he pulled off their shoes and kicked them across the room. "Okay, eggplants, strip down," he said, and when they hesitated,

he kicked each of them in the butt so hard their heads clunked against the wall.

When they were naked, he had them handcuff their right wrists to their left ankles, then he lowered his gun and picked up Hi-Hat's serried blade. "You know, my better judgment says I oughta kill the two of you." He yanked the mattress off its springboard. "But I believe in justice." Using the thick blade as a lever, he pried loose two hard-coiled springs and all the wire they were attached to. "Now, you fellas were real cordial to me the last time we met. And I feel obliged to reciprocate." He pried loose more wire and began intertwining it. When he had a long length of tightly reeved wire, he measured it against the length of their bodies and made a few adjustments. "It's a good thing I got an even temper or I'd mutilate you skanks. But, as my mom used to say, I don't get mad. I get even."

"Gusto wants you wasted, wimp," the Duke growled. "So you better kill us while you got the chance."

"You should be so lucky." Rapf laughed, took more measurements with the wire and fashioned it into two crude harnesses. "I got a little Cong trick I wanna pull on you monkeys. Besides, I don't want you dead. I want Henley."

"Forget Henley," Chuckie whispered.

"Why so, pretty boy?"

"Henley's freaked."

"Yeah? Well, reserve your opinions till after I jump him."

"Man, Henley's out," the Duke said. "I mean he's not even human anymore."

Rapf smiled. He had finished. He used the Duke's switchblade to cut their clothes into long cords out of which he made binding. As he was tying Hi-Hat's ankles together, the Duke swung around with his free hand and sunk his fingers into the back of his neck. Rapf's knife hand whipped back and skewered the Duke's palm.

"Mother!" Rapf bawled. He rubbed the back of his neck and pointed the bloodied tip of his knife at the Duke who sat silent and brooding. "For that you jokers are gonna get an added attraction." He finished binding their legs and arms and undid the handcuffs. Gently and with some pride, he slipped the nooses of wire around

their necks. The nooses were adjustable and attached to another wire that he hooked by an ingenious rider-knot to the springs. He did the same with their feet before handcuffing them and cutting off the rags.

"The beauty of your situation, fellow deviants, is that the more you struggle, the tighter the wire gets. If you squirm enough, you die. But if you're good and sit rock-steady, somebody, someday, may find you here."

Rapf stuffed their underwear into their mouths and gagged them with a rag-cord. Before leaving, he pulled the shade and put the weapons and his clothes and money in his attaché. In the lobby, he found the proprietor. His eyes were meat-colored and his mouth a black hole, sucked in. With strained courtesy, Rapf paid the money to rent his room for another month.

There were rats in the back alley, and after some hassle, Rapf managed to box two big ones. He hauled the oil-soaked box to his room and let them loose. Hi-Hat jerked violently when he saw them, and the wire drew blood from his throat. "Don't get excited, boys. This is just my way of saying good-bye." He closed the door and fidgeted with the lock until he was able to jam it closed.

Rapf headed north. For several days he went in and out of small hill villages asking about Henley. No one had seen him, and even if they had, Rapf had the distinct feeling he'd be the last one they would tell. Wherever he went he was sure he was being followed. Once, he glanced over his shoulder to see one of the young bay pirates working a nail into a footprint he'd left in the dust. The people he met were awed by his talisman, but no one would speak with him. Finally one morning, after finding a rusted jackknife near his campfire, the blade closed on a shred of paper with his crude likeness scrawled on it, he decided to call it quits. He still had most of the money Pantucci had given him, and he considered going someplace exotic to hide out from Gusto.

The next day he spotted Henley. Or what looked like Henley. Rapf saw the coral-red hair from a long way off. It was in a decrepit trenchtown several kilometers out of North End. Here and there among the glinting litter of tin and broken glass a seabird poked,

some perched on stumps and tall bamboo poles. Above, a high wind was thinning clouds into long fish shapes. A lone bird was riding a ring of wind.

Rapf kept his eye on the red hair as he jogged into town, his attaché wagging beside him, his white jellaba swelling behind. The closer he got, the less like Henley it looked. For one, the character was too tall, way over six feet. And there was something about the way he was standing, legs akimbo, head tilted to the side like a puppet, that wasn't Henley and, very nearly, wasn't human. But his back was to him, and Rapf wasn't sure.

His attention was so rigidly fixed on the figure ahead standing alongside a rusted-out jeep with large eyes painted on its fender, that Rapf didn't see the old man. He stepped from behind a tar-paper shack and grabbed Rapf by the arm. His hold was peculiarly strong. When Rapf turned to face him, he had to squint. Sunlight flashed from his face in a glare.

" 'Scuse me, fella. My name is Autway. I want words with you."

Autway turned his face, and Rapf saw himself in the mirror shard of his eye. "What do you want, old man?"

"Dat mon over dere is not de mon you lookin' for."

"How do you know I'm looking for anybody?"

Autway shook his calabash. He had a dog-crucifix around his neck, and he touched it. "I'm a *gangan*. I know why you are here."

"Yeah? Why's that?"

"To find Henley Easton."

Rapf's eyes narrowed. For one delirious moment he thought he had been found by one of Gusto's men. But then the old man rolled his eye and leered, showing black teeth. He wasn't one of Gusto's.

"How do you know that?"

"I told you. I'm a *gangan*." He rattled the calabash, touched the dog-crucifix. "You are Michael Rapf, eh?"

Rapf screwed up his face, reached out to grab the old man's stained mantle, thought better of it. "Yeah, and who fingered me? Henley?"

"Naw. I'm a *gangan*."

Rapf shook his fist at Autway. "You will be gone-gone if you don't start giving me some straight answers."

Autway nodded. His hair was like tangled hawthorn, and he brushed it back. "You have to leave—quick. Dat is not Henley. Henley is afar us all."

Rapf put his attaché down. "He's dead?"

"Worse. Naw dead—afar us all."

Rapf stared through the curtains of heat at the tall man alongside the jeep. Some young men were around him, and looking closely, he saw that they were the toughs that had pulled knives on him. "Mister, I haven't understood a thing you've told me."

"Den I will be forward. Dis voudoun salango. Dere is nuthin' like dis in de States. All power and weirding. Dat mon over dere *was* Henley Easton. But naw more. He is utterly changed."

Autway moved his calabash gently, and the tall man, as if hearing it, turned. When Rapf saw the man's face, he knew at once that it was Henley. They were his eyes. That was the line of his jaw. That was his hair. But that was all that was his. The skin was an oily black. Not negroid, but ink black. And the body was all wrong. Bizarrely elongated, loose as a marionette. Seeing it standing there cool and lean, its eyes bright as nails, Rapf felt his mind peel away. He thought of spring clouds breaking up over a long line of cold lakes, and he felt as if an ocean current, dark, awesome, were sweeping him out beyond himself. It passed quickly, blurred off like the shadow of a fish. But it lasted long enough to instill in him a dread foreboding.

"What happened to him?"

"Dot you wouldn't understan'."

Rapf had to look away from Henley. He stared up at oyster-shell clouds, saw the full moon, a pale vapor in the day sky. "Tell me."

"De Old Ones—dey have corried Henley away. And dere, das dere messenger. Das Nyarlathotep. H-s-s-t!"

"Huh?"

"He de One dream Henley afar."

"How?"

Autway shook his head. "Best you ask why. How brings madness."

Henley had turned and walked off with the toughs, drifting away as if he were vapor. From someplace there was a thin mournful whistle.

"Dere are star pools in de hills. Up dere de minions take shape. B-r-r-r-p! De Kingdom been comin' for a long, long time."

"—"

"You see—dot you wouldn't understan'. It is de Kingdom. Nyarlathotep was de Key. De world de lock. Entering, de Key is de blindness in the lock's eye, de dream dat always returns."

Rapf ran a hand over his face. His fingers were trembling. He bent to pick up his attaché, but the old man laid a hand on his shoulder, rain-soft, urging him to wait.

"You want de drug?"

Rapf looked up at him with quiet eyes and straightened slowly. "You got the heroin?"

"You can have it. In exchange. For dat." He extended a knobbed coffee-colored finger and touched the talisman.

"You're kidding?"

Autway reached into his mantle and pulled out a large cotton ditty bag.

"Let me see that." Rapf snatched the bag and tugged it open. He fingered the powder inside and touched it to his tongue. His head snapped back, and he grinned. "You got a deal." He pulled tight the bag, bent down, and put it in his attaché. With one hand he secured the case lock, and with the other he removed the stone from around his neck and handed it to Autway.

As soon as the *gangan* got his hands on it, he let out a giddy laugh that twisted under his tongue like a cry and curved off into a howl. "You stupid mon. Reap de wind. Thresh stone. All is lost. You have thrown away your only hope." He whooped.

Rapf scowled and stood up, but Autway was already moving off. Rapf watched him disappear down the back wynds and alleys of a cluster of huts. Despite the fact that he at last had what he was looking for, he felt burned, and that was a dangerous way to feel.

He decided that he wanted the stone back. It was a dumb animal illumination, Rapf realized, but that hunk of rock was suddenly important and getting to mean more each second.

Attaché under his arm, Rapf loped down a cramped alley, leaping over stacks of rubbish and debris. When he rounded the first corner, he pulled up short, swiveled on his heels, and threw himself back out of the alley. He had his Walther out, and he sat

hunched behind his attaché as a man with a bison chest and a tight, sad smile came around the corner. It was Pantucci.

"Slow down, stooge," he said, swinging his hands free of his body. "If I was gunnin' for ya you'd be dead awready."

"Turn around, cap'm."

Pantucci spun about. "I'm light as a feather."

"Sure, sure, I'm Doctor Strange. Lift those pant legs."

The captain lifted his trousers to his knees. "I've been in your shadow for days, dupe. I was waitin' for you to connect."

"Yeah? Well, what's it to you?"

"Somebody's going to have to move that stuff. And all seriousness aside, Gusto wants you to cry more than he wants that dub."

"You're always best stating the obvious with a sense of awe."

"You don't think you can move that kind of weight yourself?"

"Captain, I know you haven't been dog-breathing me all these days to keep me out of trouble. You're here to make your good out of my bad. Now I know that. There's a small fortune of sin in this case. If you want a part of it, you're gonna have to do what I say."

"Okay. Shoot—not literally, chump."

Rapf didn't smile. "First, we'll leave your bag of lethal anecdotes in the alley where you dropped it. I saw that carry-bag. How many sappers have you got in it?"

"A Magnum."

"Great. The neighborhood kids'll love it." Rapf stood up and put his pistol away. "Next we're gonna find that old man I was talking with. He's got something of mine. After that, we'll talk percentages. Jake?"

Pantucci nodded, eyed the attaché.

"Oh, yeah," Rapf added, running his thumbnail along the length of his jaw. "Don't underestimate me, cap. You're a lot bigger, but I'm very, very fast."

They prowled the trenchtown for an hour, but there was no trace of Autway. Rapf decided to head up into the hills along the one path that was available. Four hours later, after much foraging through cypress groves and fern-matted glens, they heard the rattle of Autway's calabash.

Pantucci was restless and wanted to move toward the sound, but Rapf quieted him down, and he went off behind some bushes. Rapf moved up the trail a short ways and slipped into the chute of a granite outcropping that was hung with Spanish moss. Presently, Autway came padding along the trail. When Rapf burst out behind him, he bolted. His speed was incredible. If Pantucci hadn't been up ahead, he would have lost him.

Pantucci grabbed him by his mantle and threw him to the ground. Rapf came up quickly and pressed the barrel of his gun against the old man's ear. "Where's my stone, gone-gone?"

"Dots not yours."

Rapf swiped him across the face with the butt of his gun. "Your life's not mine, either, but I'm gonna take that, too, if you don't turn over that stone."

Autway's face was bleeding, and his one eye was open wide, red-webbed. "I dawn have it."

Rapf raised his gun to strike him again, but Pantucci moved to grab his wrist. Rapf rolled off in a blur, came up in a crouch with the Walther aimed at Pantucci's head. "Belay that, cap!"

"Rapf, it's just a friggin' rock!"

"Mister, he laughed at me. He laughed at me hard. It's not a friggin' rock to him."

"He was Huck Finnin' ya—making you think he got the better end."

Rapf shook his head. "Maybe. But I want that stone or I ain't leavin'."

Pantucci lifted Autway to his feet by his ears. "Awright, crabface, where is it? Talk fast and clear or I'll pop that eye like a grape."

"I dawn have it. It's back dere." He nodded over his shoulder.

"How far?"

"Far back. Deep in de forest."

Rapf grabbed a shock of Autway's hair and jerked him around. "Let's go get it."

"Hold on, Rapf. He's gonna lead us into trouble. His boys are probably in lurch back there."

Rapf opened his attaché and took out the forty-five and the thirty-eight. He checked to see if they were loaded, then he took the

knives and hand-grip out and threw them into the bushes. He shoved the attaché to Pantucci. "You carry Satan." He put the Walther in its holster and the thirty-eight under his belt. The forty-five he pressed against the back of Autway's head. "Drop your rattle here and march."

Autway undid his calabash and started up the trail. As they climbed higher, a stillness settled around them like fog. Even the grass and the leaves were still as if lost in thought. The trees became larger, thick-boled old trees. After a while they became so dense that only a few threads of light came through. In that calm undersea light, dolmens and giant wheels hewn out of rock and carved with curious oghams began to appear among the trees, most of them half-buried or peering through luxuriant growths.

Soon Pantucci started getting restless again. He looked back over his shoulder. "Rapf, we're being watched."

"Is that right? Well, try to look your best."

A kilometer later, the trail narrowed to a trace so tight they had to lean forward to pass. But there was a plangent breeze sifting through the forest.

"How much farther?"

Autway waved his hand, a gesture like wind in a sapling. "You go through dat brake up ahead and you dere. But go slow, mon. Go slow."

Pantucci pushed through a tangle of hedge growth, and Rapf shoved Autway after him. On the other side, they stopped and looked out across an expanse of pools with water green as fire. There were a half dozen of them, ellipsoid, mirror flat, separated by huge mammocked trees and grasslands swaying in a fumy and spiritous mist. Beyond them, the horizon hazed into jungle. A green glow hung in the sky, waving over the rim of the world.

Pantucci was gazing into the water, ensorcelled by pale sketches of coral shaped like ladders. There was a nutant look on his face. "This is a dream," he said.

It is eerie, Rapf thought, focusing on a drowsy sound—the whittled-down thunder of waves shogging to shore faraway. He looked hard at the glades of blue trees, some growing out of the water, bent like witches. He had to shake his head to snap out of it.

With the barrel of his gun, he turned Autway around. The *gangan*'s face was calm and dark as amber. "Where is it, pop?"

"With dat which came from it." The seamed face grinned cretinously.

On the opposite side of the nearest pool, from behind a massive shaggy tree trunk, the long man with black skin emerged. He was naked, elongated, unreal, and there was a sheen on his shoulders that made them look like glass. It was a peculiar body light that addled the air around him. He glided through the grass like an apparition, his arms writhing, unjointed, undulant. Even as far off as he was, rounding the turn of the pool, it was obvious that he was not human. The flesh was crumbling off his bones like soaked bread, and the bones themselves were long and rubbery.

Rapf fired without thinking. The bullet stopped him. Or seemed to. But the wrinkled air around him kept coming. It was like a sheet of rain—static, warped air, transparent but vibrantly distorted. As it approached, a whistle, very high, far, faraway, twined in their ears. Before anyone could move, it became a shrill-pitched wail, a projectile nose-diving through the atmosphere. Then the trembling sheet of air swept over them, and the intensity jumped to a spinning siren. The whine became a needle skewed between their eyes, crashing them to the ground, fluttering rags. The ringing agony drilled into the bones of their teeth, shook vision to splinters, exploded louder with each heartbeat. The shriek was white hot, and they knew it would kill them. Nyarlathotep was screaming.

Then, like a slamming door, the wailing stopped. But their ears kept roaring. They were deaf as sod and would have sat there in the rusted grass swaying like old women except for what they became aware was happening around them. All three of them saw it at once. Rapf quivered like a gong and Pantucci let out a pitiful moan. Autway began to laugh, then to howl.

Henley's black and distorted body was writhing on the ground in the most inhuman way, the head bending backward to the feet, the waist twisting full around. There was a vast greasy hole in its torso where the bullet had struck, and that gap was widening and ripping. The body was peeling away, cracking open like a pod, droozing a quivering cheesy bladder—the delirious, gelatinous body of Nyarlathotep.

It was massive. By some abominable infusion, it swelled to twice the size of the body it hatched from. Its surface was covered with something sticky, a black sap, bubbling, running off at the sides,

carrying with it a bed of pearls, shiny curdled clods of milk, thick clusters of eggs. Something like pinworms needled over the gummy black silk, glimmering with a rabid bacterial fire. The body it pulled from was reduced to a cake of filaments that crumbled and lapsed with blue volts to dusty embers cooking in a soft camarine light. Then the thick singed-grease odors wafted across the field to them, and Pantucci began to retch.

Rapf couldn't take his eyes off the thing. It was hovering a few meters off the ground, its jelly sac bloated with webs of blue-pulsing veins. Tendrils, lion-red, flayed open around mouthlike gaping seams that writhed below the bulbed body. The tentacles were pushing it off, into the air, and it was lifting, its hideous rippled hulk was rising up over the puddling mess of its cocoon.

Rapf heaved himself to his feet. He wanted to flee, to bolt like wind, but another horror had fixed him. The pond was churning. Dense forms were rising to their shadows and breaking the surface. Webbed appendages lashed among the foaming waters—flat faces, lizard-eyed shark maws splashed toward shore. Autway was standing before them, his arms outspread, his wild hair whipped by his ecstatic movements.

The forms that were bobbling toward the bank were soaked black with the leakage and seepings of a putrid hell. Autway was savagely dancing, and Rapf heard him—he knew it was impossible, his ears were gluey with blood—but nonetheless he heard his cracked voice vomiting its laughter in his skull: *"Nightmarer! Domn mine enemies. And corry me. Corry me afar de dream. Vever dos miroir! O Nyarla! Sonde miroir! Nyarlathotep!"* And then he was gone. A humped, bubbling gob lurched out of the pool and sprawled over him. For an instant, Rapf thought he could see his shocked, screaming face in the milky translucence, then there was only a red cloud in the midst of a throbbing amoebic thing.

Pantucci bellowed and clutched the attaché. With a whipped run, he scampered along the rim of the pool toward the forest. A beaked, squid-headed mauler slobbered to shore and with gangling limbs pursued him. He was crying as he ran and, desperately, he heaved the attaché away. But it was no good. The creature was on him, all the seams and pleats of its throat fibrillating insanely as it

hoisted him up with one pincered, blotched arm. Even after the green-scaled beak crushed him, he was kicking spastically, swiveling his arms.

Rapf almost choked on his fear. A gun in each hand, he backed off into the forest, blasting several rounds into a gaping eyeless sucker-mouth. He burst through the hedge and broke into a frantic clipped run. Howling and sobbing, he hopped among root-tangles, lashed through hanging vines, and slammed into a thick thorn bush, shredding his jellaba, tearing his flesh to be free, and kicking off into the grave-dark forest. He could hear nothing. He was still deaf and too terrified to glance back. But there were vibrations. Dull, thudding, deadfall sensations that reached him through the ground.

Rapf lunged over the rotted shell of a tree, felt his leg catch on something, and saw the green-tangled ground jerk toward him. His guns flew out of his hands and vanished in the fern growths. Rude hands banged him onto his back, and he stared up into the gnawed and lacerated face of Duke Parmelee. Hi-Hat Chuckie Watz was standing behind him, his face puffed up, scabby, the lower lip merely a crust. They were both holding heavy butcher's knives.

Wildly, Rapf tried to communicate with them in the forced modality of the deaf, but all that he could voice was whimpers. The Duke stooped to start in with his knife, but something beyond the trees distracted him. It was Hi-Hat who screamed first. Rapf saw his face stretch with horror as he shuffled backward. His foot tangled, and he fell to his back. Before he could rise, there was a blurred flurry, and a huge segmented bulk with frantic legs and membranous wings descended on him. The Duke gawked bug-eyed and was still gawking when a lamprey with stalk-eyes lolled onto his back. He fled crazily this way and that, shrieking, trying to stab the slug-ball off his body, but it clung to him, melled to his flesh. Finally, the slick mass swelled over his head, and he collapsed, still clutching at it.

While the Duke was convulsing, Rapf rolled off, bucked to his feet, and ran headlong into the clumsy hooked arms of something loathsome. The clasped forebrains of its head swung from side to side, and its mandibles swiveled with maniacal joy. But before it

could crush him, Rapf unsprung his butterfly blade and slammed it into the shimmering bulk. He spun backward, wheeled crazily to get his balance, and then kicked off into a cloud of leaves.

On the other side was a steep bank, and Rapf plunged down it, head over heels, in a clatter of stones and dust. He splashed through rocky shallows and crashed to a stop against a thrust of boulder, his head and shoulders underwater. The cool current revived him, and he shuddered to his feet, teetered like an old man, and plopped back into the water.

Above him, among the high bank's shrubbery, he could see humps of things lumbering in and out of view. Quickly, he rolled to his belly and dragged himself out to the deeper water. The stream buoyed him and carried him off.

Hours later, he came out of a faint and found himself washed upon a gritty shore. Pale ferns fronded nearby, and beyond them he could see the tin roofs and cardboard doorways of a trenchtown. He pulled himself to his feet, slowly, painfully, and limped toward higher ground. His ears were still whining, and his head felt heavy, but he could make out the shadow of sounds: the stream rushing over pebbles with a murmur that was almost song, the curse of gravel under his feet.

He staggered toward the town mindlessly, in a daze, his eyes small and shiny as a reptile's. His mind was shut, and he moved mechanically. The people who saw him coming shied away, except for the children who pelted him with stones and ran close enough to snag him with wire-strung tin cans and garbage. Rapf shuffled on, unaware, his face empty, his eyes drifting. He had sunk into his mind.

A day later, the local police picked him up outside North End. He was being baited by a pariah dog and kids with slings and crude blow darts. Though he had been lurching frantically from street to street, occasionally lashing out with a pitiful cry, he gave the police no trouble when they cuffed him to take him away.

Days afterward, his mind shuttered into place. It took a long minute for him to take in the stained and pitted walls. Then the cretinous look drained entirely from his features, and he hunched over, weeping. When he had gotten hold of himself, he stood up by

the bars of his cell. He could see in the faces of the police and his cellmates that he had been raving. They wanted to know what had happened to him, if it had been mushrooms or village *anís* that had gone bad.

Rapf waved all speculation aside, and in a halting, fragmented way, told them what he had seen in the hills. The police laughed, but his cellmates were quiet, eyes averted.

The next day they freed him. By then he regretted telling them anything. An officer from Port-au-Prince had been called in to hear his story, and Rapf was afraid they'd somehow find out about the heroin and detain him. But the officer was only concerned about the exact location of the star pools, and Rapf told him.

The man was different from the local police. He was stocky, with quiet eyes and long intelligent fingers. And he believed Rapf. Enough, at any rate, to send four men up along the trail Rapf had followed days earlier. Actually, they wanted Rapf to go along and direct them, but when he refused, melting before them to a quaking old man, they left him behind.

That night, Rapf stayed in the prison cell. The suggestion that he go back up into the hills had so shattered him that he had needed a shot to quiet him down. In his sleep, he dreamed of a sun, black but shining, with strange stars tapping in the dark blue of the sky around it. He was alone in a damp alley, greasy brick walls rising on either side of him toward the alien sky. There was a stain on the air of something burnt, and his stomach closed at the smell of it.

Then, from the far end of the alley where an icy light was wavering, a figure approached. It was a man, thin and long as a stick, and he was carrying something. As he drew closer, Rapf could see that his face was cushiony, his chin slippery with drool, and his eyes remote, bright as needles. An idiot's face. His swollen lips were moving in a whisper: *Shut your ears big, Rapf.*

Rapf's whole body clenched at the sound of that withered, barely audible voice. But he couldn't turn away. He was transfixed by what the idiot was carrying: a black cistern with a wide mouth. His eyes were locked on it, watching it approach, tilt forward, and reveal a blackness gem-lit by a splatter of tiny lights, pin-bright, like stars.

The lights were wheeling, and watching them curve through the dark, Rapf succumbed to a lurch of vertigo, keeled over, and fell, howling, into the depthless black.

He shrugged awake and sat still a long time before accepting coffee and bread. The four men who had gone up into the hills had not returned. The officer had wired for a helicopter to cover their trail and see if it could turn up any sign of them. When Rapf was strong enough to leave the police shack, he emerged in time to see the helicopter return. The pilot and his partner were excited. They had seen something, but Rapf didn't lag around to find out what.

The walk into Port-au-Prince was long and tedious, and in the condition he was in, it would take him most of the day. But when he got there, the American consul would wire his sister in Stony Brook for money. Then he could leave, get out before Gusto sent down more of his boys or the hills sent down what they were festering.

He walked to the edge of the trenchtown and stopped at the side of the road that led to the capital. One last time, he looked back. The helicopter had gone up again. Its insectlike body glinted in the distance as it dropped toward the horizon, sunlight splintering off its domed glass, a wandering star burning alone above the hills.

The Second Wish

Brian Lumley

The scene was awesomely bleak: mountains gauntly grey and black-towered away to the east, forming an uneven backdrop for a valley of hardy grasses, sparse bushes, and leaning trees. In one corner of the valley, beneath foothills, a scattering of shingle-roofed houses, with the very occasional tiled roof showing through, was enclosed and protected in the Old European fashion by a heavy stone wall.

A mile or so from the village—if the huddle of time-worn houses could properly be termed a village—leaning on a low rotting fence that guarded the rutted road from a steep and rocky decline, the tourists gazed at the oppressive bleakness all about and felt oddly uncomfortable inside their heavy coats. Behind them their hired car—a black Russian model as gloomy as the surrounding countryside, exuding all the friendliness of an expectant hearse—stood patiently waiting for them.

He was comparatively young, of medium build, dark-haired, unremarkably good-looking, reasonably intelligent, and decidedly idle. His early adult years had been spent avoiding any sort of real industry, a prospect which a timely and quite substantial

inheritance had fortunately made redundant before it could force itself upon him. Even so, a decade of living at a rate far in excess of even his ample inheritance had rapidly reduced him to an almost penniless, unevenly cultured, high-ranking rake. He had never quite lowered himself to the level of a gigolo, however, and his womanizing had been quite deliberate, serving an end other than mere fleshly lust.

They had been ten very good years by his reckoning and not at all wasted, during which his expensive life-style had placed him in intimate contact with the cream of society; but while yet surrounded by affluence and glitter he had not been unaware of his own steadily dwindling resources. Thus, toward the end, he had set himself to the task of ensuring that his tenuous standing in society would not suffer with the disappearance of his so carelessly distributed funds; hence his philandering. In this he was not as subtle as he might have been, with the result that the field had narrowed down commensurately with his assets, until at last he had been left with Julia.

She was a widow in her middle forties but still fairly trim, rather prominently featured, too heavily made-up, not a little calculating, and very well-to-do. She did not love her consort—indeed she had never been in love—but he was often amusing and always thoughtful. Possibly his chief interest lay in her money, but that thought did not really bother her. Many of the younger, unattached men she had known had been after her money. At least Harry was not foppish, and she believed that in his way he did truly care for her.

Not once had he given her reason to believe otherwise. She had only twenty good years left and she knew it; money could only buy so much youth . . . Harry would look after her in her final years and she would turn a blind eye on those little indiscretions which must surely come—provided he did not become too indiscreet. He had asked her to marry him and she would comply as soon as they returned to London. Whatever else he lacked he made up for in bed. He was an extremely virile man and she had rarely been so well satisfied . . .

Now here they were together, touring Hungary, getting "faraway from it all."

"Well, is this remote enough for you?" he asked, his arm around her waist.

"Umm," she answered. "Deliciously barren, isn't it?"

"Oh, it's all of that. Peace and quiet for a few days—it was a good idea of yours, Julia, to drive out here. We'll feel all the more like living it up when we reach Budapest."

"Are you so eager, then, to get back to the bright lights?" she asked. He detected a measure of peevishness in her voice.

"Not at all, darling. The setting might as well be Siberia for all I'm concerned about locale. As long as we're together. But a girl of your breeding and style can hardly—"

"Oh, come off it, Harry! You can't wait to get to Budapest, can you?"

He shrugged, smiled resignedly, thought: *You niggly old bitch!* and said, "You read me like a book, darling—but Budapest is just a wee bit closer to London, and London is that much closer to us getting married, and—"

"But you have me anyway," she again petulantly cut him off. "What's so important about being married?"

"It's your friends, Julia," he answered with a sigh. "Surely you know that?" He took her arm and steered her toward the car. "They see me as some sort of cuckoo in the nest, kicking them all out of your affections. Yes, and it's the money, too."

"The money?" she looked at him sharply as he opened the car door for her. "What money?"

"The money I haven't got!" he grinned ruefully, relaxing now that he could legitimately speak his mind, if not the truth. "I mean, they're all certain it's your money I'm after, as if I was some damned gigolo. It's hardly flattering to either one of us. And I'd hate to think they might convince you that's all it is with me. But once we're married I won't give a damn what they say or think. They'll just have to accept me, that's all."

Reassured by what she took to be pure naiveté, she smiled at him and pulled up the collar of her coat. Then the smile fell from her face, and though it was not really cold she shuddered violently as he started the engine.

"A chill, darling?" he forced concern into his voice.

"Umm, a bit of one," she answered, snuggling up to him. "And a

headache, too. I've had it ever since we stopped over at—oh, what's the name of the place? Where we went up over the scree to look at that strange monolith?"

"Stregoicavar," he answered her. "The 'Witch-Town.' And that pillar-thing was the Black Stone. A curious piece of rock that, eh? Sticking up out of the ground like a great black fang! But Hungary is full of such things: myths and legends and odd relics of forgotten times. Perhaps we shouldn't have gone to look at it. The villagers shun it . . ."

"Mumbo jumbo," she answered. "No, I think I shall simply put the blame on *this* place. It's bloody depressing, really, isn't it?"

He tut-tutted good-humoredly and said: "My God!—the whims of a woman, indeed!"

She snuggled closer and laughed in his ear. "Oh, well, that's what makes us so mysterious, Harry. Our changeability. But seriously, I think maybe you're right. It is a bit late in the year for wandering about the Hungarian countryside. We'll stay the night at the inn as planned, then cut it short and go on tomorrow into Budapest. It's a drive of two hours at the most. A week at Zjhack's place, where we'll be looked after like royalty, and then on to London. How does that sound?"

"Wonderful!" He took one hand from the wheel to hug her. "And we'll be married by the end of October."

The inn at Szolyhaza had been recommended for its comforts and original Hungarian cuisine by an innkeeper in Kecskemét. Harry had suspected that both proprietors were related, particularly when he first laid eyes on Szolyhaza. That had been on the previous evening as they drove in over the hills.

Business in the tiny village could hardly be said to be booming. Even in the middle of the season, gone now along with the summer, Szolyhaza would be well off the map and out of reach of the ordinary tourist. It had been too late in the day to change their minds, however, and so they had booked into the solitary inn, the largest building in the village, an ancient stone edifice of at least five and a half centuries.

And then the surprise. For the proprietor, Herr Debrec, spoke near-perfect English; their room was light and airy with large

windows and a balcony (Julia was delighted at the absence of a television set and the inevitable "Kultur" programs); and later, when they came down for a late evening meal, the food was indeed wonderful!

There was something Harry had wanted to ask Herr Debrec that first evening, but sheer enjoyment of the atmosphere in the little dining room—the candlelight, the friendly clinking of glasses coming through to them from the bar, the warm fire burning bright in an old brick hearth, not to mention the food itself and the warm red local wine—had driven it from his mind. Now, as he parked the car in the tiny courtyard, it came back to him. Julia had returned it to mind with her headache and the talk of ill-rumored Stregoicavar and the Black Stone on the hillside.

It had to do with a church—at least Harry suspected it was or had been a church, though it might just as easily have been a castle or ancient watchtower—sighted on the other side of the hills beyond gaunt autumn woods. He had seen it limned almost as a silhouette against the hills as they had covered the last few miles to Szolyhaza from Kecskemét. There had been little enough time to study the distant building before the road veered and the car climbed up through a shallow pass, but nevertheless Harry had been left with a feeling of—well, almost of déjà vu—or perhaps presentiment. The picture of somber ruins had brooded obscurely in his mind's eye until Herr Debrec's excellent meal and luxurious bed, welcome after many hours of driving on the poor country roads, had shut the vision out.

Over the midday meal, when Herr Debrec entered the dining room to replenish their glasses, Harry mentioned the old ruined church, saying he intended to drive out after lunch and have a closer look at it.

"That place, mein Herr? No, I should not advise it."

"Oh?" Julia looked up from her meal. "It's dangerous, is it?"

"Dangerous?"

"In poor repair—on the point of collapsing on someone?"

"No, no. Not that I am aware of, but—" he shrugged half-apologetically.

"Yes, go on," Harry prompted him.

Debrec shrugged again, his short fat body seeming to wobble uncertainly. He slicked back his prematurely greying hair and tried to smile. "It is . . . very old, that place. Much older than my inn. It has seen many bad times, and perhaps something of those times still—how do you say it?—yes, 'adheres' to it."

"It's haunted!" Julia suddenly clapped her hands, causing Harry to start.

"No, not that—but then again—" the Hungarian shook his head, fumbling with the lapels of his jacket. He was obviously finding the conversation very uncomfortable.

"But you must explain yourself, Herr Debrec," Harry demanded. "You've got us completely fascinated."

"There is . . . a dweller," the man finally answered. "An old man—a holy man, some say, but I don't believe it—who looks after . . . things."

"A caretaker, you mean?" Julia asked.

"A keeper, madam, yes. He terms himself a 'monk,' I think, the last of his sect. I have my doubts."

"Doubts?" Harry repeated, becoming exasperated. "But what about?"

"Herr, I cannot explain," Debrec fluttered his hands. "But still I advise you, do not go there. It is not a good place."

"Now wait a min—" Harry began, but Debrec cut him off:

"If you insist on going, then at least be warned: do not touch . . . anything. Now I have many duties. Please to excuse me." He hurried from the room.

Left alone they gazed silently at each other for a moment. Then Harry cocked an eyebrow and said: "Well?"

"Well, we have nothing else to do this afternoon, have we?" she asked.

"No, but—oh, I don't know," he faltered, frowning. "I'm half inclined to heed his warning."

"But why? Don't tell me you're superstitious, Harry?"

"No, not at all. It's just that—oh, I have this feeling, that's all."

She looked astounded. "Why, Harry, I really don't know which one of you is trying hardest to have me on: you or Debrec!" She tightened her mouth and nodded determinedly. "That settles it

then. We *will* go and have a look at the ruins, and damnation to all these old wives' tales!"

Suddenly he laughed. "You know, Julia, there might just be some truth in what you say—about someone having us on, I mean. It's just struck me: you know this old monk Debrec was going on about? Well, I wouldn't be at all surprised if it turned out to be his uncle or something! All these hints of spooky goings-on could be just some sort of a put-on, a con game, a tourist trap. And here we've fallen right into it! I'll give you odds it costs us five pounds a head just to get inside the place!" And at that they both burst out laughing.

The sky was overcast and it had started to rain when they drove away from the inn. By the time they reached the track that led off from the road and through the grey woods in the direction of the ruined church, a ground mist was curling up from the earth in white drifting tendrils.

"How's this for sinister?" Harry asked, and Julia shivered again and snuggled closer to him. "Oh?" he said, glancing at her and smiling. "Are you sorry we came after all, then?"

"No, but it is eerie driving through this mist. It's like floating on milk! . . . Look, there's our ruined church directly ahead."

The woods had thinned out and now high walls rose up before them, walls broken in places and tumbled into heaps of rough moss-grown masonry. Within these walls, in grounds of perhaps half an acre, the gaunt shell of a great Gothic structure reared up like the tombstone of some primordial giant. Harry drove the car through open iron gates long since rusted solid with their massive hinges. He pulled up before a huge wooden door in that part of the building which still supported its lead-covered roof.

They left the car to rest on huge slick centuried cobbles, where the mist cast languorous tentacles about their ankles. Low over distant peaks the sun struggled bravely, trying to break through drifting layers of cloud.

Harry climbed the high stone steps to the great door and stood uncertainly before it. Julia followed him and said, with a shiver in her voice: "Still think it's a tourist trap?"

"Uh? Oh! No, I suppose not. But I'm interested anyway. There's something about this place. A feeling almost of—"

"As if you'd been here before?"

"Yes, exactly! You feel it too?"

"No," she answered, in fine contrary fashion. "I just find it very drab. And I think my headache is coming back."

For a moment or two they were silent, staring at the huge door.

"Well," Harry finally offered, "nothing ventured, nothing gained." He lifted the massive iron knocker, shaped like the top half of a dog's muzzle, and let it fall heavily against the grinning metal teeth of the lower jaw. The clang of the knocker was loud in the misty stillness.

"Door creaks open," Julia intoned, "revealing Bela Lugosi in a black high-collared cloak. In a sepulchral voice he says: 'Good evening . . .' " For all her apparent levity, half of the words trembled from her mouth.

Wondering how, at her age, she could act so stupidly girlish, Harry came close then to telling her to shut up. Instead he forced a grin, reflecting that it had always been one of her failings to wax witty at the wrong time. Perhaps she sensed his momentary annoyance, however, for she frowned and drew back from him fractionally. He opened his mouth to explain himself but started violently instead as, quite silently, the great door swung smoothly inward.

The opening of the door seemed almost to pull them in, as if a vacuum had been created . . . the sucking rush of an express train through a station. And as they stumbled forward they saw in the gloom the shrunken, flame-eyed ancient framed against a dim, musty-smelling background of shadows and lofty ceilings.

The first thing they really noticed of him when their eyes grew accustomed to the dimness was his filthy appearance. Dirt seemed ingrained in him! His coat, a black full-length affair with threadbare sleeves, was buttoned up to his neck where the ends of a grey tattered scarf protruded. Thin grimy wrists stood out from the coat's sleeves, blue veins showing through the dirt. A few sparse wisps of yellowish hair, thick with dandruff and probably worse, lay limp on the pale bulbous dome of his head. He could have been no more than sixty-two inches in height, but the fire that burned

behind yellow eyes, and the vicious hook of a nose that followed their movements like the beak of some bird of prey, seemed to give the old man more than his share of strength, easily compensating for his lack of stature.

"I . . . that is, we . . ." Harry began.

"Ah!—*English!* You are English, yes? Or perhaps American?" His heavily accented voice, clotted and guttural, sounded like the gurgling of a black subterranean stream. Julia thought that his throat must be full of phlegm, as she clutched at Harry's arm.

"Tourists, eh?" the ancient continued. "Come to see old Möhrsen's books? Or perhaps you don't know why you've come?" He clasped his hands tightly together, threw back his head, and gave a short coughing laugh.

"Why, we . . . that is . . ." Harry stumbled again, feeling foolish, wondering just why they *had* come.

"Please enter," said the old man, standing aside and ushering them deeper, irresistibly in. "It is the books, of course it is. They all come to see Möhrsen's books sooner or later. And of course there is the view from the tower. And the catacombs . . ."

"It was the ruins," Harry finally found his voice. "We saw the old building from the road, and—"

"Picturesque, eh? The ruins in the trees . . . Ah!—but there are other things here. You will see."

"Actually," Julia choked it out, fighting with a sudden attack of nausea engendered by the noisome aspect of their host, "we don't have much time . . ."

The old man caught at their elbows, yellow eyes flashing in the gloomy interior. "Time? No time?" his hideous voice grew intense in a moment. "True, how true. Time is running out for all of us!"

It seemed then that a draft, coming from nowhere, caught at the great door and eased it shut. As the gloom deepened Julia held all the more tightly to Harry's arm, but the shrunken custodian of the place had turned his back to guide them on with an almost peremptory: "Follow me."

And follow him they did.

Drawn silently along in his wake, like seabirds following an ocean liner through the night, they climbed stone steps, entered a wide corridor with an arched ceiling, finally arrived at a room with

a padlocked door. Möhrsen unlocked the door, turned, bowed, and ushered them through.

"My library," he told them, "my beautiful books."

With the opening of the door light had flooded the corridor, a beam broad as the opening in which musty motes were caught, drifting, eddying about in the disturbed air. The large room—bare except for a solitary chair, a table, and tier upon tier of volume-weighted shelves arrayed against the walls—had a massive window composed of many tiny panes. Outside the sun had finally won its battle with the clouds; it shone wanly afar, above the distant mountains, its autumn beam somehow penetrating the layers of grime on the small panes.

"Dust!" cried the ancient. "The dust of decades—of decay! I cannot keep it down." He turned to them. "But see, you must sign."

"Sign?" Harry questioned. "Oh, I see. A visitors' book."

"Indeed, for how else might I remember those who visit me here? See, look at all the names . . ."

The old man had taken a leather-bound volume from the table. It was not a thick book, and as Möhrsen turned the parchment leaves they could see that each page bore a number of signatures, each signature being dated. Not one entry was less than ten years old. Harry turned back the pages to the first entry and stared at it. The ink had faded with the centuries so that he could not easily make out the ornately flourished signature. The date, on the other hand, was still quite clear: "Frühling, 1611."

"An old book indeed," he commented, "but recently, it seems, visitors have been scarce . . ." Though he made no mention of it, frankly he could see little point in his signing such a book.

"Sign nevertheless," the old man gurgled, almost as if he could read Harry's mind. "Yes, you must, and the madam too." Harry reluctantly took out a pen, and Möhrsen watched intently as they scribbled their signatures.

"Ah, good, good!" he chortled, rubbing his hands together. "There we have it—two more visitors, two more names. It makes an old man happy, sometimes, to remember his visitors . . . And sometimes it makes him sad."

"Oh?" Julia said, interested despite herself. "Why sad?"

"Because I know that many of them who visited me here are no more, of course!" He blinked great yellow eyes at them.

"But look, look here," he continued, pointing a grimy sharp-nailed finger at a signature. "This one: 'Justin Geoffrey, 12 June, 1926.' A young American poet, he was. A man of great promise. Alas, he gazed too long upon the Black Stone!"

"The Black Stone?" Harry frowned. "But—"

"And here, two years earlier: 'Charles Dexter Ward'—another American, come to see my books. And here, an Englishman this time, one of your own countrymen, 'John Kingsley Brown.' " He let the pages flip through filthy fingers. "And here another, but much more recently. See: 'Hamilton Tharpe, November, 1959.' Ah, I remember Mr. Tharpe well! We shared many a rare discussion here in this very room. He aspired to the priesthood, but—" He sighed. "Yes, seekers after knowledge all, but many of them ill-fated, I fear. . ."

"You mentioned the Black Stone," Julia said. "I wondered—?"

"Hmm? Oh, nothing. An old legend, nothing more. It is believed to be very bad luck to gaze upon the stone."

"Yes," Harry nodded. "We were told much the same thing in Stregoicavar."

"Ah!" Möhrsen immediately cried, snapping shut the book of names, causing his visitors to jump. "So you, too, have seen the Black Stone?" He returned the volume to the table, then regarded them again, nodding curiously. Teeth yellow as his eyes showed as he betrayed a sly, suggestive smile.

"Now see here—" Harry began, irrational alarm and irritation building in him, welling inside.

Möhrsen's attitude, however, changed on the instant. "A myth, a superstition, a fairy story!" he cried, holding out his hands in the manner of a conjurer who has nothing up his sleeve. "After all, what is a stone but a stone?"

"We'll have to be going," Julia said in a faint voice. Harry noticed how she leaned on him, how her hand trembled as she clutched his arm.

"Yes," he told their wretched host, "I'm afraid we really must go."

"But you have not seen the beautiful books!" Möhrsen protested. "Look, look—" Down from a shelf he pulled a pair of massive antique tomes and opened them on the table. They were full of incredible, dazzling illuminated texts; and despite themselves, their feelings of strange revulsion, Harry and Julia handled the ancient works and admired their great beauty.

"And this book, and this." Möhrsen piled literary treasures before them. "See, are they not beautiful? And now you are glad you came, yes?"

"Why, yes, I suppose we are," Harry grudgingly replied.

"Good, good! I will be one moment—some refreshment—please look at the books. Enjoy them . . ." And Möhrsen was gone, shuffling quickly out of the door and away into gloom.

"These books," Julia said as soon as they were alone. "They must be worth a small fortune!"

"And there are thousands of them," Harry answered, his voice awed and not a little envious. "But what do you think of the old boy?"

"He—frightens me," she shuddered. "And the way he smells!"

"Shh!" he held a finger up to his lips. "He'll hear you. Where's he gone, anyway?"

"He said something about refreshment. I certainly hope he doesn't think I'll eat anything he's prepared!"

"Look here!" Harry called. He had moved over to a bookshelf near the window and was fingering the spines of a particularly musty-looking row of books. "Do you know, I believe I recognize some of these titles? My father was always interested in the occult, and I can remember—"

"The occult?" Julia echoed, cutting him off, her voice nervous again. He had not noticed it before, but she was starting to look her age. It always happened when her nerves became frazzled, and then all the makeup in the world could not remove the stress lines.

"The occult, yes," he replied. "You know, the 'Mystic Arts,' the 'Supernatural,' and what have you. But what a collection! There are books here in Old German, in Latin, Dutch—and listen to some of the titles:

"De Lapide Philosophico . . . De Vermis Mysteriis . . . Othuum Omnicia . . . Liber Ivonis . . . Necronomicon." He gave a low

whistle, then: "I wonder what the British Museum would offer for this lot? They must be near priceless!"

"They *are* priceless!" came a guttural gloating cry from the open door. Möhrsen entered, bearing a tray with a crystal decanter and three large crystal glasses. "But please, I ask you not to touch them. They are the pride of my whole library."

The old man put the tray upon an uncluttered corner of the table, unstoppered the decanter, and poured liberal amounts of wine. Harry came to the table, lifted his glass, and touched it to his lips. The wine was deep, red, sweet. For a second he frowned, then his eyes opened in genuine appreciation. "Excellent!" he declared.

"The best," Möhrsen agreed, "and almost one hundred years old. I have only six more bottles of this vintage. I keep them in the catacombs. When you are ready you shall see the catacombs, if you so desire. Ah, but there is something down there that you will find most interesting, compared to which my books are dull, uninteresting things."

"I don't really think that I care to see your—" Julia began, but Möhrsen quickly interrupted:

"A few seconds only," he pleaded, "which you will remember for the rest of your lives. Let me fill your glasses."

The wine had warmed her, calming her treacherous nerves. She could see that Harry, despite his initial reservations, was now eager to accompany Möhrsen to the catacombs.

"We have a little time," Harry urged. "Perhaps—?"

"Of course," the old man gurgled, "time is not *so* short, eh?" He threw back his own drink and noisily smacked his lips, then shepherded his guests out of the room, mumbling as he did so: "Come, come—this way—only a moment—no more than that."

And yet again they followed him, this time because there seemed little else to do; deeper into the gloom of the high-ceilinged corridor, to a place where Möhrsen took candles from a recess in the wall and lit them; then on down two, three flights of stone steps into a nitrous vault deep beneath the ruins; and from there a dozen or so paces to the subterranean room in which, reclining upon a couch of faded silk cushions, Möhrsen's revelation awaited them.

The room itself was dry as dust, but the air passing gently through held the merest promise of moisture, and perhaps this rare

combination had helped preserve the object on the couch. There she lay—central in her curtain-veiled cave, behind a circle of worn, vaguely patterned stone tablets reminiscent of a miniature Stonehenge—a centuried mummy-parchment figure, arms crossed over her abdomen, remote in repose. And yet somehow . . . unquiet.

At her feet lay a leaden casket, a box with a hinged lid, closed, curiously like a small coffin. A design on the lid, obscure in the poor light, seemed to depict some mythic creature, half-toad, half-dog. Short tentacles or feelers fringed the thing's mouth. Harry traced the dusty raised outline of this chimera with a forefinger.

"It is said she had a pet—a companion creature—which slept beside her bed in that casket," said Möhrsen, again anticipating Harry's question.

Curiosity overcame Julia's natural aversion. "Who is . . . who *was* she?"

"The last true Priestess of the Cult," Möhrsen answered. "She died over four hundred years ago."

"The Turks?" Harry asked.

"The Turks, yes. But if it had not been them . . . who can say? The cult has always had its opponents."

"The cult? Don't you mean the order?" Harry looked puzzled. "I've heard that you're—ah—a man of God. And if this place was once a church—"

"A man of God?" Möhrsen laughed low in his throat. "No, not of your God, my friend. And this was not a church but a temple. And not an order, a cult. I am its priest, one of the last, but one day there may be more. It is a cult which can never die." His voice, quiet now, nevertheless echoed like a warning, intensified by the acoustics of the cave.

"I think," said Julia, her own voice weak once more, "that we should leave now, Harry."

"Yes, yes," said Möhrsen, "the air down here, it does not agree with you. By all means leave—but first there is the legend."

"Legend?" Harry repeated him. "Surely not another legend?"

"It is said," Möhrsen quickly continued, "that if one holds her hand and makes a wish . . ."

"No!" Julia cried, shrinking away from the mummy. "I couldn't touch that!"

"Please, please," said Möhrsen, holding out his arms to her, "do not be afraid. It is only a myth, nothing more."

Julia stumbled away from him into Harry's arms. He held her for a moment until she had regained control of herself, then turned to the old man. "All right, how do I go about it? Let me hold her hand and make a wish—but then we *must* be on our way. I mean, you've been very hospitable, but—"

"I understand," Möhrsen answered. "This is not the place for a gentle, sensitive lady. But did you say that you wished to take the hand of the priestess?"

"Yes," Harry answered, thinking to himself: "if that's the only way to get to hell out of here!"

Julia stepped uncertainly, shudderingly back against the curtained wall as Harry approached the couch. Möhrsen directed him to kneel; he did so, taking a leathery claw in his hand. The elbow joint of the mummy moved with surprising ease as he lifted the hand from her withered abdomen. It felt not at all dry but quite cool and firm. In his mind's eye Harry tried to look back through the centuries. He wondered who the girl had really been, what she had been like. "I wish," he said to himself, "that I could know you as you were . . ."

Simultaneous with the unspoken thought, as if engendered of it, Julia's bubbling shriek of terror shattered the silence of the vault, setting Harry's hair on end and causing him to leap back away from the mummy. Furthermore, it had seemed that at the instant of Julia's scream, a tingle as of an electrical discharge had traveled along his arm into his body.

Now Harry could see what had happened. As he had taken the mummy's withered claw in his hand, so Julia had been driven to clutch at the curtains for support. Those curtains had not been properly hung but merely draped over the stone surface of the cave's walls; Julia had brought them rustling down. Her scream had originated in being suddenly confronted by the hideous bas-reliefs which completely covered the walls, figures and shapes that seemed to leap and cavort in the flickering light of Möhrsen's candles.

Now Julia sobbed and threw herself once more into Harry's arms, clinging to him as he gazed in astonishment and revulsion at the monstrous carvings. The central theme of these was an octopod

creature of vast proportions—winged, tentacled, and dragonlike, and yet with a vaguely anthropomorphic outline—and around it danced all the demons of hell. Worse than this main horror itself, however, was what its attendant minions were doing to the tiny but undeniably human figures which also littered the walls. And there, too, as if directing the nightmare activities of a group of these small, horned horrors, was a girl—with a leering dog-toad abortion that cavorted gleefully about her feet!

Hieronymus Bosch himself could scarcely have conceived such a scene of utterly depraved torture and degradation, and horror finally burst into livid rage in Harry as he turned on the exultant keeper of this nighted crypt. "A temple, you said, you old devil! A temple to what?—to that obscenity?"

"To Him, yes!" Möhrsen exulted, thrusting his hooknose closer to the rock-cut carvings and holding up the candles the better to illuminate them. "To Cthulhu of the tentacled face, and to all his lesser brethren."

Without another word, more angry than he could ever remember being, Harry reached out and bunched up the front of the old man's coat in his clenched fist. He shook Möhrsen like a bundle of moth-eaten rags, cursing and threatening him in a manner which later he could scarcely recall.

"God!" he finally shouted. "It's a damn shame the Turks didn't raze this whole nest of evil right down to the ground! You . . . you can lead the way out of here right now, at once, or I swear I'll break your neck where you stand!"

"If I drop the candles," Möhrsen answered, his voice like black gas bubbles breaking the surface of a swamp, "we will be in complete darkness!"

"No, please!" Julia cried. "Just take us out of here . . ."

"If you value your dirty skin," Harry added, "you'll keep a good grip on those candles!"

Möhrsen's eyes blazed sulphurous yellow in the candlelight and he leered hideously. Harry turned him about, gripped the back of his grimy neck, and thrust him ahead, out of the blasphemous temple. With Julia stumbling in the rear, they made their way to a flight of steps that led up into daylight, emerging some twenty-five yards from the main entrance.

They came out through tangled cobwebs into low decaying vines and shrubbery that almost hid their exit. Julia gave one long shudder, as if shaking off a nightmare, and then hastened to the car. Not once did she look back.

Harry released Möhrsen who stood glaring at him, shielding his yellow eyes against the weak light. They confronted each other in this fashion for a few moments, until Harry turned his back on the little man to follow Julia to the car. It was then that Möhrsen whispered:

"Do not forget: I did not force you to do anything. I did not make you touch anything. You came here of your own free will."

When Harry turned to throw a few final harsh words at him, the old man was already disappearing down into the bowels of the ruins.

In the car as they drove along the track through the sparsely clad trees to the road, Julia was very quiet. At last she said: "That was quite horrible. I didn't know such people existed."

"Nor did I," Harry answered.

"I feel filthy," she continued. "I need a bath. What on earth did that creature want with us?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. I think he must be insane."

"Harry, let's not go straight back to the inn. Just drive around for a while." She rolled down her window, breathing deeply of the fresh air that flooded in before lying back in the seat and closing her eyes. He looked at her, thinking: "God!—but you're certainly showing your age now, my sweet" . . . but he couldn't really blame her.

There were two or three tiny villages within a few miles of Szolyhaza, centers of peasant life compared to which Szolyhaza was a veritable capital. These were mainly farming communities, some of which were quite picturesque. Nightfall was still several hours away and the rain had moved on, leaving a freshness in the air and a beautiful warm glow over the hills, so that they felt inclined to park the car by the roadside and enjoy a drink at a tiny *Gasthaus*.

Sitting there by a wide window that overlooked the street, while

Julia composed herself and recovered from her ordeal, Harry noticed several posters on the wall of the building opposite. He had seen similar posters in Szolyhaza, and his knowledge of the language was just sufficient for him to realize that the event in question—whatever that might be—was taking place tonight. He determined, out of sheer curiosity, to question Herr Debrec about it when they returned to the inn. After all, there could hardly be very much of importance happening in an area so out-of-the-way. It had already been decided that nothing should be said about their visit to the ruins, the exceedingly unpleasant hour spent in the doubtful company of Herr Möhrsen.

Twilight was settling over the village when they got back. Julia, complaining of a splitting headache, bathed and went straight to her bed. Harry, on the other hand, felt strangely restless, full of physical and mental energy. When Julia asked him to fetch her a glass of water and a sleeping pill, he dissolved two pills, thus ensuring that she would remain undisturbed for the night. When she was asleep he tidied himself up and went down to the bar.

After a few drinks he buttonholed Herr Debrec and questioned him about the posters; what was happening tonight? Debrec told him that this was to be the first of three nights of celebration. It was the local shooting carnival, the equivalent of the German *Schützenfest,* when prizes would be presented to the district's best rifle shots.

There would be sideshows and thrilling rides on machines specially brought in from the cities—members of the various shooting teams would be dressed all in hunter's green—beer and wine would flow like water and there would be good things to eat—oh, and all the usual trappings of a festival. This evening's main attraction was to be a masked ball, held in a great barn on the outskirts of a neighboring village. It would be the beginning of many a fine romance. If the Herr wished to attend the festivities, Debrec could give him directions . . . ?

Harry declined the offer and ordered another drink. It was odd the effect the brandy was having on him tonight: he was not giddy—it took a fair amount to do that—but there seemed to be a peculiar *excitement* in him. He felt much the same as when, in the

old days, he'd pursued gay young debutantes in the Swiss resorts or on the Riviera.

Half an hour and two drinks later he checked that Julia was fast asleep, obtained directions to the *Schützenfest,* told Herr Debrec that his wife was on no account to be disturbed, and drove away from the inn in fairly high spirits. The odds, he knew, were all against him, but it would be good fun and there could be no possible comeback; after all, they were leaving for Budapest in the morning, and what the eye didn't see, the heart wouldn't grieve over. He began to wish that his command of the language went a little further than "good evening" and "another brandy, please." Still, there had been plenty of times in the past when language hadn't mattered at all, when talking would have been a positive hindrance.

In no time at all he reached his destination, and at first glance he was disappointed. Set in the fields beside a hamlet, the site of the festivities was noisy and garishly lit, in many ways reminiscent of the country fairgrounds of England. All very well for teenage couples, but rather gauche for a civilized, sophisticated adult. Nevertheless, that peculiar tingling with which Harry's every fiber seemed imbued had not lessened, seemed indeed heightened by the whirling machines and gaudy, gypsyish caravans and sideshows; and so he parked the car and threaded his way through the swiftly gathering crowd.

Hung with bunting and festooned with balloons like giant ethereal multihued grapes, the great barn stood open to the night. Inside, a costumed band tuned up while masked singles and couples in handsome attire gathered, preparing to dance and flirt the night away. Framed for a moment in the huge open door, frozen by the camera of his mind, Harry saw among the crowd the figure of a girl—a figure of truly animal magnetism—dressed almost incongruously in peasant's costume.

For a second masked eyes met his own and fixed upon them across a space of only a few yards, and then she was gone. But the angle of her neck as she had looked at him, the dark unblinking eyes behind her mask, the fleeting, knowing smile on her lips before she turned away—all of these things had spoken volumes.

That weird feeling, the tingling that Harry felt, suddenly suffused

his whole being. His head reeled and his mouth went dry; he had consciously to fight the excitement rising from within; following which he headed dizzily for the nearest wine tent, gratefully to slake his thirst. Then, bolstered by the wine, heart beating fractionally faster than usual, he entered the cavernous barn and casually cast about for the girl whose image still adorned his mind's eye.

But his assumed air of casual interest quickly dissipated as his eyes swept the vast barn without sighting their target, until he was about to step forward and go among the tables in pursuit of his quarry. At that point a hand touched his arm, a heady perfume reached him, and a voice said: "There is an empty table on the balcony. Would you like to sit?"

Her voice was not at all cultured, but her English was very good; and while certainly there was an element of peasant in her, well, there was much more than that. Deciding to savor her sensuous good looks later when they were seated, he barely glanced at her but took her hand and proceeded across the floor of the barn. They climbed wooden stairs to an open balcony set with tables and cane chairs. On the way he spoke to a waiter and ordered a bottle of wine, a plate of dainties.

They sat at their tiny table overlooking the dance floor, toying with their glasses and pretending to be interested in completely irrelevant matters. He spoke of London, of skiing in Switzerland, the beach at Cannes. She mentioned the mountains, the markets of Budapest, the bloody history of the country, particularly of this region. He was offhanded about his jet-setting, not becoming ostentatious; she picked her words carefully, rarely erring in pronounciation. He took in little of what she said and guessed that she wasn't hearing him. But their eyes—at first rather fleetingly—soon became locked; their hands seemed to meet almost involuntarily atop the table.

Beneath the table Harry stretched out a leg toward hers, felt something cold and hairy arching against his calf as might a cat. A cat, yes, it must be one of the local cats, fresh in from mousing in the evening fields. He edged the thing to one side with his foot . . . but she was already on her feet, smiling, holding out a hand to him.

They danced, and he discovered gypsy in her, and strangeness, and magic. She bought him a red mask and positioned it over his

face with fingers that were cool and sure. The wine began to go down that much faster . . .

It came almost as a surprise to Harry to find himself in the car, in the front passenger seat, with the girl driving beside him. They were just pulling away from the bright lights of the *Schützenfest,* but he did not remember leaving the great barn. He felt more than a little drunk—with pleasure as much as with wine.

"What's your name?" he asked, not finding it remarkable that he did not already know. Only the sound of the question seemed strange to him, as if a stranger had spoken the words.

"Cassilda," she replied.

"A nice name," he told her awkwardly. "Unusual."

"I was named after a distant . . . relative."

After a pause he asked: "Where are we going, Cassilda?"

"Is it important?"

"I'm afraid we can't go to Szolyhaza—" he began to explain.

She shrugged, "My . . . home, then."

"Is it far?"

"Not far, but—"

"But?"

She slowed the car, brought it to a halt. She was a shadowy silhouette beside him, her perfume washing him in warm waves. "On second thought, perhaps I had better take you straight back to your hotel—and leave you there."

"No, I wouldn't hear of it," he spoke quickly, seeing his hopes for the night crumbling about him, sobered by the thought that she could so very easily slip out of his life. The early hours of the morning would be time enough for slipping away—and he would be doing it, not the girl. "You'd have to walk home, for one thing, for I'm afraid I couldn't let you take the car . . ." To himself he added: And I know that taxis aren't to be found locally.

"Listen," he continued when she made no reply, "you just drive yourself home. I'll take the car from there back to my hotel."

"But you do not seem steady enough to drive."

"Then perhaps you'll make me a cup of coffee?" It was a terribly juvenile gambit, but he was gratified to see her smiling behind her mask.

Then, just as quickly as the smile had come, it fell away to be replaced by a frown he could sense rather than detect in the dim glow of the dashboard lights. "But you must not see where I live."

"Why on earth not?"

"It is not . . . a rich dwelling."

"I don't care much for palaces."

"I don't want you to be able to find your way back to me afterward. This can be for one night only . . ."

Now this, Harry thought to himself, is more like it! He felt his throat going dry again. "Cassilda, it can't possibly be for more than one night," he gruffly answered. "Tomorrow I leave for Budapest."

"Then surely it is better that—"

"Blindfold me!"

"What?"

"Then I won't be able to see where you live. If you blindfold me I'll see nothing except. . . your room." He reached across and slipped his hand inside her silk blouse, caressing a breast.

She reached over and stroked his neck, then pulled gently away. She nodded knowingly in the darkness: "Yes, perhaps we had better blindfold you, if you insist upon handling everything that takes your fancy!"

She tucked a black silk handkerchief gently down behind his mask, enveloping him in darkness. Exposed and compromised as she did this, she made no immediate effort to extricate herself as he fondled her breasts through the silk of her blouse. Finally, breathing the words into his face, she asked:

"Can you not wait?"

"It's not easy."

"Then I shall make it easier." She took his hands away from her body, sat back in her seat, slipped the car into gear and pulled away. Harry sat in total darkness, hot and flushed and full of lust.

"We are there," she announced, rousing him from some peculiar torpor. He was aware only of silence and darkness. He felt just a trifle queasy and told himself that it must be the effect of being driven blindfolded over poor roads. Had he been asleep? What a fool he was making of himself!

"No," she said as he groped for the door handle. "Let's just sit here for a moment or two. Open a bottle, I'm thirsty."

"Bottle? Oh, yes!" Harry suddenly remembered the two bottles of wine they had brought with them from the *Schützenfest.* He reached into the back seat and found one of them. "But we have no glasses. And why should we drink here when it would be so much more comfortable inside?"

She laughed briefly. "Harry. I'm a little nervous . . ."

Of course! French courage!—or was it Dutch? What odds? If a sip or two would help get her into the right frame of mind, why not? Silently he blessed the manufacturers of screw-top bottles and twisted the cap free. She took the wine from him, and he heard the swishing of liquid. Her perfume seemed so much stronger, heady as the scent of poppies. And yet beneath it he sensed . . . something tainted?

She returned the bottle to him and he lifted it to parched lips, taking a long deep draft. His head immediately swam, and he felt a joyous urge to break into wild laughter. Instead, discovering himself the victim of so strange a compulsion, he gave a little grunt of surprise.

When he passed the bottle back to her, he let his hand fall to her breast once more—and gasped at the touch of naked flesh, round and swelling! She had opened her blouse to him—or she had removed it altogether! With trembling fingers he reached for his mask and the handkerchief tucked behind it.

"No," she said, and he heard the slither of silk. "There, I'm covered again. Here, finish the bottle and then get out of the car. I'll lead you . . ."

"Cassilda," he slurred her name. "Let's stop this little game now and—"

"You may not take off the blindfold until we are in my room, when we both stand naked." He was startled by the sudden coarseness of her voice—the lust he could now plainly detect—and he was also fired by it. He jerked violently when she took hold of him with a slender hand, working her fingers expertly, briefly, causing him to gabble some inarticulate inanity.

Momentarily paralyzed with nerve-tingling pleasure and shock,

when finally he thought to reach for her she was gone. He heard the whisper of her dress and the click of the car door as she closed it behind her.

Opening his own door he almost fell out, but her hand on his shoulder steadied him. "The other bottle," she reminded him.

Clumsily he found the wine, then stumbled as he turned from the car. She took his free hand, whispering: "Shh! Quiet!" and gave a low guttural giggle.

Blind, he stumbled after her across a hard, faintly familiar surface. Something brushed against his leg, cold, furry, and damp. The fronds of a bushy plant, he suspected.

"Lower your head," she commanded. "Carefully down the steps. This way. Almost there . . ."

"Cassilda," he said, holding tightly to her hand. "I'm dizzy."

"The wine!" she laughed.

"Wait, wait!" he cried, dragging her to a halt. "My head's swimming." He put out the hand that held the bottle, found a solid surface, pressed his knuckles against it and steadied himself. He leaned against a wall of sorts, dry and flaky to his touch, and gradually the dizziness passed.

This is no good, he told himself: I'll be of no damn use to her unless I can control myself! To her he said, "Potent stuff, your local wine."

"Only a few more steps," she whispered.

She moved closer and again there came the sound of sliding silk, of garments falling. He put his arm round her, felt the flesh of her body against the back of his hand. The weight of the bottle slowly pulled down his arm. Smooth firm buttocks—totally unlike Julia's, which sagged a little—did not flinch at the passing of fingers made impotent by the bottle they held.

"God!" he whispered, throat choked with lust. "I wish I could hold on to you for the rest of my life . . ."

She laughed, her voice hoarse as his own, and stepped away, pulling him after her. "But that's your second wish," she said.

Second wish . . . Second wish? He stumbled and almost fell, was caught and held upright, felt fingers busy at his jacket, the buttons of his shirt. Not at all cold, he shivered, and deep inside a tiny voice

began to shout at him, growing louder by the moment, shrieking terrifying messages into his inner ear.

His second wish!

Naked he stood, suddenly alert, the alcohol turning to water in his system, the unbelievable looming real and immense and immediate as his four sound senses compensated for voluntary blindness.

"There," she said. "And now you may remove your blindfold!"

Ah, but her perfume no longer masked the charnel musk beneath; her girl's voice was gone, replaced by the dried-up whisper of centuries-shriveled lips; the hand he held was—

Harry leaped high and wide, trying to shake off the thing that held his hand in a leathery grip, shrieking his denial in a black vault that echoed his cries like lunatic laughter. He leaped and cavorted, coming into momentary contact with the wall, tracing with his burning, supersensitive flesh the tentacled monstrosity that gloated there in bas-relief, feeling its dread embrace!

And bounding from the wall he tripped and sprawled, clawing at the casket which, in his mind's eye, he saw where he had last seen it at the foot of her couch. *Except that now the lid lay open!*

Something at once furry and slimy-damp arched against his naked leg—and again he leaped frenziedly in darkness, gibbering now as his mind teetered over vertiginous chasms.

Finally, dislodged by his threshing about, his blindfold—the red mask and black silk handkerchief he no longer dared remove of his own accord—slipped from his face. . . And then his strength became as that of ten men, became such that nothing natural or supernatural could ever have held him there in that nighted cave beneath black ruins.

Herr Ludovic Debrec heard the roaring of the car's engine long before the beam of its headlights swept down the black deserted road outside the inn. The vehicle rocked wildly and its tires howled as it turned an impossibly tight corner to slam to a halt in the inn's tiny courtyard.

Debrec was tired, cleaning up after the day's work, preparing for the morning ahead. His handful of guests were all abed, all except

the English Herr. This must be him now, but why the tearing rush? Peering through his kitchen window, Debrec recognized the car—then his weary eyes widened and he gasped out loud. But what in the name of all that . . .? The Herr was naked!

The Hungarian landlord had the door open wide for Harry almost before he could begin hammering upon it—was bowled to one side as the frantic, gasping, bulge-eyed figure rushed in and up the stairs—but he had seen enough, and he crossed himself as Harry disappeared into the inn's upper darkness.

"Mein Gott!" he croaked, crossing himself again, and yet again. "The Herr has been in *that* place!"

Despite her pills, Julia had not slept well. Now, emerging from unremembered, uneasy dreams, temples throbbing in the grip of a terrific headache, she pondered the problem of her awakening. A glance at the luminous dial of her wristwatch told her that the time was ten after two in the morning.

Now what had startled her awake? The slamming of a door somewhere? Someone sobbing? Someone crying out to her for help? She seemed to remember all of these things.

She patted the bed beside her with a lethargic gesture. Harry was not there. She briefly considered this, also the fact that his side of the bed seemed undisturbed. Then something moved palely in the darkness at the foot of the bed.

Julia sucked in air, reached out and quickly snapped on the bedside lamp. Harry lay naked, silently writhing on the floor, face down, his hands beneath him.

"Harry!" she cried, getting out of bed and going to him. With a bit of a struggle she turned him onto his side, and he immediately rolled over on his back.

She gave a little shriek and jerked instinctively away from him, revulsion twisting her features. His eyes were screwed shut now, lips straining back from teeth in unendurable agony. His hands held something to his straining chest, something black and crumbly.

Even as Julia watched, horrified, his eyes wrenched open, his face went slack, he stopped breathing. Then his hands fell away from his chest. In one of them the disintegrating black thing seemed

burned into the flesh of his palm and fingers. It was unmistakably a small mummified hand!

She began to back away from him across the floor, and as she did so something came from behind, moving sinuously as it brushed against her. She saw it and scuttled even faster, her mouth working silently as she came up against the wall of the room.

The—creature—went to Harry, took the shriveled hand from him, turned away, and then, as if on an afterthought, turned back. It arched against him for a moment, then quickly sank sharp teeth into the flesh of his leg, the short feelers about its mouth writhing greedily as it did so. In the next instant the thing was gone, but Julia did not see where it went.

Unable to tear her eyes away she saw Harry's leg where he had been bitten turn black, withering visibly. She saw the blackness spreading like a devouring fire over his whole body, melting it into dully glittering lumps.

Then, ignoring the insistent knocking now sounding at the door, she drew breath into starved lungs, drew breath until she thought she must surely burst—and finally expelled it all in one vast eternal scream . . .

Dark Awakening

Frank Belknap Long

It was just the right place for an encounter with an enchantress. There was a long stretch of shining beach, with a sand dune towering up behind it, and in the near distance a high white steeple and the sun-gilded roofs of a small New England village from which I had just departed for a dip in the sea. It was vacation time, always a good time to be a guest at an inn that you like straight off, if only because not a single jarring note accompanies your arrival with a worn and battered suitcase and an eye for oak paneling that dates back a century or more.

The village seemed sleepy and unchanged, always a splendid thing in midsummer when you've had your fill of city noises and smoke and bustle and the intolerable encroachments of the "do this" and "do that" brigade.

I'd seen her at breakfast time, with her two small children, a boy and a girl, taking up all of her attention until I sat down at a table a short distance away and stared steadily at her for a moment. I couldn't help it. She would have drawn all eyes in a parade of glamorous models. A widow? I wondered. A divorcée? Or—banish the thought—a happily married woman whose thoughts never strayed?

It was impossible to know, of course. But when she looked up and saw me she nodded slightly and smiled, and for a moment nothing seemed to matter but the fear that she was so very beautiful my stare would reveal my inmost thoughts.

New arrivals at small village inns are often greeted with a smile and a nod by the kindly disposed, solely to put them at their ease and make them feel that they are the opposite of outsiders. I wasn't deceived on that score. But still—

Meeting her now, between the dune and the sea, with her children still on opposite sides of her, I was unprepared for more than another smile and nod. I had emerged from around the dune, coming into view so abruptly that she might well have looked merely startled, and it made the explicit nature of her greeting seem astonishing indeed.

She raised her arm and waved to me, and called out: "Oh, hello! I didn't expect to see anyone from the inn here so early. You can be of great help to me."

"In what way?" I asked, trying to keep from looking as flustered as I felt and crossing to her side in several not-too-hurried strides.

"I cut my hand rather badly just now on a razor-sharp shell," she said. "But I'm not in the least worried. It's just that—it was terribly stupid of me, and I haven't a handkerchief. If you have one—"

"Of course," I said. "We'll get it bound up in short order. But you'd better let me look at it first."

Her hand was velvety soft in my clasp, and so beautiful that for a moment I hardly noticed the cut on her palm. It was bleeding a little but not profusely, even though it wasn't exactly a scratch. It took me only a moment to wrap a handkerchief twice around the middle of her hand and knot it securely just below her wrist.

"That should take care of it," I said. "For now. If you're not returning to the inn soon you can take the bandage off when the bleeding stops and douse it in seawater. There's no better antiseptic. A rusty nail and a seashell are worlds apart, antiseptically speaking."

"You've been most helpful," she said, seeming not to care that I was taking my time in releasing her hand. "I'm more grateful than I can say."

The children were fidgeting about with their toes turned in, looking reproachfully from their mother to me and back again. There is nothing children resent more than to be totally ignored when an introduction can be achieved in a matter of seconds. The gulf that yawns between a child and an adult can be spanned to an incredible extent at times with no more than a gesture, and most children are wise enough to know when they are being cheated of an enriching experience for no reason at all.

It seemed suddenly to occur to her that she had failed even to introduce herself, and she made amends quickly in a threefold way. "I'm Helen Rathbourne," she said. "When my husband died I didn't think I'd ever find myself at the inn again. I felt that coming here would bring back—well, too many things. But I do love this place. Everything about it is irresistibly enchanting. The children adore it too."

She patted her son on the shoulder and took a strand of her daughter's windblown hair and twined it about her finger. "John is eight and Susan is six," she said. "John is a young explorer. When he goes adventuring every land is a far land, no matter how near it may be geographically."

She smiled. "He prefers simple weapons. A bow and a sheaf of arrows suit him quite well. He has slain some incredible beasts just through the accuracy of his aim."

"I don't doubt that for a moment," I said. "Hello, John."

He had seemed a little on the shy side, but there was no trace of shyness in the prideful way he held himself when we shook hands. It was as if, in some hidden recess of his mind, he believed every word his mother had just said about him.

"Susan's quite different," she went on, her eyes crinkling in a wholly enchanting way. "Most of her adventuring is done on 'wings of bright imagining,' as some poet must have phrased it sometime in the past, perhaps far back in the Victorian age. I'm not good at making such lines up."

"I'm sure you're mistaken," I told her. "I read a great deal of poetry, both traditional and avant-garde, and I can't recall ever having encountered that particular line."

" 'Stumbled over' would be better," she said.

"It's a little grandiose," I conceded. "But when you say it, it doesn't sound that way at all. I know exactly what you have in mind. Susan likes to dream away the hours sitting by a window ledge, with potted geraniums obscuring just a little of the view—a seascape or rolling hills with a snow-capped mountain looming in the distance."

"Thank you," she said. "I can shoot down a compliment like that faster than you might suspect, as a rule, armed with just one of John's arrows. But when you say it—"

We both laughed.

"Susan's not a tomboy," she added thoughtfully. "But she won't take any guff from John or any of his friends. You should have seen how fast she was running along the beach just now, outdistancing him in a few seconds. They are both children to be proud of, don't you think?"

"Indeed I do," I assured her. "I sensed that straight off. It doesn't really need to be pointed up in any way."

"Thank you again," she said. "I must confess that, on rare occasions, I have a few doubts. But it's amazing how quickly children can make an adult change his mind about them when forgiveness becomes of paramount importance—"

I should have known that if what she had said about her son's exploring urge was true—and I had no reason to doubt it—it would have been impossible to keep him still for more than a moment or two. But I was not prepared for the harm he did to our conversation just as it was reaching a most rewarding stage by turning about and dashing off so abruptly that concern for his safety drove every other thought from her mind.

"John, come back here!" she called. "*Right this minute!*"

She had followed him out across the beach, almost running, before I saw what had alarmed her. He had not merely bypassed the surf line and headed for a section of the beach strewn with the wreckage of a recent storm. He had climbed up on rotting boards of a washed-ashore, storm-shattered breakwater and was staring down at a side channel of swirling dark water which almost bisected the beach at precisely that point. Just below where he stood on one of the boards, precariously perched, the water had widened out into a pool that was unrippled by the wind and had a

deep, black, extremely ominous look. It had been made more hazardous by the way the wreckage extended out over it here and there, with edges so jagged a pitchfork would have seemed far less menacing.

I caught up with her before she could quite accomplish what her son had achieved with close to miraculous speed. There is no accounting for the swift way a small boy can travel from place to place when some wildly impulsive notion takes firm root in his mind.

"Don't be alarmed," I urged, hurrying along at her side. "Kids his age do reckless things at times simply because they just don't think. But we do, and it will take only a moment to get him down."

"He's not listening to me!" she protested. "That's what alarms me. I've never known him to be so stubborn."

"He'll listen to *me*," I assured her. "He may just be starting to feel the need for some stern father-to-son talk. If a kid has to go without something he's once known too long—"

"I don't want him to fall!" she said, as if she hadn't heard me, and before I could go on. "I'm so terribly worried."

"You can stop worrying," I assured her. "He'll climb straight down the instant I raise my voice."

I was far from sure that he would. But it wasn't just an idle boast to impress her. I was genuinely concerned for the boy's safety, and there was no excuse for what he was doing now. He could, I felt, have at least answered his mother's almost frantic appeals. Refusing to obey was one thing, totally ignoring her concern quite another.

When I reached the piled-up mass of wreckage he had moved even closer to the edge of the demolished breakwater, and the board on which he was standing seemed rickety in the extreme. It was so rotted away in spots that the swirling dark tides just beyond the almost rippleless pool were visible through the warped and nearly vertical far end of it. Something about the shape of it struck a chill to my heart. The supporting beams of a gallows might well have had just such a look, with both vertical and horizontal aspects, to the blurring vision of a condemned man awaiting swift oblivion.

Being parentally harsh is very difficult for me, because I've

always felt that the young are frequently justified in their rebellion, and as often as not I find myself on their side. But now I was very angry and felt not the slightest trace of sympathy for a boy who could cause his mother so much unnecessary anguish.

"John, get down!" I shouted at him. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

I suddenly felt that shouting was not needed and went on just loudly enough to make sure he'd catch every word. "I see I was wrong in believing everything your mother told me about you. No courageous explorer I've ever known took meaningless risks with his life. You've got to think of *other* people. How can you be so cruel, so thoughtless? Your mother—"

I stopped abruptly, noticing for the first time that there was a faraway look in his eyes and that he did not appear to be listening. He was clasping something in his right hand, and suddenly he opened his fingers and stared down at it, as if only the object mattered, and everything I had said had gone unheeded.

And that was when it happened. That was when the terrible mistake I'd made by not climbing up without saying a word and grabbing hold of him dawned on me. But perhaps it wouldn't have mattered. Even if he failed to put up a struggle, just my added weight on the board might have caused it to collapse anyway.

It collapsed with a dreadful splintering sound. The warped and upended, almost rotted away, portion fell first into the dark beach-bisecting channel, followed quickly by the part of it on which he had been standing. He went with that part so swiftly into the water that no slightest sound came from below the wreckage for ten full seconds. Then I heard only the gurgling of the water as it subsided, the initial splash having been a great deal louder. Despite that loudness I was quite sure that if he had made some outcry before vanishing I would have heard it.

My immediate, overwhelming emotion was one of horror, mingled with disbelief and a sudden gratefulness. The gratefulness was due solely to the fact that I had come to the beach to go swimming, and wore only bathing trunks beneath a light summer bathrobe.

I kicked off my sneakers first and discarded the bathrobe almost simultaneously with my swift ascent of the wreckage adjacent to

the vanished part of the storm-shattered breakwater. I had no way of knowing how deep the water might be at that particular spot, but when a narrow channel widens out into a pool it is likely to have a greater depth as well, and I was nine-tenths sure it was the opposite of shallow.

I remained for a moment staring down at that dark expanse of water, until I became convinced that no bobbing young head seemed likely to send a great wave of relief surging over me, for more additional seconds than I cared to risk wasting.

To have dived in would have risked a stunning blow to my head from the cluttered wreckage, which projected out over the pool in a dozen directions. So I let myself down slowly and cautiously before swimming out into the sluggishly moving current.

I abandoned my overhand strokes to plunge into the depths at about the spot where it seemed most likely John had been swallowed up. The farther I descended the less sluggish the current became, and I was soon being carried erratically back and forth in a tide-buffeted fashion.

It was my first attempt to save anyone from drowning, and I was lacking in all of the qualities that can make such a rescue attempt quickly successful.

I began to fear I would have to come up for air and descend a second time when I saw him, through a blurry film of dark water. Only vaguely at first and then more distinctly, revolving slowly about as if on some small underwater treadmill that was causing him neither to rise nor to descend farther.

Fortunately he did not struggle when I got to him, as close-to-drowning people are supposed to do unless you caution them in the open air where your voice carries. In another moment I had a tight grip on his arm and was ascending with him through what now seemed a depth of at least twenty fathoms.

Five minutes later he was lying stretched out on the sand at the base of the wreckage, with his mother bending over him. She was sobbing softly and looking up at me, her eyes shining with gratefulness.

No seven-year-old could have looked more capable of summoning to his aid all the innate vitality of the very young of sturdy constitution. The color was flooding back into his cheeks, and his

eyes were fluttering open with the stubborn, resolute look of a young explorer who refuses to give up, despite the worst buffetings that fate can inflict.

I suppose I should have felt nothing but relief and sympathy. But I was still angry, and the first words I spoke to him were so harsh that I almost instantly found myself regretting them.

"You should have known better than to put your mother through something like this. It's a good thing you're not my son. If you were there would be no baseball or anything else for you for one solid month. You'd just have to sit at the window and call down to your friends. Probably they are as bad as you are. Unruly, selfish, totally undisciplined kids run together in wolf cub packs."

The instant I stopped his eyes opened very wide, and he stared up at me without the slightest trace of hostility or resentment in his gaze. It was as if he realized I had spoken like the kind of person I wasn't and really could never be.

"I couldn't help it," he said. "There was something there I knew I'd find if I looked around for it. I didn't want to find it. But you can't help it when you dream about something you don't want to find, and you can't wake up in time—"

"You dreamed about it?"

"Not like when I go to sleep. I was just thinking about what it would look like when I found it."

"And that's why you ran off the way you did, without warning your mother that you were about to do something dangerous?"

"I couldn't help it. It was like something was pulling me."

"You were looking at it when I spoke to you," I said. "So you must have found it. It's too bad you lost it when you fell into the water. If you still had it, what you want us to believe might make a little more sense. Not much—but a little."

"I didn't lose it," he said. "It's right here in my hand."

"But that's impossible."

"No, it isn't," his mother said, interrupting us for the first time. "Look how tightly clenched his right hand is."

I could hardly believe it, if only because it made far more sense to assume that the hands of a boy falling from a collapsing board would have opened and closed many times in a desperate kind of

grasping, first at the empty air and then at a smothering wall of water rushing in upon him. What I had failed to recognize was that in such an extremity one may hold on to some small object that has just been picked up—a pebble or a shell—*even more tightly.*

There might even be—more to it than that. Not only adult men and women, but not a few children, had endured unspeakable torments without relinquishing, even in death, some small object precious to them, or feared by them in some terrible secret way. The Children's Crusade—

It was hard for me to imagine what could have put such thoughts into my mind, for I hadn't as much as caught a glimpse of the object which John had seemingly found very quickly. Surely what he had said about it could be dismissed as childish prattle. A dreamlike compulsion, coming upon him suddenly, and forcing him to go in search of it, as if drawn by a magnet. Powerless to resist, unable to break that mysterious binding influence. Not wanting to find it at all, but aware that he had been given no choice. Not wanting—

Susan had joined us beneath the wreckage, ignoring the wishes of her mother, who had waved her back to make her son's recovery less of a problem. Another small child, hopping about in the sand, would have made it difficult for her to give all of her attention to what I'd just been saying to her son.

But now she was looking at me as if I had added a new, unexpected complication by my two full minutes of silence.

"Let him see what it was you picked up, John," she said. "Just open your hand and show it to him. You're making some strange mystery out of it, and so is he. I'd like to see it too. Then we'll all be happier."

"I can't," John said.

"You can't what?" I demanded, startled by the look of astonishment and pain that had come into his eyes.

"I can't move my fingers," he said. "I just found out. I didn't try before."

"Oh, that's nonsense," I said. "Listen to me, before you say anything even more foolish. You must have at least *tried* to move your fingers a dozen or more times before I rescued you. Just as often afterward."

He shook his head. "That's not true."

"It *has* to be true. That's your *right* hand. You use it all the time. Everyone does."

"I can't move my fingers," he reiterated. "If I'd opened my hand it would have fallen out—"

"I know all that," I said. "But you could have at least found out before this whether you could so much as move your fingers. It would have been a natural thing to do."

It had been difficult for me to think of his mother in a very special way, so overwrought had she become since I had gone to his rescue. But something of the beach-temptress look had returned when her son had opened his eyes and had seemed no worse for the tragedy that had almost overtaken him. But now she looked distraught again. Sudden fear flamed in her eyes.

"Could it be—hysterical paralysis?" she asked. "It can happen, I've been told, in quite young children."

"I don't think so," I said. "Just try to stay calm. We'll know in a moment."

I took her son's hand, raised it, and looked at it closely. He made no protest. The fingers could not have been more tightly clenched. The nails, I felt, must be biting painfully into the flesh of his palms. His knuckles looked bluish.

I began to work on his fingers, trying my best to force them open. I had no success for a moment. Then, gradually, they seemed to become more flexible and some of the stiffness went out of them.

Quite suddenly his entire hand opened, as if my persistent tugging at each individual finger in turn had broken some kind of spell.

The small object which rested on his palm did not seem to have been compressed or injured in any way by the tight constriction to which it had been subjected. I thought at first it was of metal, so brightly did it gleam in the sunlight. But when I picked it up and looked at it closely I saw that it was of some rubbery substance with merely the sheen of metal.

I had never before looked at any inanimate object quite so horrible. Superficially it resembled a tiny many-tentacled octopus, but there was something about it which would have made the ugliest of sea monsters seem merely fishlike in a slightly repulsive

way. It had a countenance, of a sort, a shriveled, sunken old man's face that was no more than suggestively human. Not a human face at all, really, but the suggestion was there, a hint, at least, of anthropoid intelligence of a wholly malignant nature. But the longer I stared at it the less human it seemed, until I began to feel that I had read into it something that wasn't there. Intelligence, yes—awareness of some kind, but so much the opposite of anthropoid that my mind reeled at trying to imagine what intelligence would be like if it was as cold as the dark night of space and could exercise a wholly merciless authority over every animate entity in the universe of stars.

I looked at Helen Rathbourne and saw that she was trembling and had turned very pale. I had lowered my hand just enough to enable her to see it clearly, and I knew that her son had seen it again too. He said nothing, just looked at me as if, young as he was, the thought that such an object had been taken from his hand made him feel in some strange way contaminated.

"You picked it up without knowing," I wanted to shout at him. "Forget it, child—blot it from your mind. I'll take it to the pool you almost drowned in and let it sink from sight, and we'll forget we ever saw it."

But before I could say a word to John or his mother, something began to happen to my hand. It began to happen even before I realized the object was attached to a rusted metal chain and had clearly been designed to be worn as an amulet around someone's neck.

My fingers closed over it, contracting more and more until I was holding it in as tight a grip as John had done. I couldn't seem to open them again or hurl the object from me as I suddenly wanted to do.

Something happened then to more than just my hand. Everything about me seemed subtly to change, the contours of near objects becoming less sharply silhouetted against the sky and more distant objects not only losing their sharpness, but seeming almost to dissolve. There was a roaring in my ears, and a strange, terrifying feeling of vastness, of emptiness—I can describe it in no other way—swept over me.

Nothing actually vanished, nothing was gone, but I had the

feeling that I was in two places at once—suspended in some vast abyss of emptiness wider than the universe of stars, and still on the beach beneath the wreckage, with Helen Rathbourne, John, and Susan all looking at me in alarm.

They were staring in alarm because I was moving, I felt, in some strange, almost unnatural way, as men and women were not supposed to move. Like some mindless automaton perhaps, a robot shape with no way of preserving its balance because its cybernetic brain had exploded into fragments and it could only stagger about in the grip of an utter mindlessness that was about to cause it to go crashing to the sand.

Then my perceptions steadied a little, and when I looked down over myself I saw that no change had taken place in my physical body at least. But I had swung about and was walking toward the surf line.

Nearer and nearer I came to it, and suddenly I was not alone. John had gotten to his feet, and both children were pursuing me across the sand. Their mother was following them, frantic with concern, but unable to catch up with them because they were running so fast to join me before I started wading out into the waves that were cresting into foam a few feet from shore.

The instant they reached my side, my hand went out toward Susan and her small trembling fingers crept between mine. I could not give John my other hand, but he was not in need of support. He had become his sturdy young self again and was striding along very rapidly at my side. The water was swirling about my ankles, and Susan was stumbling a little because it had risen to her knees when I spoke the words that had not even formed in my mind, in a voice that I did not recognize as my own:

"The Deep Ones await their followers, and we must not fail to be present at the Great Awakening. It is written that all shall arise and join. We who carry the emblem and those who have looked upon it. From the ends of the earth the summons, the call has come and we must not delay.

"In watery R'lyeh Great Cthulhu is stirring. Shub-Niggurath! Yog-Sothoth! Iä! The Goat with a Thousand Young!"

"He will be all right now," the young resident physician was saying. "I am sure he will be all right. It was your son who deserves all of

the credit by prying that lost amulet from his hand just as he was about to go under, after lifting your daughter above the waves."

I could hear the voices clearly, although my head was still in a whirl. The crisp white hospital sheets had been so stiffly starched that they cut into the flesh of my throat when I tried to raise my head. So I gave up trying, and went on listening instead.

"It's strange," came in a voice I would have recognized if nothing had been left of me but a hollow shell, on the darkest of days, "how quickly children can become attached to a total stranger. Susan risked her life to save him, and so did my son. When he took that hideous thing from my son's hand and I saw it, I thought I was going to faint. I can't begin to tell you how unnerving it was."

"He didn't know about—"

"How it came to be there? Apparently not. He just arrived at the inn this morning. Since it happened two weeks ago everyone had stopped talking about it. It was so horrible a thing that it doesn't surprise me in the least."

"The man was a member of an esoteric cult, I understand. A half-crazed, uncouth fellow with a waist-length beard. There were eight or ten of them roaming about here at one time, but now they have all disappeared. After what happened, it's not in the least surprising, as you say."

"I can't bear to think about it, even now. His body was dismembered, and horribly mangled. One of his legs was missing. He was found right where my son picked up the amulet, so it must have belonged to him. Of course everyone has a ready explanation for such horrors. Sheriff Wilcox believes that where the channel widens out by that demolished breakwater there is sufficient depth of water to provide a kind of swimming pool for a shark. And if he had stumbled and fallen—"

"Do you think he did?"

"You either have to believe that, or that he went down deliberately into the water. Are you familiar with the writings of H. P. Lovecraft? He was a genius, of a sort. He resided in Providence until his death in 1937."

"Yes, I've read a few of his stories."

"Those bearded, uncouth cult members you mention must have read them all. Perhaps that's why they've disappeared. Perhaps they made the mistake of taking Lovecraft's stories a little too seriously."

"You can't really believe that."

"I don't quite know what I believe. Just suppose—Lovecraft didn't put everything he knew or suspected into his stories. That would have left a quite wide margin for future exploration."

"Ah, yes," the resident physician said. "That's what he claimed before I gave him that second seconal injection. I'm sure he'll feel quite differently about all of this when he wakes up."

"I hope he doesn't feel differently about Susan's heroic, close to sacrificial act. Love for a total stranger. It's curious, but do you know—I can understand just why Susan felt that way about him."

It was what I'd been waiting to hear. I closed my eyes and started humming softly to myself, waiting for the second seconal to work.

But when it drew me down, the seconal felt like water. Something like a shriveled face came floating up from immeasurable distances, and I remembered my own words: "It is written that all shall arise and join—we who carry the emblem and those who have looked upon it. . ."

Shaft Number 247

Basil Copper

> The process of delving into the black abyss is to me the keenest form of fascination.
>
> —H. P. Lovecraft

Driscoll looked at the dial reflectively. The Control Room was silent except for the distant thumping of the dynamos. The dim lights gleamed reassuringly on the familiar faces of the instruments and on the curved metal of the roof, its massive nuts and bolts and girders holding back the tremendous weight of the earth above their heads. The green luminous digits of the triangular clock on the bulkhead pointed to midnight.

It was the quietest part of the Watch. Driscoll shifted to a more comfortable position in his padded swivel armchair. He was a big man, whose hair was going a little white at the edges, but his features were still hard and firm, unblurred by time, though he must have been past fifty.

He glanced across at Wainewright at the other side; he had the earphones clamped over his head and was turning one of his calibrating instruments anxiously. Driscoll smiled inwardly. But

then Wainewright always had been the worrying type. He could not have been more than twenty-nine, yet he looked older than Driscoll with his lean, strained features, his straggly moustache, and the hair that was already thinning and receding.

Driscoll's gaze rested just a fraction on his colleague, drifted on to bring into focus a bank of instruments with large easy-read dials on the far bulkhead, and finally came to rest on the red-painted lettering of the alarm board situated to his front and in a commanding position. The repeater screen below contained forty-five flickering blue images, which showed the state of the alarm boards in the farthest corners of the complex for which Driscoll, as Captain of the Watch, was responsible.

All was normal. But then it always was. Driscoll shrugged and turned his attention to the desk in front of him. He filled in the log with a luminous radionic pencil. Still two hours to go. But he had to admit that he liked the night duty better than the day. The word "enjoy" was frowned on nowadays, but the word was appropriate to Driscoll's state; he actually enjoyed this Watch. It was quiet, almost private, and that was a decreasing quality in life.

His musings were interrupted by a sharp, sibilant exclamation from Wainewright.

"Some activity in Shaft 639!" he reported, swiveling to look at the Captain of the Watch with watery blue eyes.

Driscoll shook his head, a thin smile on his lips.

"It's nothing. Some water in the shaft, probably."

Wainewright tightened his mouth.

"Perhaps. . . Even so, it ought to be reported."

Driscoll stiffened on the seat and looked at the thin man; the other was the first to drop his eyes.

"You have reported it," he said gently. "And I say it is water in the shaft."

He snapped on the log entries, read them off the illuminated repeater on the bulkhead.

"There have been seventeen similar reports in the past year. Water each time."

Wainewright hunched over his instruments; his shoulders heaved as though he had difficulty in repressing his emotions. Driscoll looked at him sharply. It might be time to make a report on

Wainewright. He would wait a little longer. No sense in being too precipitate.

"Shaft clear," Wainewright mumbled presently.

He went on making a play of checking instruments, throwing switches, examining dials, avoiding Driscoll's eye.

Driscoll sat back in his chair again. He looked at the domed metal roof spreading its protective shell over them; its rivets and studs winking and throwing back the lights from the instrument dials and the shaded lamps. He mentally reviewed Wainewright's case, sifting and evaluating the facts as he knew them.

The man was beginning to show signs of psychotic disturbance. Driscoll could well understand this. They did not know what was out there, that was the trouble. He had over forty miles of galleries and communicating tunnels alone in the section under his own command, for example. But still, that did not excuse him. They had to proceed on empirical methods. He yawned slightly, looked again at the time.

He thought of his relief without either expectation or regret; he was quite without emotion, unlike Wainewright. Unlike Wainewright again, well suited to his exacting task. He would not be Captain of the Watch otherwise. Even when he was relieved he would not seek his bunk. He would descend to the canteen for coffee and food before joining Karlson for a brief session of chess.

He frowned. He had just thought of Deems again. He thrust the image of Deems from his mind. It flickered momentarily, then disappeared. It was no good; it had been two years now, but it still came back occasionally. He remembered, too, that he had been Wainewright's particular friend; that probably explained his jumpiness lately. Nevertheless, he would need watching.

He pursed his lips and bent forward, watching the bright green pencil of tracery on the tube in front of him. He pressed the voice button, and Hort's cavernous voice filled the Control Room.

"Condition Normal, I hope!"

There was a jovial edge to his query; the pronouncement was intended to be a joke, and Driscoll permitted himself a smile of about three millimeters in width. That would satisfy Hort, who was not really a humorous man. There was no point in knocking himself out for someone so devoid of the absurd in his makeup.

"Nothing to report," he called back in the same voice.

Hort nodded. Driscoll could see his multi-imaged form flickering greenly at the corner of his vision, but he did not look directly at it. He knew that annoyed Hort, and it pleased him to make these small gestures of independence.

"I'd like to see you when you come off Watch," Hort went on.

He had a slightly sardonic look on his thin face now.

Driscoll nodded.

"I'll be there," he said laconically.

He waved a perfunctory hand, and the vision on the tube wavered and died, a tiny rain of green sparks remaining against the blackness before dying out.

He was aware of Wainewright's troubled eyes seeking his own; he ignored the other man and concentrated instead on a printout which was just coming through. It was a routine check, he soon saw and he leaned back, his sharp eyes sweeping across the serried ranks of instruments, his ears alert for even the slightest aberration in the smooth chatter of the machinery.

He wondered idly what Hort might want with him. Probably nothing of real importance, but it was best to be prepared; he pressed the repeater valve on the desk in front of him, instantly memorizing the latest data that was being constantly fed in by a wide stream of instruments. There were only three sets of numbers of any importance; he scratched these onto his pad and kept it ready at his elbow.

There would be nothing else of note in the Watch now, short of an unforeseen emergency. He momentarily closed his eyes, leaning back in the chair, lightly resting his fingertips on the smooth polished metal of the desk. He savored the moment, which lasted only for a few seconds. Then he opened his eyes again, refreshed and wide-awake. A faint humming vibration filled all the galleries and corridors adjacent to the Control Room. The vents were open for the moment; all was as it should be.

The rest of the Watch passed almost too quickly; Wainewright was already being relieved by Krampf, Driscoll noted. The bulkhead clock indicated nine minutes to the hour. But then Krampf always was more zealous than most of the personnel here. Driscoll really knew little about him. He glanced incuriously at the

man now, dapper and self-confident, his dark hair bent over the panel opposite, listening to Wainewright's handing-over report. Then he had adjusted the headphones and was sliding into the padded seat.

Wainewright waited almost helplessly for a moment, and then went hurriedly down the metal staircase. Krampf's eyes rested on Driscoll and his lips curved in a smile; he gave the Captain of the Watch a jaunty thumbs-up signal. Driscoll felt vaguely irritated.

There was something about Krampf he did not quite understand. He had none of the anxiety to please that Wainewright displayed; indeed he exuded a disconcerting air of suppressed energy and egotistical drive.

Still, it was none of his business; he only saw Krampf for a very few minutes when they were changing over Watches. Three or four minutes in a week, perhaps, for sometimes their duties failed to overlap. His own relief was at his elbow now and Driscoll got up, almost reluctant to vacate the seat. He handed over with a few smooth phrases and went down the staircase in the wake of Wainewright.

There was no one in the canteen but Karlson. A plump, balding man, he nodded shyly as Driscoll came up. He rose and made room for him on the smooth plastic bench. Soft music was drifting from louvers in the ceiling. Karlson had already set up the board and had made his opening move. It was his turn to start. Driscoll glanced briefly at the problem and then crossed over to study the menu on the screen.

He put his token in the tray and drew out the hot coffee and the thin wheaten biscuits with honey that he liked so well. He did not eat very much when he came off Watch at this time as it impaired his digestion and interfered with his sleep. He went back to the table in the corner where he and Karlson always sat and sipped the hot, strong coffee slowly, his eyes seemingly inattentive but all the time studying the board and Karlson's concentrated face.

But it was obvious that his attention was waning. He fidgeted for a moment and then turned away from the board, his eyes fixed on the table before him. Karlson looked at him quickly, a sympathetic smile already flowering at the corners of his mouth.

"Tired?"

Driscoll shook his head.

"No more than usual. It is not that, no."

He folded firm, capable hands round the rim of his beaker and stared into the steaming black surface of his coffee as though the answer to his unspoken question lay there.

"Then it is something which happened on Watch?"

Karlson's eyes were alert, questioning now. Driscoll knew he had to be very careful in his choice of words. Karlson was a particular friend, but the system had to come first, whatever else happened. He sipped the coffee slowly, playing for time. Karlson watched him without impatience, a sort of majestic contentment on his outwardly placid face. Yet there was a wary and unusual brain beneath the banal exterior. Driscoll had ample evidence of that.

Then Karlson's face relaxed. He smiled slowly.

"Not Wainewright again. And his shaft noises?"

Driscoll's surprise showed on his face.

"So you know about it?"

Karlson nodded.

"It's no secret. We have our eye on things. He was on Watch with Collins three weeks ago, when you were indisposed."

Driscoll cast his mind back, failed to remember anything of significance. He avoided Karlson's eye, looked instead at the gleaming metal dome of the roof that stretched above them. Wherever one went in the miles of corridors, there was nothing but the smooth unbroken monotony.

"Your loyalty does you credit," Karlson said drily. "But it is not really necessary in this case. Wainewright's nerve was never strong. And he has certainly not been the same since Deems went. . ."

He broke off suddenly and leaned forward at the table. His sharp, attentive attitude made him look almost as if he were listening for something. Something beyond the roof. Which was absurd, under the circumstances. Driscoll allowed himself a thin smile at the thought. He took up Karlson as though his friend had not hesitated.

"Out There," he finished bluntly.

Karlson looked momentarily startled; his bland façade abruptly

cracked. He drummed with thick spatulate fingers on the table. He looked almost angry, Driscoll thought.

But his voice was calm and measured when he spoke.

"We do not mention that," he said gently. "But since you have seen fit to raise it—yes."

Driscoll picked up one of his special biscuits and took a fastidious bite.

"I have kept a close watch on Wainewright," he said, more stiffly than he had intended. "If there had been the slightest doubt in my mind. . ."

His companion interrupted him by laying a hand on his arm.

"There was no criticism intended," he said gently. "As I said, we are all aware of Wainewright's problems. They are being monitored at higher level. Long before any danger point we shall take him out."

Karlson focused his gaze back on the game before them.

"It does not seem as though we shall get any further tonight. With your permission. . ."

Driscoll nodded. Karlson animated the lever. Board and men sank back into the surface of the table with a barely audible whine. Karlson folded his hands on the spot where the board had stood.

"Wainewright reported five occurrences in the one Watch," he said bluntly. "In various shafts."

Driscoll licked his lips. He said nothing, merely bending his head politely as he waited for Karlson to go on.

"It was unprecedented," Karlson continued. "It could not be overlooked. So Collins reported it to me direct. Wainewright has been under close surveillance ever since."

He looked at Driscoll reproachfully.

"You have not reported anything yourself."

Driscoll flushed. He bit his lip.

"Is that why Hort wants to see me?"

Karlson spread his hands wide in a gesture of apology.

"I do not know," he said simply. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. But it would be wise to go carefully."

He smiled then. A full-mouthed, sincere smile.

"Thank you," Driscoll said. "There is nothing, really.

Wainewright is fidgety, it is true. And he was dubious about Shaft Number 639 tonight. That is all."

Karlson let his breath out in a sigh of relief.

"That is good. Nevertheless, I should let Hort know."

He got up suddenly, as though summoned by an inaudible alarm bell. He looked down at Driscoll thoughtfully.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "But let Hort know."

He went out quietly and unhurriedly, leaving Driscoll to his coffee and biscuits and the insect humming of the hidden machinery.

Hort was a tall, thin, ascetic man with a bald head and hooded grey eyes. He wore a blue tunic zipped up to the neck and the scarlet badge denoting his rank of Gallery Master. He was in his early sixties, but despite his years there was a dynamic athleticism in his wiry frame that many people found unnerving. Driscoll did not find it so, but there was a faint core of wariness within him as he came up the spiral glass staircase leading to Hort's office.

He could see Hort through the armored glass wall that separated his quarters from the other administration units. Driscoll slid the door back and went in. Hort sat down at his semicircular desk with its battery of winking lights and motioned Driscoll to take a seat on the divan in front of him. Driscoll sank down cautiously, as though afraid the cushions would not bear his weight. Hort's eyes looked slightly amused as he stared for a moment without speaking. Then he made a pretense of examining his fingernails and came to the point.

"I expect you've guessed why I've asked you to come here?"

Driscoll nodded curtly.

"Wainewright?"

Despite himself he thought his voice had a defensive quality in it which he had not intended.

"Exactly."

Hort sat back in his padded chair and went through the nail-examining charade again.

"I won't conceal from you, Driscoll, that we're worried. Especially after the other business."

His eyes had grown serious, and he looked searchingly at the Captain of the Watch.

"Deems?" Driscoll said.

Hort nodded.

"Exactly. We have to be so careful. You understand almost better than I the implications of such a situation. We must avoid any leakage. . ."

He broke off, avoided Driscoll's eyes, and focused his own gaze on his fingernails again.

"It is difficult to put delicately, Driscoll. But we have to avoid also the arousing of any uneasiness among the personnel. . ."

Driscoll put on his blank-faced look.

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you. Wainewright has reported certain disturbances in several of the main shafts. There have been a number of such incidents over the past year or so. I fail to see why that should be considered anything abnormal."

Encouraged by Hort's silence and his relaxed manner as he sat staring at his nails, he went on.

"Obviously, Wainewright is disturbed. But I have been keeping him under close observation. And I understand the Captains of other Watches have done the same when the circumstances arose."

Hort wagged his head gravely, as though in agreement with every word Driscoll had spoken.

"I am glad to hear it," he said mildly. "But there is something more than that. There must be no repetition—"

He broke off, the points of his fingers trembling on the desk. Driscoll realized that he had been applying pressure to the desk top all the while he had been speaking. Hort turned his head to Driscoll with an effort.

"There must be no repetition," he said with calm finality. "That is all, unless you have anything further to add."

The matter was perfectly clear in Driscoll's mind; he did not like Hort and the other man knew it, but he respected his abilities. He would not have held his present position if he had not been immensely able. And it was one of his duties to prevent problems arising. Driscoll realized for the first time what a shock Deems must have given the Administration.

He got up slowly, expecting dismissal. But Hort's mind had apparently gone on to other things. He chatted amiably of various trivialities before the interview came to an end.

Driscoll turned back when he reached the staircase. Hort was still standing by the desk as he had left him, as though lost in thought. Then, aware that Driscoll could see him through the armored glass wall, he sat down again at his desk.

Driscoll walked back down the stairs; he gained the sloping metal corridor that led to his own quarters. Long after he sought his bunk his mind was absorbed with unaccustomed thoughts. He heard the soft burring of the alarm bell for the next Watch before sleep found him.

Driscoll slid back the door of Central Records and went over the shining parquet to the main desk. He was off Watch today and he often spent some time here, researching his particular projects. Today he went to the Historical Section and scratched his notation on a pad in front of the request screen. It was quiet in the library today; only about two dozen people were spread out at the metal desks beyond the transparent screen. Light shimmered evenly on their bowed heads, and the faint humming of the machinery filled the air.

A soft breeze was coming through the vents; the scent was jasmine today, Driscoll noted. Driscoll liked Jasmine Day above all others. It was a pity it only came around about once every two months. The speaker was quietly braying into his ear.

"Your request has been programmed. Desk number 64."

The door slid back automatically as Driscoll walked over; it was warmer in the Historical Section, and he unbuttoned the top layers of his clothing. He went down the aisles to where the number 64 glowed on the identification tag and sank into the padded chair. He had asked for the records of the entire year. It would not do to be too specific. And somehow he felt it might be dangerous. He did not quite know why.

He looked listlessly as the image of the first page of the log appeared, greatly enlarged, on the brightly lit screen in front of him. He pressed the button, displacing the entry, working quietly through, pretending to take notes. He spent more than an hour on

this stage. He felt his palms slightly sweating as he neared the relevant dates.

He selected an entry that came in the middle of the period that interested him, as though at random. He immediately knew there was something wrong. The familiar bleeping noise began and the crimson light commenced winking. The screen went blank and the recorded voice bleated: "The information you require is in the Restricted Section. To consult the entry you require verified permission of Authority."

Driscoll sighed. He pressed the neutral button, and the screen came up with the bland entries of the log for the last date before the restricted period. Driscoll did not try any further dates. He knew the response would be the same. If he tried three successive entries in the Restricted Section it would bring the curator to the desk in person to inquire about his interest in the information. He could not risk that.

He sat back at the desk and consulted the notes on his pad. There was only one other thing to do. He would have to talk to Wainewright. Even then there might be difficulties. Driscoll had become interested in the problem. When he was interested in something he never let go. If Hort had not asked to see him; if there had not been some subtle expression on Karlson's face; if Wainewright's own features had not borne some furtive evidence of secret shock. . .

Driscoll drummed with his capable fingers on the desk surface in the glutinous silence while the muted background hum that was almost inaudible to its hearers lapped the library in its almost apian susurrus.

He was irritated with himself; something had occurred to cause ripples on the smooth and placidly ordered surface of his life. He did not like that. He sat there frowningly for another ten minutes or so, silently wrestling with the problem. Then he rose and abruptly quitted the Historical Section. The long armored glass doors slid to quietly behind him, leaving the earnest questers after knowledge to their hermetic silence.

Driscoll waited until after lunch. There was no difficulty. There was nothing against his visiting Wainewright. It was unusual,

perhaps. Driscoll knew that television cameras scanned all public places and main thoroughfares. There was really no reason for secrecy, but he preferred to be more discreet. So he walked out as though for the exercise and caught a car on an obscure junction where it was unlikely he would be seen.

He had to change twice, but he felt justified in the procedure. Wainewright lived in Gallery 4,034, and Driscoll was not quite sure of the exact location of his apartment. In the event it took him more than an hour, and during that time Driscoll evolved his story. He did not quite know how to approach Wainewright; that there was something about Deems's death which had profoundly shocked him was obvious. To one of Driscoll's fiber such things were a little unusual, but nothing to upset the stolid norm of everyday living.

Yet Deems's departure had evidently upset the authorities more than they had cared to admit; Karlson's guarded attitude had not really deceived Driscoll. He had half suspected that Hort had asked him to make inquiries, and his own interview with Hort had crystallized his suspicions. Driscoll's mind was still full of half-formulated impulses when he slid back the folding door of the car at Station 68 and walked up the tiled concourse in the direction of Gallery 4,034.

He soon located Wainewright's apartment and ascended to the third stage where it was situated. Wainewright's lean, strained features revealed their frank astonishment as he slid back the door to answer Driscoll's summons. His watery blue eyes looked up at Driscoll half-defiantly, half-defensively.

"I am sorry," said Driscoll almost hesitantly. "If it is not convenient. . ."

"No, of course not," Wainewright stammered.

He drew back, his left hand making an expressive gesture.

"Come in, come in, please. I am quite alone."

Driscoll stepped past his host and stood lost in thought in the radiance of the dim overhead light. He waited until Wainewright had closed the door.

"Forgive my apparent confusion," Wainewright went on, leading the way into the circular living room where soft music oozed from

hidden louvers. He went over to the switch and killed the recital. He waved Driscoll to a divan opposite him and sank into a steel-backed chair facing his guest.

"You see," Wainewright went on, "your visit is most unusual so that I was naturally surprised. I hope there is nothing wrong. . ."

Driscoll shook his head; he spoke some anodyne words, allaying the other's fears.

"It is nothing, really, yet I felt I would like to come for an hour. If you can spare the time. . ."

"Certainly, certainly."

Wainewright had recovered his poise now.

"May I offer you some refreshment? I am partial to tea."

Driscoll smiled thinly; there was something a little old-maidish about Wainewright. He supposed it came from living alone as he did.

"Only if you are making something. It is nothing of real importance that I wished to discuss. It will keep."

Wainewright got up, obviously relieved. While he busied himself making the tea, Driscoll sat with his heavy hands folded in his lap, quite at ease, his lids drooping over his eyes as though half-asleep. But he missed nothing that went on in the small world in which he found himself. It was not easy to shake off the habits of a lifetime.

Wainewright reappeared at last, with mumbled apologies. Driscoll was silent until after he had poured the tea. He sat watching the liquid descend in a steaming amber arc into the burnished metal cup. He made polite small talk until the ceremony was over. His host sat back on the chair opposite and regarded him warily. Caution and confusion struggled somewhere in the depths of his eyes.

"I was surprised at your visit," he said. "I will not conceal it. I wondered if there was something wrong at Control. My records are quite in order. . ."

He broke off for a second. Then, reassured by Driscoll's expression, he continued.

"Of course, I know there have been complaints. It was perhaps inevitable. But I have not been sleeping at all well lately."

"It was about that I wanted to talk to you," said Driscoll quickly,

feeling his way clear. "It is obvious there was something on your mind. It is the private sector, you understand. This has nothing to do with Control."

He waited to see what effect his words were having on Wainewright. The thin man sat in an immobile posture, his watery blue eyes blinking rapidly. Only the restless clenching and unclenching of his hands revealed his inner tension; it was almost as though his naked nerve-ends were exposed to Driscoll's probing gaze. The visitor knew his man. He abruptly changed the subject.

"Excellent tea," he said cheerfully, extending his cup for a refill. "Where do you get such quality these days?"

Wainewright's apprehensive face flushed with pleasure.

"I blend it myself," he answered. "It is something of a lost art."

Driscoll agreed, making a mental note regarding his inmost thoughts on Wainewright. His sleepy eyes went on probing the apartment.

"It was your reports of movements in the shafts," he went on gently. "The subject interests me. And after what happened. . ."

He broke off abruptly, leaving the sentence hanging awkwardly in the air. For a moment he thought he had overplayed his hand. Wainewright bit his lip. His fingers shook perceptibly, so much so that he set down his teacup on the tray. He put both hands together in front of him, as though to control their shaking.

"Did Hort ask you to come?" Wainewright said heavily.

There was a sort of sullen defiance on his rather weak face. The blue eyes looked baffled and defeated. Driscoll felt a sudden flash of pity for him. He shook his head.

"I was speaking the truth," he said simply. "This is entirely private. I wanted to help if I could. . ."

Again he broke off the sentence, let it hang in the air. The echoes of his voice seemed to go on reverberating round the apartment long after their natural resonance should have died away. There was an odd, dead silence between the two.

Wainewright sat, his body awkwardly constricted, his hands together in his lap, slightly leaning forward as though listening for something that could not be heard by anyone else. Driscoll had often noted it when they were on night Watch together. They still

kept Earth Time, even though there was nothing but artificial light now. They had long adapted to it.

Driscoll had noted that Wainewright seemed more apprehensive on night duties. Curious that it should be so. He gave his host a reassuring smile, moved on the divan slightly, and then picked up his teacup again. Normality seemed to flow back into the room.

"There is much I could say," Wainewright said heavily. "You see, after Deems went. . ."

He swallowed and broke off. To Driscoll it seemed as though there were some sort of mute appeal in his eyes.

"It was Deems I really wanted to speak about," Driscoll prompted him. "And whatever you imagine is in the shafts."

A shudder seemed to pass through Wainewright's thin form. His attitude was more than ever one of someone listening intently for something to happen. The notion was absurd, but Driscoll could not dismiss it from his mind.

"In the shafts?" Wainewright repeated dully.

Driscoll nodded encouragingly.

"Out There."

Wainewright stirred on the chair with a visible effort. Then he made a convulsive movement and raised his cup to his lips. He drank as though he were thirsty, taking great gulps, his eyes tightly closed as if to erase the memory of something from his sight. Though Driscoll might have mistaken his motives; it might merely have been the effect of the hot steam against his eyelids.

"Deems was a very good friend of yours, wasn't he?" Driscoll said gently.

The eyelids had opened. The watery blue eyes regarded him intently.

"The best. There is no one now."

His voice was so low the words were almost inaudible. Driscoll was more sure of his ground. He leaned forward across the tea-things.

"I tried to check on the log entries regarding Deems this afternoon. They were not available in Central Records."

Wainewright's face had gone white. He visibly trembled. He shook his head.

"That was extremely unwise. Though I am surprised that you are so interested."

His face changed as he was speaking. Some of the tension drained out of it. He looked at Driscoll steadily.

"Does this mean that you understand? That you might even believe me?"

Driscoll knew all was well now. He leaned back easily on the divan.

"Let us just say I have an open mind. And I shall be extremely discreet."

Driscoll smiled at Wainewright. He had a frank, open face, and the confidence he exuded seemed to extend to his companion. Wainewright's features seemed more relaxed, and the haunting tightness round the eyes and temples was momentarily eased. He looked steadily at Driscoll.

"You want to know about Deems?"

Driscoll nodded.

"If it will help me to an understanding of what troubles you, yes."

He knew at once he had said the right thing; Wainewright seemed visibly moved. He half got up, as though he would come over to his guest's side, then he sank back into his seat again.

"You may not understand," he said.

"I do not understand now," Driscoll said. "When I have learned what troubles you I surely cannot know less."

Wainewright nodded slowly. Sitting there stiffly, blinking his eyes, he seemed to Driscoll like something left over from an earlier age; an age when gentleness and learned pursuits had value, and when purifying winds blew across the surface of the earth. But there was no indication of his thoughts as he sat with his steady gaze surveying Wainewright calmly. The latter restlessly knotted and unknotted his fingers.

"Deems was my friend," he said. "My only real friend. His going was a dreadful shock."

"I can understand that," Driscoll said gently. "I want to help."

Wainewright shifted on his seat. His eyes looked vague and half-frightened.

"If only I could believe that. . ."

Driscoll showed a faint flicker of impatience. He cupped his big hands round his right kneecap and rocked himself to and fro.

"You have ample proof of it," he pointed out. "My very presence here. You know we are not supposed to meet off Watch."

The point struck home; Wainewright narrowed his eyes and flinched back slightly, as though his companion had struck him. He made up his mind. He started to talk, breathing heavily between sentences, as though he were running.

"Deems knew," he said. "He was always talking about it. On Watch as well as off. He knew there was something."

"Out There?" Driscoll prompted.

Wainewright nodded. He swallowed once or twice but realized he had to go on; he had committed himself, and it was too late to turn back.

"It started with Shaft Number 247. You didn't know that, did you?"

Driscoll stared at him. He shook his head. Wainewright smiled thinly.

"It was a well-kept secret. It's right on the edge of our section. It's a strange place. No one wants to say anything about it. The lighting system is always going there, so that the tunnels are often in semidarkness. There have been odd noises and movements in the shafts. Water has come through in one or two places, and some of the valves are rusting."

Driscoll looked at Wainewright incredulously. He licked his lips, but there was the stamp of sincerity in the look he returned.

"It's perfectly true," he said. "Only none of the official reports refer to it. Special teams attend to it, and no formal records are kept."

Driscoll stared at his companion in silence for a long moment.

"I take it you know what you're saying?"

Wainewright nodded. He kept his watery eyes fixed on the other.

"This thing has been with me for a long time. I know exactly what I'm saying. And I am choosing my words with care."

Driscoll kept his bleak gaze fully ahead of him, not seeing Wainewright for the moment. His brain was heavy with dark thoughts.

"Go on."

Wainewright made a pathetic little flourishing movement with his hands.

"Did you know, for instance, that there have been breaks in the tunnel? Water in the shafts and, as I said, rust on the valves?"

"I find that difficult to believe."

His voice sounded a little unsteady, even to himself. Wainewright permitted himself a shy, hesitant smile. He stirred uneasily, his eyes searching Driscoll's face.

"You will not find it in the records. But he knew."

Driscoll's senses must have been a little dulled this afternoon. He looked blankly at Wainewright, the bland, smooth lighting of the room beating down on them, turning their figures to a pale butter yellow.

"Deems, of course," Wainewright went on, as though a flood of emotion had been released in him. "He was determined to know. He confided in me. The thing had been on his mind for some time. He was convinced there was something in the shafts. And Shaft Number 247 was the obvious. . ."

"Why obvious?" Driscoll interrupted.

Wainewright passed a bluish tongue across dry lips.

"Surely you must know that. It is the largest. It was the inspection tunnel years ago. When people went Out There to check on conditions."

Driscoll was slightly irritated with himself; he put his hands round his kneecap again and rocked to and fro. Of course; he remembered now. He smiled confidently at his companion.

"The shaft with the inspection capsule? Is it still there?"

Wainewright shook his head.

"The authorities had it taken out. But the chamber still exists. And it would be no great thing to undo the bolts of the hatch."

Driscoll was startled; he sat, his strong face immobile as he stared at Wainewright.

"Why would anyone want to do that?"

Wainewright shrugged.

"Why would Deems want to go there? To find out. To increase the sum of human knowledge, of course. The movement in the shafts. . ."

Despite himself a slight chill had spread over Driscoll. He looked at the indicator on the bulkhead near where he sat, wondering if the temperature of the chamber had been altered. But it was quite normal. His tone of voice was absolutely level when he spoke.

"What do you think is there, Wainewright?"

The watery blue eyes had a strange filmy expression in them.

"There is something . . . animate, shall we say. Something that wants to get in touch with us. Why should Shaft Number 247 leak, for example? The situation is almost unprecedented."

Driscoll leaned forward, his eyes intent on the other's face.

"Why does Shaft Number 247 leak?"

Wainewright licked his lips again, and his eyes were dark and haunted as he stared back.

"Because something is turning the bolts from the other side," he said simply.

"I think you had better tell me how Deems died," said Driscoll quietly.

There was a sulphurous silence in the room now. Wainewright's eyes were like pale blue holes in the blankness of his face. He gestured toward the teapot. Driscoll declined with a brief shake of his head. He had to hold his impatience in check.

"Deems?"

Wainewright passed his tongue over his lips again.

"He knew about Shaft 247, you see. He had found how to open it. There was a temporary fault on the circuits in that section. He went there unknown to the authorities. The place had a fascination for him."

He paused again and looked at Driscoll. There was an imploring look on his face as though he were asking his companion for help he knew the latter was unable to give.

"How do you know this?"

"Deems was my best friend. It emerged over a long period. He had made up his mind, you see."

Wainewright's eyes were closed now as though he could no longer bear to look at Driscoll.

"You mean to go Out There?"

Driscoll's voice was unsteady. Wainewright opened his eyes. For once they were sharp and unwavering. He nodded.

"He found life intolerable here. He could not adjust. And he had to discover what lay Outside. He made his plans carefully. But even I did not entirely realize his determination."

Driscoll sat on in heavy silence. He was aware that it was dangerous to listen to Wainewright; that he had now become his confidant. That would be knowledge difficult to live with. He was becoming confused, which was a completely unknown quantity with him hitherto. Yet he had to find out more about Deems.

None of this showed on his face, which expressed only polite interest as he waited for his companion to continue. But Wainewright seemed to have become aware of the enormity of his conduct. For one did not talk like this, especially to persons of Driscoll's rank and caliber. Yet Wainewright was encouraged by the other's silence; by the calm, intent look on his face. He stirred on the chair opposite and then went on without hesitation, as though he had finally made up his mind.

"Deems came to see me before he went Out," he said. "He was more than usually agitated that night. He called here just as you have called today, which was an equally extraordinary circumstance."

"Did he tell you what he was going to do?"

Wainewright shook his head.

"Hints only. But he was tremendously disturbed. More than I had ever seen him before. He had studied the phenomena, you see. And it was my conviction that he knew what was moving in the shafts Out There."

Wainewright cleared his throat nervously.

"He talked about wanting to be free. He was convinced contact was being made for some purpose. That there was a benevolence. . . a peace. . ."

He fell silent for long moments. Driscoll felt the whole weight of the roof covering the miles of tunnels and galleries on his shoulders, pressing him downward into the black bowels of the earth. It was a feeling completely alien to him and he did not like it.

"What happened that night? When the alarm bells rang?"

"I relieved Deems," Wainewright went on. "He appeared quite normal. We exchanged no formal word. We just looked at one another. I did not remember that look until afterward. Then he went off, to seek his bunk I thought. The alarm bells rang about half an hour later. Collins was in charge that night. He did not give me formal permission to leave, but he must have noticed something in my expression for he nodded as I got up.

"I ran down the corridors. I knew exactly where to go. There was no lighting in the section housing Shaft Number 247. And I knew it would take the emergency squad more than twenty minutes to reach the area. I had no fear. But I think also I knew what I would find."

He swallowed, a thin glaze of sweat on his face; then, as Driscoll ventured no comment, he hurried on.

"I had a torch with me. There was a lot of water in the tunnel. The cover of the shaft was open. Or rather it was unlatched. I shone the light in the inspection chamber. There was a note at the bottom, addressed to me. And a grey viscous material that had been crushed in the edge of the metal doors. It looked like primitive embryonic fingers."

Wainewright stopped and shuddered. He seemed to fight for breath and then turned and gulped mouthfuls of hot strong tea. Driscoll sat immobile, but his big hands were locked together; his knuckles showed white.

"What was in the note?"

" 'This is the first. There will be many others. Come Outside. There is a shining peace, a brightness, a freedom. . .'

"The writing was spidery, as though it had been cut off suddenly."

Wainewright looked pale, his eyes haunted by forbidden knowledge.

"It was then that I knew Deems had not written it."

Driscoll slept badly that night. Wainewright's words and the image of his tense, strained form kept coming back to him. Finally Driscoll got up, put on the lights, and sat staring at the full-scale chart of the gallery system covered by his section. He could not

recall such a night, which was disturbing in itself. He decided to tell no one of his interview with Wainewright; it could do no good, and he knew Wainewright himself would say nothing.

The authorities must have realized that Wainewright had been at the shaft. Driscoll knew, though he had not specifically asked, that Wainewright must have disposed of the note and the material in the inspection chamber, but even so there would have been suspicion. Which was no doubt why Hort and Karlson were so interested; and why there was an embargo on the official reports of the incident.

The cameras would have noted in which direction Wainewright was hurrying, even if the area surrounding the shaft had been in darkness; and in any case Collins would immediately have switched to infrared. No, there must be some other reason why no action had been taken over Wainewright. But it had been decidedly dangerous, Driscoll's visit to his apartment; he would have to be especially careful, particularly if he went there again.

Driscoll was surprising himself by the convolution of his thoughts this evening; he wondered what report Collins himself had made of Wainewright's absence from Control on that occasion, and what log entries related to it. He would carry out his own check, though he had no doubt that Hort would have skillfully covered up the situation.

He stared at the blueprint of the tunnels, noting exactly what junctions would make the best approach. His heart was beating slightly faster than normal as he returned the document to its case. He went back to bed and this time slept better.

But his doubts returned on the following day. He had an earlier Watch that evening and he had no opportunity of seeing Collins. It would be unwise to make verbal inquiries in any case. And it was certain that he would again draw a blank if he returned to Central Records.

Driscoll thought long about his interview with Wainewright and particularly his last few words; the implications were distinctly disturbing. He liked neither the message nor the somewhat imprecise description of what Wainewright had seen in the inspection chamber. If he had read Wainewright aright, the material had disappeared—"dissolved" was Wainewright's term—before the

emergency squad had arrived. And though he had not told Driscoll so, he had doubtless removed the note.

So that the official records, whatever they were, would not tell the complete story as Driscoll had it from Wainewright. But the authorities were undoubtedly right to have their suspicions of Wainewright; Driscoll himself would have to be careful, extremely careful.

The Captain of the Watch looked round the crowded restaurant. He was having lunch and had studiously avoided the glances of recognition from various acquaintances in the big room with its subdued lighting.

However, as he was about to leave he suddenly noticed Karlson near the entrance. He had evidently finished his meal and was on his way out. He gave Driscoll an enigmatic look, and the latter could not be sure that he had seen and recognized him. Yet something vague and disquieting remained in his mind. There was another man with Karlson.

Driscoll only glimpsed his back before the sliding doors cut him off, but it looked extraordinarily like Hort. Supposing that the Gallery Master and Karlson had been discussing him? Or, worse still, spying on him? Driscoll almost laughed aloud. Yet the supposition was not so fanciful as it might appear on the surface. Driscoll's smile died on his lips. He wore a thoughtful expression as he went to prepare for his Watch.

Normally Driscoll enjoyed his periods of duty; he was like all those who were able to wield power and accept responsibility and yet find it sit lightly on their shoulders. For all the shining instruments, the humming machinery, the routine purpose in the mechanics, and the meticulous attention to detail of those on Watch, there was yet an awesome responsibility for one who sat in Driscoll's chair.

One momentary lapse of attention, and the result could be chaos within the streamlined galleries, the miles of tunnels, and the sleeping city beyond. Driscoll had not faltered through long years, and yet on this occasion he found his well-ordered mind wandering; his thoughts troubled as he mused again on Wainewright and the indiscreet revelations he had made.

But the training and self-discipline that had brought him to this pitch of well-ordered perfection carried on mechanically, and for four hours, as he noted and evaluated, coordinated the routines of personnel miles apart along the galleries, scanned the dials and vision tubes, and smoothly manipulated the switches and levers that motivated the electronics of this subterranean complexity, a residue of his mind was still engaged in somber and deep-seated self-searching.

It was near the end of the Watch when it happened; indeed, Driscoll had already handed over to his relief and was standing engaged in small talk on the details, when the alarm bells began to bleep and a flurry of activity animated the Control Room. He already knew before a glance confirmed it that the abnormality emanated from Shaft Number 247, and he had slipped silently out of Control before those bent over the desks and instrument panels were aware that he had gone.

He ran down the gallery as unobtrusively as possible, though he realized that his image was being transmitted through the mounted cameras in each gallery and corridor back to Central Control. Ostensibly, he was making for his own quarters, but he diverged at right angles to bring himself into line with the section that interested him. He knew that if he hurried he would be first on the scene.

He hardly understood why he was running at such speed; the situation was abnormal of course, but there was some inner compulsion beyond that; something within himself that impelled him onward, despite the cautious core of reserve that advised against. Incredibly, Wainewright had been correct: the illumination of the approach tunnel was out.

Driscoll ran quickly back to his cabin, returned with a pocket-torch, and retraced his steps. Whether or not he could still be seen by the cameras he did not know; neither, at this precise moment in time, did he care. He only knew that the overpowering curiosity over Shaft Number 247 which Wainewright had aroused in him had to be satisfied. He was in darkness now, the beam of the torch dancing luminescent and elongated across the shining metal surface and massive studs of the gallery.

The burring of the alarm went on; Driscoll knew that it would continue until the trouble had been put right. That was an invariable rule with the repeater system. He could imagine Hort's figure hunched over the screen as he manipulated switches to give his orders. Driscoll pounded forward, grimly aware that he would have only ten minutes in which to satisfy himself of the accuracy of Wainewright's statements. But ten minutes should be enough.

He paused at a right-angle junction in the gallery, gained his bearings. He was astonished to hear a slopping noise as he ran down toward the main shafts. He played his torch on the floor of the tunnel, saw the beam reflected back from the creeping tide of water. He was running through the thin trickle now, heedless of the splashing. The gallery had an acrid salt smell, like that of the tang of the sea as Driscoll had smelled it when screened in ancient actuality material.

But he had no time for analysis. He noticed that the cameras in the roof of the tunnel here were all out of action; the dim glow of the red emergency lights made his hands and the torch beam look like blood. There was only a hundred yards to go now. Driscoll knew that he would be first. No one else could possibly catch up with him, and there was no sign of anyone following behind.

Not that anyone would come on foot; and the rubber-tired trolleys of the emergency squad made only a faint whispering sound. But he would be able to hear their sirens from a long way off. Almost there now. Driscoll shone the torch onto the roof fittings; strange that the lighting had failed here and only here. It could not be due to the water. The pumps were working normally, which made it doubly strange.

There must be seepage from one of the shafts. Even as he ran forward the last few yards, Driscoll knew in his inmost soul that the leakage was almost certainly from Shaft Number 247. Not only Wainewright's story but all his inquiries had prepared him for that. There was a strange stench in his nostrils now; one that was vaguely repellent but at the same time familiar.

Driscoll stumbled on something slimy and almost fell. He swore and recovered himself, but he was badly shaken just the same. The torch beam trembled as he waved it wildly across the floor. Dark

rivulets of water flowed across the tiling; curiously, there were many dry patches, which told Driscoll immediately that there were a number of shafts involved.

He was almost there now. His footsteps echoed monstrously back from the ceiling. He was no longer conscious of the water slopping over his feet. Driscoll was only vaguely aware of why he had come here. But there was a strong compulsion at the back of his mind; he had to come. And he knew it had something to do with Wainewright.

He stumbled again and almost fell. He put out his hand to the shafting and supported himself. He saw without surprise the black-painted letters as his torch danced across them: SHAFT NO. 247.

There was a strange odor now; something that he had not smelled before. He could not place it and paused hesitantly, the torch in his suddenly nervous hand trembling across the arched metal ceiling of the tunnel. There was dampness, of course; that was something to be expected with the water underfoot. But there was something else, something almost obscene. An animal smell, pungent and rotting to the nostrils; reptilian, if you like.

Driscoll had once visited the zoological gardens long ago, where the few remaining specimens were kept. The aquarium had particularly fascinated him. There was something of that now. The great saurians, some almost a hundred years old, sleeping caked in their beds of mud; glazed green eyes immobile for hours on end. The torch wavered again, and Driscoll sharply snapped his mind back to the present.

He moved cautiously, deliberately blocking out the heavy miasma as he splashed the last yard to the shaft. It was enormous; he couldn't quite remember its original purpose though it was primarily to do with inspection. Wainewright had been correct about one thing. There was rust on the casing and the bolts. He touched the cold metal with a tentative forefinger, saw it come away red in the light of the torch.

The inspection-chamber hatch was ajar. Driscoll soon saw why. There was something protruding from it. Something grey and rubbery from which the stench emanated. Driscoll did not like to touch it. Instead, he worked the hatch pivot with his torch. The

thing that was jammed in the gap moved as the aperture grew. It looked like an embryonic hand with tiny fingers. Driscoll was startled; his hand slipped on the torch, the metal slid back with a harsh rumble, disturbing in the gloom of the tunnel, and the mass fell with a slopping splash into the water, where it was presumably carried away. Driscoll felt relieved.

The inspection chamber was empty as he had hoped. The door that connected with the Outside was firmly closed and latched. Driscoll bent his head and listened intently. He could hear nothing but the sound of running water. It was absurd really. He did not know what he expected to hear.

But there was another odor; something like a musky perfume that made his head swim. Driscoll knew what had fascinated Wainewright and his friend Deems before him. The heady odor had something in it that reached back deep into his roots. He saw green fields; a blue sky; corn waving in the breeze. This was not something on the vision tube, but an atavistic memory of reality.

Driscoll staggered and reached out a hand to save himself; he saw the message pad then, lying in the bottom of the chamber. He knew before he picked it up that it was Wainewright's. It bore his own name he saw without surprise. It merely repeated in block capitals: FREEDOM! And underneath, in smaller letters: UNTIL WE MEET OUTSIDE. A scribbled *W* ended the message. Driscoll stood and an overwhelming sadness enveloped him; a sadness that was dispelled only by the faint wail of the emergency-squad siren. He took the message pad with him as he went splashing back up the tunnel.

Driscoll was suspended, of course. Someone must have seen him before he regained his quarters, or perhaps the cameras had been working before the lights came on. Hort did not ask to see him; there was merely the dreaded green chit with the official stamp slipped beneath his door as he slept. There would be an official hearing in a week's time.

Driscoll did not wait for the hearing. Something had happened to him. He was hardly conscious of it himself. Nothing seemed to have changed, yet everything had subtly altered. There were no more chess games with Karlson. Nothing was said, but Karlson

was never in evidence when Driscoll took his meals. Strangely enough, Krampf, the only person in Central Control who secretly irritated Driscoll, seemed sympathetic at this time of crisis.

Twice Driscoll had met him in the corridors, and it seemed to him that there was a strange secret compassion in his eyes. But he dare not speak to Driscoll; no one dare while he was awaiting the hearing. Similarly, he was no longer welcome in Records, and Driscoll felt he would be under surveillance if he went out. He was no longer trusted; that was the brutal truth. And a person who was no longer trusted here was a nonperson.

He kept his cabin; he could use the restaurant facilities and watch the vision tube. In effect he was limited to eating, sleeping, and passing his time as best he might. No messages came for him; there was no communication from above apart from the green chit; and Hort certainly had no wish to see him. That might prejudice the proceedings.

Driscoll thought about it for three days and three nights; then he made up his mind. It was night as time was measured here, and there would be few people on duty. Driscoll packed a few things; he carried with him a hammer, a wrench, and heavy-duty wire cutters with insulated handles, together with a food supply for three weeks. At the intersection of the first corridor he smashed the camera lens there. He went purposefully down the passages, smashing every installation he could find. Within a minute the alarm was reverberating along the corridors. Driscoll did not care. He was running strongly now, every sense alert.

He was smashing light fixtures too; he was surprised how easily they broke. No one had ever done this before. It was absurdly easy. At the time he hoped that the tunnel section was not guarded; there could be no turning back now. He found his way with difficulty. He must have fused something at the last light installation he smashed, for all these corridors were plunged into darkness.

The small cone of his torch wavered ahead, steadying on the smooth metal surface of the tunnel walls, the heavy bolts and rivets overhead. Here was the place; there was no one about. Water dripped somewhere up ahead as Driscoll splashed unhesitatingly through the puddles. The strange nostalgic stench was in his nostrils. He adjusted the pack on his back and set off at a staggering

run over the last quarter of a mile. His heart was beating a little more unsteadily than he would have liked. Still there was no siren of the emergency squad.

The shafting was in front of him. Driscoll could almost taste the stench in his nostrils. It was not oppressive. On the contrary. He breathed deeply. It brought back things he had forgotten ever existed. Sunlight; waving corn; clouds moving across a blue sky; a woman's smile; a child tottering toward an old woman in a white dress.

He stood before Shaft Number 247, noting its massive strength and immense size. Quite without surprise he saw that the hatch of the inspection chamber was half-open. It slid easily beneath his touch. Dance music was reverberating from somewhere; a girl in a bathing suit plunged into blue water, droplets of spray raining downward; there were flowers and with them the fragrant perfume that had been lost for so many decades.

The girl was smiling again. A grave grey-eyed girl, with tawny-gold hair. Driscoll stepped into the inspection chamber. It was cold and he instinctively shrank at the dampness which settled on his face and clothing. A hurdy-gurdy was playing, and he could smell roast chestnuts. A child bounded past on a scooter, his feet making a click-clacking noise on the setts of the paving. There was the distinctive impact of a cricket bat connecting with a ball on a summer afternoon. Driscoll nodded at the ripple of applause.

He could see the point now. Everything down here was negative. He had to know. He thought of Krampf, Deems, and Wainewright; of Hort and Karlson. He had no real friends; hitherto, the only reality was the tunnels burrowing beneath the earth and the remorselessly efficient humming of the machinery.

It did not seem to be enough. Driscoll set his teeth. Perspiration was streaming down his face as he reached out to the interior hatch of the inspection chamber of Shaft Number 247. A child lifted her head and put her arms round Driscoll's neck. He was smiling as he began to turn the bolts.

Black Man With a Horn

T.E.D. Klein

> The Black [words obscured by postmark] was fascinating—I must get a snap shot of him.
>
> —H. P. Lovecraft, postcard to E. Hoffmann Price, 7/23/1934

There is something inherently comforting about the first-person past tense. It conjures up visions of some deskbound narrator puffing contemplatively upon a pipe amid the safety of his study, lost in tranquil recollection, seasoned but essentially unscathed by whatever experience he's about to relate. It's a tense that says, "I am here to tell the tale. I lived through it."

The description, in my own case, is perfectly accurate—as far as it goes. I am indeed seated in a kind of study: a small den, actually, but lined with bookshelves on one side, below a view of Manhattan painted many years ago, from memory, by my sister. My desk is a folding bridge table that once belonged to her. Before me the electric typewriter, though somewhat precariously supported, hums soothingly, and from the window behind me comes the familiar drone of the old air conditioner, waging its lonely battle against the tropic night. Beyond it, in the darkness outside, the

small night-noises are doubtless just as reassuring: wind in the palm trees, the mindless chant of crickets, the muffled chatter of a neighbor's TV, an occasional car bound for the highway, shifting gears as it speeds past the house. . .

House, in truth, may be too grand a word; the place is a green stucco bungalow just a single story tall, third in a row of nine set several hundred yards from the highway. Its only distinguishing features are the sundial in the front yard, brought here from my sister's former home, and the jagged little picket fence, now rather overgrown with weeds, which she had erected despite the protests of neighbors.

It's hardly the most romantic of settings, but under normal circumstances it might make an adequate background for meditations in the past tense. "I'm still here," the writer says, adjusting to the tone. (I've even stuck the requisite pipe in mouth, stuffed with a plug of latakia.) "It's over now," he says. "I lived through it."

A comforting premise, perhaps. Only, in this case, it doesn't happen to be true. Whether the experience is really "over now" no one can say; and if, as I suspect, the final chapter has yet to be enacted, then the notion of my "living through it" will seem a pathetic conceit.

Yet I can't say I find the thought of my own death particularly disturbing. I get so tired, sometimes, of this little room, with its cheap wicker furniture, the dull outdated books, the night pressing in from outside. . . And of that sundial out there in the yard, with its idiotic message. "*Grow old along with me. . .*"

I have done so, and my life seems hardly to have mattered in the scheme of things. Surely its end cannot matter much either.

Ah, Howard, you would have understood.

> That, boy, was what I call a travel-experience!
> —LOVECRAFT, 3/12/1930

If, while I set it down, this tale acquires an ending, it promises to be an unhappy one. But the beginning is nothing of the kind; you may find it rather humorous, in fact—full of comic pratfalls, wet trouser cuffs, and a dropped vomit-bag.

"I steeled myself to *endure* it," the old lady to my right was saying. "I don't mind telling you I was exceedingly frightened. I held on to the arms of the seat and just *gritted my teeth.* And then, you know, right after the captain warned us about that *turbulence,* when the tail lifted and fell, flip-flop, flip-flop, *well*—" she flashed her dentures at me and patted my wrist, "—I don't mind telling you, there was simply nothing for it but to *heave.*"

Where had the old girl picked up such expressions? And was she trying to pick me up as well? Her hand clamped wetly round my wrist. "I *do* hope you'll let me pay for the dry cleaning."

"Madam," I said, "think nothing of it. The suit was already stained."

"Such a nice man!" She cocked her head coyly at me, still gripping my wrist. Though their whites had long since turned the color of old piano keys, her eyes were not unattractive. But her breath repelled me. Slipping my paperback into a pocket, I rang for the stewardess.

The earlier mishap had occurred several hours before. In clambering aboard the plane at Heathrow, surrounded by what appeared to be an aboriginal rugby club (all dressed alike, navy blazers with bone buttons), I'd been shoved from behind and had stumbled against a black cardboard hatbox in which some Chinaman was storing his dinner; it was jutting into the aisle near the first-class seats. Something inside sloshed over my ankles—duck sauce, soup perhaps—and left a sticky yellow puddle on the floor. I turned in time to see a tall, beefy Caucasian with an Air Malay bag and a beard so thick and black he looked like some heavy from the silent era. His manner was equally suited to the role, for after shouldering me aside (with shoulders broad as my valises), he pushed his way down the crowded passage, head bobbing near the ceiling like a gas balloon, and suddenly disappeared from sight at the rear of the plane. In his wake I caught the smell of treacle, and was instantly reminded of my childhood: birthday hats, Callard and Bowser gift packs, and after-dinner bellyaches.

"So very sorry." A bloated little Charlie Chan looked fearfully at this departing apparition, then doubled over to scoop his dinner beneath the seat, fiddling with the ribbon.

"Think nothing of it," I said.

I was feeling kindly toward everyone that day. Flying was still a novelty. My friend Howard, of course (as I'd reminded audiences earlier in the week), used to say he'd "hate to see aëroplanes come into common commercial use, since they merely add to the goddam useless speeding up of an already overspeeded life." He had dismissed them as "devices for the amusement of a gentleman"—but then, he'd only been up once, in the twenties, and for only as long as $3.50 would bring. What could he have known of whistling engines, the wicked joys of dining at thirty thousand feet, the chance to look out a window and find that the earth is, after all, quite round? All this he had missed; he was dead and therefore to be pitied.

Yet even in death he had triumphed over me. . .

It gave me something to think about as the stewardess helped me to my feet, clucking in professional concern at the mess on my lap—though more likely she was thinking of the wiping up that awaited her once I'd vacated the seat. "Why do they make those bags so *slippery*?" my elderly neighbor asked plaintively. "And all over this nice man's suit. You really should do something about it." The plane dropped and settled; she rolled her yellowing eyes. "It could happen again."

The stewardess steered me down the aisle toward a restroom at the middle of the plane. To my left a cadaverous young woman wrinkled her nose and smiled at the man next to her. I attempted to disguise my defeat by looking bitter—"Someone else has done this deed!"—but doubt I succeeded. The stewardess's arm supporting mine was superfluous but comfortable; I leaned on her more heavily with each step. There are, as I'd long suspected, precious few advantages in being seventy-six and looking it—yet among them is this: though one is excused from the frustration of flirting with a stewardess, one gets to lean on her arm. I turned toward her to say something funny, but paused; her face was blank as a clock's.

"I'll wait out here for you," she said, and pulled open the smooth white door.

"That will hardly be necessary." I straightened up. "But could you—do you think you might find me another seat? I have nothing

against that lady, you understand, but I don't want to see any more of her lunch."

Inside the restroom the whine of the engines seemed louder, as if the pink plastic walls were all that separated me from the jet stream and its arctic winds. Occasionally the air we passed through must have grown choppy, for the plane rattled and heaved like a sled over rough ice. If I opened the john I half expected to see the earth miles below us, a frozen grey Atlantic fanged with icebergs. England was already a thousand miles away.

With one hand on the door handle for support, I wiped off my trousers with a perfumed paper towel from a foil envelope, and stuffed several more into my pocket. My cuffs still bore a residue of Chinese goo. This, it seemed, was the source of the treacle smell; I dabbed ineffectually at it. Surveying myself in the mirror—a bald, harmless-looking old baggage with stooped shoulders and a damp suit (so different from the self-confident young fellow in the photo captioned "HPL and disciple")—I slid open the bolt and emerged, a medley of scents. The stewardess had found an empty seat for me at the back of the plane.

It was only as I made to sit down that I noticed who occupied the adjoining seat: he was leaning away from me, asleep with his head resting against the window, but I recognized the beard.

"Uh, stewardess—?" I turned, but saw only her uniformed back retreating up the aisle. After a moment's uncertainty I inched myself into the seat, making as little noise as possible. I had, I reminded myself, every right to be here.

Adjusting the recliner position (to the annoyance of the black behind me), I settled back and reached for the paperback in my pocket. They'd finally gotten around to reprinting one of my earlier tales, and already I'd found four typos. But then, what could one expect? The front cover, with its crude cartoon skull, said it all: "*Goosepimples*: Thirteen Cosmic Chillers in the Lovecraft Tradition."

So this is what I was reduced to—a lifetime's work shrugged off by some blurb-writer as "worthy of the Master himself," the creations of my brain dismissed as mere pastiche. And the tales themselves, once singled out for such elaborate praise, were now simply—as if this were commendation enough—"Lovecraftian."

Ah, Howard, your triumph was complete the moment your name became an adjective.

I'd suspected it for years, of course, but only with the past week's conference had I been forced to acknowledge the fact: that what mattered to the present generation was not my own body of work, but rather my association with Lovecraft. And even this was demeaned: after years of friendship and support, to be labeled—simply because I'd been younger—a mere "disciple." It seemed too cruel a joke.

Every joke must have a punchline. This one's was still in my pocket, printed in italics on the folded yellow conference schedule. I didn't need to look at it again: there I was, characterized for all time as "a member of the Lovecraft circle, New York educator, and author of the celebrated collection *Beyond the Garve*."

That was it, the crowning indignity: to be immortalized by a misprint! You'd have appreciated this, Howard. I can almost hear you chuckling from—where else?—beyond the *garve*. . .

Meanwhile, from the seat next to me came the rasping sounds of a constricted throat; my neighbor must have been caught in a dream. I put down my book and studied him. He looked older than he had at first—perhaps sixty or more. His hands were roughened, powerful looking; on one of them was a ring with a curious silver cross. The glistening black beard that covered the lower half of his face was so thick as to be nearly opaque; its very darkness seemed unnatural, for above it the hair was streaked with grey.

I looked more closely, to where beard joined face. Was that a bit of gauze I saw, below the hair? My heart gave a little jump. Leaning forward for a closer look, I peered at the skin to the side of his nose; though burned from long exposure to the sun, it had an odd pallor. My gaze continued upward, along the weathered cheeks toward the dark hollows of his eyes.

They opened.

For a moment they stared into mine without apparent comprehension, glassy and bloodshot. In the next instant they were bulging from his head and quivering like hooked fish. His lips opened, and a tiny voice croaked, "*Not here.*"

We sat in silence, neither of us moving. I was too surprised, too embarrassed, to answer. In the window beyond his head the sky

looked bright and clear, but I could feel the plane buffeted by unseen blasts, its wingtips bouncing furiously.

"Don't do it to me here," he whispered at last, shrinking back into his seat.

Was the man a lunatic? Dangerous, perhaps? Somewhere in my future I saw spinning headlines: "Jetliner Terrorized. . . Retired NYC Teacher Victim. . ." My uncertainty must have shown, for I saw him lick his lips and glance past my head. Hope, and a trace of cunning, swept his face. He grinned up at me. "Sorry, nothing to worry about. Whew! Must have been having a nightmare." Like an athlete after a particularly tough race he shook his massive head, already regaining command of the situation. His voice had a hint of Tennessee drawl. "Boy"—he gave what should have been a hearty laugh—"I'd better lay off the Kickapoo juice!"

I smiled to put him at his ease, though there was nothing about him to suggest that he'd been drinking. "That's an expression I haven't heard in years."

"Oh, yeah?" he said, with little interest. "Well, I've been away." His fingers drummed nervously—impatiently?—on the arm of his chair.

"Malaya?"

He sat up, and the color left his face. "How did you know?"

I nodded toward the green flight-bag at his feet. "I saw you carrying that when you came aboard. You, uh—you seemed to be in a little bit of a hurry, to say the least. In fact, I'm afraid you almost knocked me down."

"Hey." His voice was controlled now, his gaze level and assured. "Hey, I'm really sorry about that, old fella. The fact is, I thought someone might be following me."

Oddly enough, I believed him; he looked sincere—or as sincere as anyone can be behind a phony black beard. "You're in disguise, aren't you?" I asked.

"You mean the whiskers? They're just something I picked up in Singapore. Shucks, I knew they wouldn't fool anyone for long, at least not a friend. But an enemy, well. . . maybe." He made no move to take them off.

"You're—let me guess—you're in the service, right?" The foreign service, I meant; frankly, I took him for an aging spy.

"In the service?" He looked significantly to the left and right, then dropped his voice. "Well, yeah, you might say that. In *His* service." He pointed toward the roof of the plane.

"You mean—?"

He nodded. "I'm a missionary. Or was until yesterday."

> Missionaries are infernal nuisances who ought to be kept at home.
>
> —LOVECRAFT, 9/12/1925

Have you ever seen a man in fear of his life? I had, though not since my early twenties. After a summer of idleness I'd at last found temporary employment in the office of what turned out to be a rather shady businessman—I suppose today you'd call him a small-time racketeer—who, having somehow offended "the mob," was convinced he'd be dead by Christmas. He had been wrong, though; he'd been able to enjoy that and many other Christmases with his family, and it wasn't till years later that he was found in his bathtub, face down in six inches of water. I don't remember much about him, except how hard it had been to engage him in conversation; he never seemed to be listening.

Yet talking with the man who sat next to me on the plane was all too easy; he had nothing of the other's distracted air, the vague replies and preoccupied gaze. On the contrary, he was alert and highly interested in all that was said to him. Except for his initial panic, in fact, there was little to suggest he was a hunted man.

Yet so he claimed to be. Later events would, of course, settle all such questions, but at the time I had no way to judge if he was telling the truth, or if his story was as phony as his beard.

If I believed him, it was almost entirely due to his manner, not the substance of what he said. No, he didn't claim to have made off with the Eye of Klesh; he was more original than that. Nor had he violated some witch doctor's only daughter. But some of the things he told me about the region in which he'd worked—a state called Negri Sembilan, south of Kuala Lumpur—seemed frankly incredible: houses invaded by trees, government-built roads that simply disappeared, a nearby colleague returning from a ten-day vacation to find his lawn overgrown with ropy things they'd had to

burn twice to destroy. He claimed there were tiny red spiders that jumped as high as a man's shoulder—"there was a girl in the village gone half-deaf because one of the nasty little things crawled in her ear and swelled so big it plugged up the hole"—and places where mosquitoes were so thick they suffocated cattle. He described a land of steaming mangrove swamps and rubber plantations as large as feudal kingdoms, a land so humid that wallpaper bubbled on the hot nights and bibles sprouted mildew.

As we sat together on the plane, sealed within an air-cooled world of plastic and pastel, none of these things seemed possible; with the frozen blue of the sky just beyond my reach, the stewardesses walking briskly past me in their blue-and-gold uniforms, the passengers to my left sipping Cokes or sleeping or leafing through *In-Flite*, I found myself believing less than half of what he said, attributing the rest to sheer exaggeration and a Southern regard for tall tales. Only when I'd been home a week and paid a visit to my niece in Brooklyn did I revise my estimate upward, for glancing through her son's geography text I came upon this passage: "Along the [Malayan] peninsula, insects swarm in abundance; probably more varieties exist here than anywhere else on earth. There is some good hardwood timber, and camphor and ebony trees are found in profusion. Many orchid varieties thrive, some of extraordinary size." The book alluded to the area's "rich mixture of races and languages," its "extreme humidity" and "colorful native fauna," and added: "Its jungles are so impenetrable that even the wild beasts must keep to well-worn paths."

But perhaps the strangest aspect of this region was that, despite its dangers and discomforts, my companion claimed to have loved it. "They've got a mountain in the center of the peninsula—" He mentioned an unpronounceable name and shook his head. "Most beautiful thing you ever saw. And there's some really pretty country down along the coast, you'd swear it was some kind of South Sea island. Comfortable, too. Oh, it's damp all right, especially in the interior where the new mission was supposed to be—but the temperature never even hits a hundred. Try saying that for New York City."

I nodded. "Remarkable."

"And the *people*," he went on, "why, I believe they're just the

friendliest people on earth. You know, I'd heard a lot of bad things about the Moslems—that's what most of them are, part of the Sunni sect—but I'm telling you, they treated us with real neighborliness . . . just so long as we made the teachings *available,* so to speak, and didn't interfere with their affairs. And we didn't. We didn't have to. What we provided, you see, was a hospital—well, a clinic, at least, two RNs and a doctor who came twice a month—and a small library with books and films. And not just theology, either. All subjects. We were right outside the village, they'd have to pass us on their way to the river, and when they thought none of the *lontoks* were looking they'd just come in and look around."

"None of the what?"

"Priests, sort of. There were a lot of them. But they didn't interfere with us, we didn't interfere with them. I don't know that we made all that many converts, actually, but I've got nothing bad to say about those people."

He paused, rubbing his eyes; he suddenly looked his age. "Things were going fine," he said. "And then they told me to establish a second mission, further in the interior."

He stopped once more, as if weighing whether to continue. A squat little Chinese woman was plodding slowly up the aisle, holding on to the chairs on each side for balance. I felt her hand brush past my ear as she went by. My companion watched her with a certain unease, waiting till she'd passed. When he spoke again his voice had thickened noticeably.

"I've been all over the world—a lot of places Americans can't even go to these days—and I've always felt that, wherever I was, God was surely watching. But once I started getting up into those hills, well. . ." He shook his head. "I was pretty much on my own, you see. They were going to send most of the staff out later, after I'd got set up. All I had with me was one of our grounds keepers, two bearers, and a guide who doubled as interpreter. Locals, all of them." He frowned. "The grounds keeper, at least, was a Christian."

"You needed an interpreter?"

The question seemed to distract him. "For the new mission, yes. My Malay stood me well enough in the lowlands, but in the interior they used dozens of local dialects. I would have been lost up there.

Where I was going they spoke something which our people back in the village called *agon di-gatuan*—'the Old Language.' I never really got to understand much of it." He stared down at his hands. "I wasn't there long enough."

"Trouble with the natives, I suppose."

He didn't answer right away. Finally he nodded. "I truly believe they must be the nastiest people who ever lived," he said with great deliberation. "I sometimes wonder how God could have created them." He stared out the window, at the hills of cloud below us. "They called themselves the Chauchas, near as I could make out. Some French colonial influence, maybe, but they looked Asiatic to me, with just a touch of black. Little people. Harmless looking." He gave a small shudder. "But they were nothing like what they seemed. You couldn't get to the bottom of them. They'd been living way up in those hills I don't know how many centuries, and whatever it is they were doing, they weren't going to let a stranger in on it. They called themselves Moslems, just like the lowlanders, but I'm sure there must have been a few bush-gods mixed in. I thought they were primitive, at first. I mean, some of their rituals—you wouldn't believe it. But now I think they weren't primitive at all. They just kept those rituals because they enjoyed them!" He tried to smile; it just accentuated the lines in his face.

"Oh, they seemed friendly enough in the beginning," he said. "You could approach them, do a bit of trading, watch them breed their animals. You could even talk to them about Salvation. And they'd just keep smiling, smiling all the time. As if they really *liked* you."

I could hear the disappointment in his voice, and something else.

"You know," he confided, suddenly leaning closer, "down in the lowlands, in the pastures, there's an animal, a kind of snail, the Malays kill on sight. A little yellow thing, but it scares them silly: they believe that if it passes over the shadow of their cattle, it'll suck out the cattle's life-force. They used to call it a 'Chaucha snail.' Now I know why."

"Why?" I asked.

He looked around the plane, and seemed to sigh. "You understand, at this stage we were still living in tents. We had yet to build anything. Well, the weather got bad, the mosquitoes got

worse, and after the grounds keeper disappeared the others took off. I think the guide persuaded them to go. Of course, this left me—"

"Wait. You say your grounds keeper disappeared?"

"Yes, before the first week was out. It was late afternoon. We'd been pacing out one of the fields less than a hundred yards from the tents, and I was pushing through the long grass thinking he was behind me, and I turned around and he wasn't."

He was speaking all in a rush now. I had visions out of 1940s movies, frightened natives sneaking off with the supplies, and I wondered how much of this was true.

"So with the others gone, too," he said, "I had no way of communicating with the Chauchas, except through a kind of pidgin language, a mixture of Malay and their tongue. But I knew what was going on. All that week they kept laughing about something. Openly. And I got the impression that they were somehow responsible. I mean, for the man's disappearance. You understand? He'd been the one I trusted." His expression was pained. "A week later, when they showed him to me, he was still alive. But he couldn't speak. I think they wanted it that way. You see, they'd—they'd *grown* something in him." He shuddered.

Just at that moment, from directly behind us came an inhumanly high-pitched caterwauling that pierced the air like a siren, rising above the whine of the engines. It came with heart-stopping suddenness, and we both went rigid. I saw my companion's mouth gape as if to echo the scream. So much for the past; we'd become two old men gone all white and clutching at themselves. It was really quite comical. A full minute must have passed before I could bring myself to turn around.

By this time the stewardess had arrived and was dabbing at the place where the man behind me, dozing, had dropped his cigarette on his lap. The surrounding passengers, whites especially, were casting angry glances at him, and I thought I smelled burnt flesh. He was at last helped to his feet by the stewardess and one of his teammates, the latter chuckling uneasily.

Minor as it was, the accident had derailed our conversation and unnerved my companion; it was as if he'd retreated into his beard. He would talk no further, except to ask me ordinary and rather

trivial questions about food prices and accommodations. He said he was bound for Florida, looking forward to a summer of, as he put it, "R and R," apparently financed by his sect. I asked him, a bit forlornly, what had happened in the end to the grounds keeper; he said that he had died. Drinks were served; the North American continent swung toward us from the south, first a finger of ice, soon a jagged line of green. I found myself giving the man my sister's address—Indian Creek was just outside Miami, where he'd be staying—and immediately regretted doing so. What did I know of him, after all? He told me his name was Ambrose Mortimer. "It means 'Dead Sea,'" he said. "From the Crusades."

When I persisted in bringing up the subject of the mission, he waved me off. "I can't call myself a missionary anymore," he said. "Yesterday, when I left the country, I gave up that right." He attempted a smile. "Honest, I'm just a civilian now."

"What makes you think they're after you?" I asked.

The smile vanished. "I'm not so sure they are," he said, not very convincingly. "I may just be getting paranoid in my old age. But I could swear that in New Delhi, and again at Heathrow, I heard someone singing—singing a certain song. Once it was in the men's room, on the other side of a partition; once it was behind me on line. And it was a song I recognized. It's in the Old Language." He shrugged. "I don't even know what the words mean."

"Why would anyone be singing? I mean, if they were following you?"

"That's just it. I don't know." He shook his head. "But I think—I think it's part of the ritual."

"What sort of ritual?"

"I don't know," he said again. He looked quite pained, and I resolved to bring this inquisition to an end. The ventilators had not yet dissipated the smell of charred cloth and flesh.

"But you'd heard the song before," I said. "You told me you recognized it."

"Yeah." He turned away and stared at the approaching clouds. We were passing over Maine. Suddenly the earth seemed a very small place. "I'd heard some of the Chaucha women singing it," he said at last. "It was a sort of farming song. It's supposed to make things grow."

Ahead of us loomed the saffron yellow smog that covers Manhattan like a dome. The "No Smoking" light winked silently on the console above us.

"I was hoping I wouldn't have to change planes," my companion said presently. "But the Miami flight doesn't leave for an hour and a half. I guess I'll get off and walk around a bit, stretch my legs. I wonder how long customs'll take." He seemed to be talking more to himself than to me. Once more I regretted my impulsiveness in giving him Maude's address. I was half tempted to make up some contagious disease for her, or a jealous husband. But then, quite likely he'd never call on her anyway; he hadn't even bothered to write down the name. And if he did pay a call—well, I told myself, perhaps he'd unwind when he realized he was safe among friends. He might even turn out to be good company; after all, he and my sister were practically the same age.

As the plane gave up the struggle and sank deeper into the warm encircling air, passengers shut books and magazines, organized their belongings, made last hurried forays to the bathroom to pat cold water on their faces. I wiped my spectacles and smoothed back what remained of my hair. My companion was staring out the window, the green Air Malay bag in his lap, his hands folded on it as if in prayer. We were already becoming strangers.

"Please return seat backs to the upright position," ordered a disembodied voice. Out beyond the window, past the head now turned completely away from me, the ground rose to meet us and we bumped along the pavement, jets roaring in reverse. Already stewardesses were rushing up and down the aisles pulling coats and jackets from the overhead bins; executive types, ignoring instructions, were scrambling to their feet and thrashing into raincoats. Outside I could see uniformed figures moving back and forth in what promised to be a warm grey drizzle. "Well," I said lamely, "we made it." I got to my feet.

He turned and flashed me a sickly grin. "Good-bye," he said. "This really has been a pleasure." He reached for my hand.

"And do try to relax and enjoy yourself in Miami," I said, looking for a break in the crowd that shuffled past me down the aisle. "That's the important thing—just to relax."

"I know that." He nodded gravely. "I know that. God bless you."

I found my slot and slipped into line. From behind me he added, "And I won't forget to look up your sister." My heart sank, but as I moved toward the door I turned to shout a last farewell. The old lady with the eyes was two people in front of me, but she didn't so much as smile.

One trouble with last farewells is that they occasionally prove redundant. Some forty minutes later, having passed like a morsel of food through a series of white plastic tubes, corridors, and customs lines, I found myself in one of the airport gift shops, whiling away the hour till my niece came to collect me; and there, once again, I saw the missionary.

He did not see me. He was standing before one of the racks of paperbacks—the so-called "Classics" section, haunt of the public domain—and with a preoccupied air he was glancing up and down the rows, barely pausing long enough to read the titles. Like me, he was obviously just killing time.

For some reason—call it embarrassment, a certain reluctance to spoil what had been a successful good-bye—I refrained from hailing him. Instead, stepping back into the rear aisle, I took refuge behind a rack of gothics, which I pretended to study while in fact studying him.

Moments later he looked up from the books and ambled over to a bin of cellophane-wrapped records, idly pressing the beard back into place below his right sideburn. Without warning he turned and surveyed the store; I ducked my head toward the gothics and enjoyed a vision normally reserved for the multifaceted eyes of an insect: women, dozens of them, fleeing an equal number of tiny mansions.

At last, with a shrug of his huge shoulders, he began flipping through the albums in the bin, snapping each one forward in an impatient staccato. Soon, the assortment scanned, he moved to the bin on the left and started on that.

Suddenly he gave a little cry, and I saw him shrink back. He stood immobile for a moment, staring down at something in the bin; then he whirled and walked quickly from the store, pushing past a family about to enter.

"Late for his plane," I said to the astonished salesgirl, and

strolled over to the albums. One of them lay faceup in the pile—a jazz record featuring John Coltrane on saxophone. Confused, I turned to look for my erstwhile companion, but he had vanished in the crowd hurrying past the doorway.

Something about the album had apparently set him off; I studied it more carefully. Coltrane stood silhouetted against a tropical sunset, his features obscured, head tilted back, saxophone blaring silently beneath the crimson sky. The pose was dramatic but trite, and I could see in it no special significance: it looked like any other black man with a horn.

> New York eclipses all other cities in the spontaneous cordiality and generosity of its inhabitants—at least, such inhabitants as I have encountered.
>
> —LOVECRAFT, 9/29/1922

How quickly you changed your mind! You arrived to find a gold Dunsanian city of arches and domes and fantastic spires. . . or so you told us. Yet when you fled two years later you could see only "alien hordes."

What was it that so spoiled the dream? Was it that impossible marriage? Those foreign faces on the subway? Or was it merely the theft of your new summer suit? I believed then, Howard, and I believe it still, that the nightmare was all your own; though you returned to New England like a man reemerging into sunlight, there was, I assure you, a very good life to be found amid the shade. I remained—and survived.

I almost wish I were back there now, instead of in this ugly little bungalow, with its air conditioner and its rotting wicker furniture and the humid night dripping down its windows.

I almost wish I were back on the steps of the natural history museum where, that momentous August afternoon, I stood perspiring in the shadow of Teddy Roosevelt's horse, watching matrons stroll past Central Park with dogs or children in tow and fanning myself ineffectually with the postcard I'd just received from Maude. I was waiting for my niece to drive by and leave off her son, whom I planned to take round the museum; he'd wanted to see

the life-size mockup of the blue whale and, just upstairs, the dinosaurs. . .

I remember that Ellen and her boy were more than twenty minutes late. I remember too, Howard, that I was thinking of you that afternoon, and with some amusement: much as you disliked New York in the twenties, you'd have reeled in horror at what it's become today. Even from the steps of the museum I could see a curb piled high with refuse and a park whose length you might have walked without once hearing English spoken; dark skins crowded out the white, and mambo music echoed from across the street.

I remember all these things because, as it turned out, this was a special day: the day I saw, for the second time, the black man and his baleful horn.

My niece arrived late, as usual; she had for me the usual apology and the usual argument. "How can you still live over here?" she asked, depositing Terry on the sidewalk. "I mean, just look at those people." She nodded toward a park bench around which blacks and Latins congregated like figures in a group portrait.

"Brooklyn is so much better?" I countered, as tradition dictated.

"Of course," she said. "In the Heights, anyway. I don't understand it—why this pathological hatred of moving? You might at least try the East Side. You can certainly afford it." Terry watched us impassively, lounging against the fender. I think he sided with me over his mother, but he was too wise to show it.

"Ellen," I said, "let's face it. I'm just too old to start hanging around singles bars. Over on the East Side they read nothing but best-sellers, and they hate anyone past sixty. I'm better off where I grew up—at least I know where the cheap restaurants are." It was, in fact, a thorny problem: forced to choose between whites whom I despised and blacks whom I feared, I somehow preferred the fear.

To mollify Ellen I read aloud her mother's postcard. It was the prestamped kind that bore no picture. "I'm still getting used to the cane," Maude had written, her penmanship as flawless as when she'd won the school medallion. "Livia has gone back to Vermont for the summer, so the card games are suspended & I'm hard into Pearl Buck. Your friend Rev. Mortimer dropped by & we had a

nice chat. What amusing stories! Thanks again for the subscription to *McCall's*; I'll send Ellen my old copies. Look forward to seeing you all after the hurricane season."

Terry was eager to confront the dinosaurs; he was, in fact, getting a little old for me to superintend, and was halfway up the steps before I'd arranged with Ellen where to meet us afterward. With school out the museum was almost as crowded as on weekends, the halls' echo turning shouts and laughter into animal cries. We oriented ourselves on the floor plan in the main lobby—YOU ARE HERE read a large green dot, below which someone had scrawled "*Too bad for you*"—and trooped toward the Hall of Reptiles, Terry impatiently leading the way. "I saw that in school." He pointed toward a redwood diorama. "That too"—the Grand Canyon. He was, I believe, about to enter seventh grade, and until now had been little given to talk; he looked younger than the other children.

We passed toucans and marmosets and the new Urban Ecology wing ("concrete and cockroaches," sneered Terry), and duly stood before the brontosaurus, something of a disappointment: "I forgot it was just the skeleton," he said. Behind us a group of black boys giggled and moved toward us; I hurried my nephew past the assembled bones and through the most crowded doorway, dedicated, ironically, to Man in Africa. "This is the boring part," said Terry, unmoved by masks and spears. The pace was beginning to tire me. We passed through another doorway—Man in Asia—and moved quickly past the Chinese statuary. "I saw that in school." He nodded at a stumpy figure in a glass case, wrapped in ceremonial robes. Something about it was familiar to me, too; I paused to stare at it. The outer robe, slightly tattered, was spun of some shiny green material and displayed tall, twisted-looking trees on one side, a kind of stylized river on the other. Across the front ran five yellow-brown shapes in loincloth and headdress, presumably fleeing toward the robe's frayed edges; behind them stood a larger one, all black. In its mouth was a pendulous horn. The figure was crudely woven—little more than a stick figure, in fact—but it bore an unsettling resemblance, in both pose and proportion, to the one on the album cover.

Terry returned to my side, curious to see what I'd found. "Tribal garment," he read, peering at the white plastic notice below the case. "Malay Peninsula, Federation of Malaysia, early nineteenth century." He fell silent.

"Is that all it says?"

"Yep. They don't even have which tribe it's from." He reflected a moment. "Not that I really care."

"Well, I do," I said. "I wonder who'd know."

Obviously I'd have to seek advice at the information counter in the main lobby downstairs. Terry ran on ahead, while I followed even more slowly than before; the thought of a mystery evidently appealed to him, even one so tenuous and unexciting as this.

A bored-looking young college girl listened to the beginning of my query and handed me a pamphlet from below the counter. "You can't see anyone till September," she said, already beginning to turn away. "They're all on vacation."

I squinted at the tiny print on the first page: "Asia, our largest continent, has justly been called the cradle of civilization, but it may also be a birthplace of man himself." Obviously the pamphlet had been written before the current campaigns against sexism. I checked the date on the back: "Winter 1958." This would be of no help. Yet on page four my eye fell on the reference I sought:

> . . . The model next to it wears a green silk ceremonial robe from Negri Sembilan, most rugged of the Malayan provinces. Note central motif of native man blowing ceremonial horn, and the graceful curve of his instrument; the figure is believed to be a representation of "Death's Herald," possibly warning villagers of approaching calamity. Gift of an anonymous donor, the robe is probably Tcho-tcho in origin, and dates from the early 19th century.

"What's the matter, uncle? Are you sick?" Terry gripped my shoulder and stared up at me, looking worried; my behavior had obviously confirmed his worst fears about old people. "What's it say in there?"

I gave him the pamphlet and staggered to a bench near the wall. I wanted time to think. The Tcho-Tcho People, I knew, had figured in a number of tales by Lovecraft and his disciples—Howard him-

self had called them "the wholly abominable Tcho-Tchos"—but I couldn't remember much about them except that they were said to worship one of his imaginary deities. For some reason I associated them with Burma. . .

But whatever their attributes, I'd been certain of one thing: the Tcho-Tchos were completely fictitious.

Obviously I'd been wrong. Barring the unlikely possibility that the pamphlet itself was a hoax, I was forced to conclude that the malign beings of the stories were in fact based upon an actual race inhabiting the Southeast Asian subcontinent—a race whose name the missionary had mistranslated as "the Chauchas."

It was a rather troublesome discovery. I had hoped to turn some of Mortimer's recollections, authentic or not, into fiction; he'd unwittingly given me the material for three or four good plots. Yet I'd now discovered that my friend Howard had beaten me to it, and that I was put in the uncomfortable position of living out another man's horror stories.

> Epistolary expression is with me largely replacing conversation.
>
> —LOVECRAFT, 12/23/1917

I hadn't expected my second encounter with the black horn-player. A month later I got an even bigger surprise: I saw the missionary again.

Or at any rate, his picture. It was in a clipping my sister had sent me from the *Miami Herald,* over which she had written in ball-point pen, *"Just saw this in the paper—how awful!!"*

I didn't recognize the face; the photo was obviously an old one, the reproduction poor, and the man was clean-shaven. But the words below it told me it was him.

> CLERGYMAN MISSING IN STORM
>
> (Wed.) The Rev. Ambrose B. Mortimer, 56, a lay pastor of the Church of Christ, Knoxville, Tenn., has been reported missing in the wake of Monday's hurricane. Spokesmen for the order say Mortimer had recently retired after serving nineteen years as a missionary, most recently in Malaysia. After moving to Miami in July, he had been a resident of 311 Pompano Canal Road.

Here the piece ended, with an abruptness that seemed all too appropriate to its subject. Whether Ambrose Mortimer still lived I didn't know, but I felt certain now that, having fled one peninsula, he had strayed onto another just as dangerous, a finger thrust into the void. And the void had swallowed him up.

So, anyway, ran my thoughts. I have often been prey to depressions of a similar nature, and subscribe to a fatalistic philosophy I'd shared with my friend Howard: a philosophy one of his less sympathetic biographers has dubbed "futilitarianism."

Yet pessimistic as I was, I was not about to let the matter rest. Mortimer may well have been lost in the storm; he may even have set off somewhere on his own. But if, in fact, some lunatic religious sect had done away with him for having pried too closely into its affairs, there were things I could do about it. I wrote to the Miami police that very day.

"Gentlemen," I began. "Having learned of the recent disappearance of the Reverend Ambrose Mortimer, I think I can provide information which may prove of use to investigators."

There is no need to quote the rest of the letter here. Suffice it to say that I recounted my conversation with the missing man, emphasizing the fears he'd expressed for his life: pursuit and "ritual murder" at the hands of a Malayan tribe called the Tcho-Tcho. The letter was, in short, a rather elaborate way of crying "foul play." I sent it care of my sister, asking that she forward it to the correct address.

The police department's reply came with unexpected speed. As with all such correspondence, it was more curt than courteous. "Dear Sir," wrote a Detective Sergeant A. Linahan; "In the matter of Rev. Mortimer we had already been apprised of the threats on his life. To date a preliminary search of the Pompano Canal has produced no findings, but dredging operations are expected to continue as part of our routine investigation. Thanking you for your concern—"

Below his signature, however, the sergeant had added a short postscript in his own hand. Its tone was somewhat more personal; perhaps typewriters intimidated him. "You may be interested to know," it said, "that we've recently learned a man carrying a Malaysian passport occupied rooms at a North Miami hotel for most of the summer, but checked out two weeks before your friend

disappeared. I'm not at liberty to say more, but please be assured we are tracking down several leads at the moment. Our investigators are working full-time on the matter, and we hope to bring it to a speedy conclusion."

Linahan's letter arrived on September twenty-first. Before the week was out I had one from my sister, along with another clipping from the *Herald;* and since, like some old Victorian novel, this chapter seems to have taken an epistolary form, I will end it with extracts from these two items.

The newspaper story was headed WANTED FOR QUESTIONING. Like the Mortimer piece, it was little more than a photo with an extended caption:

> (Thurs.) A Malaysian citizen is being sought for questioning in connection with the disappearance of an American clergyman, Miami police say. Records indicate that the Malaysian, Mr. D. A. Djaktu-tchow, had occupied furnished rooms at the Barkleigh Hotella, 2401 Culebra Ave., possibly with an unnamed companion. He is believed still in the greater Miami area, but since August 22 his movements cannot be traced. State Dept. officials report Djaktu-tchow's visa expired August 31; charges are pending.
>
> The clergyman, Rev. Ambrose B. Mortimer, has been missing since September 6.

The photo above the article was evidently a recent one, no doubt reproduced from the visa in question. I recognized the smiling moon-wide face, although it took me a moment to place him as the man whose dinner I'd stumbled over on the plane. Without the moustache, he looked less like Charlie Chan.

The accompanying letter filled in a few details. "I called up the *Herald,*" my sister wrote, "but they couldn't tell me any more than was in the article. Just the same, finding that out took me half an hour, since the stupid woman at the switchboard kept putting me through to the wrong person. I guess you're right—anything that prints color pictures on page one shouldn't call itself a newspaper.

"This afternoon I called up the police department, but they weren't very helpful either. I suppose you just can't expect to find out much over the phone, though I still rely on it. Finally I got an

Officer Linahan, who told me he's just replied to that letter of yours. Have you heard from him yet? The man was very evasive. He was trying to be nice, but I could tell he was impatient to get off. He did give me the full name of the man they're looking for—Djaktu Abdul Djaktu-tchow, isn't that marvelous?—and he told me they have some more material on him which they can't release right now. I argued and pleaded (you know how persuasive I can be!) and finally, because I claimed I'd been a close friend of Rev. Mortimer's, I wheedled something out of him which he swore he'd deny if I told anyone but you. Apparently the poor man must have been deathly ill, maybe even tubercular—I intended to get a patch test next week, just to play safe, and I recommend that you get one too—because it seems that, in the reverend's bedroom, they found something *very* odd: pieces of lung tissue. Human lung tissue."

I, too, was a detective in youth.
—LOVECRAFT, 2/17/1931

Do amateur detectives still exist? I mean, outside the novels? I doubt it. Who, after all, has the time for such games today? Not I, unfortunately; though for more than a decade I'd been nominally retired, my days were quite full with the unromantic activities that occupy everyone this side of the paperbacks: letters, luncheon dates, visits to my niece and to my doctor; books (not enough) and television (too much) and perhaps a Golden Agers' matinee (though I have largely stopped going to films, finding myself increasingly out of sympathy with their heroes). I also spent Halloween week in Atlantic City, and most of another attempting to interest a rather overpolite young publisher in reprinting some of my early work.

All this, of course, is intended as a sort of apologia for my having put off further inquiries into poor Mortimer's case till mid-November. The truth is, the matter almost slipped my mind; only in novels do people not have better things to do.

It was Maude who reawakened my interest. She had been avidly scanning the papers—in vain—for further reports on the man's disappearance; I believe she had even phoned Sergeant Linahan a second time, but had learned nothing new. Now she wrote me with a tiny fragment of information, heard at thirdhand: one of her

bridge partners had had it on the authority of "a friend in the police force" that the search for Mr. Djaktu was being widened to include his presumed companion—"a Negro child," or so my sister reported. Although there was every possibility that this information was false, or that it concerned an entirely different case, I could tell she regarded it as very sinister indeed.

Perhaps that was why the following afternoon found me struggling once more up the steps of the natural history museum—as much to satisfy Maude as myself. Her allusion to a Negro, coming after the curious discovery in Mortimer's bedroom, had recalled to mind the figure on the Malayan robe, and I had been troubled all night by the fantasy of a black man—a man much like the beggar I'd just seen huddled against Roosevelt's statue—coughing his lungs out into a sort of twisted horn.

I had encountered few other people on the streets that afternoon, as it was unseasonably cold for a city that's often mild till January; I wore a muffler, and my grey tweed overcoat flapped round my heels. Inside, however, the place like all American buildings was overheated; I was soon the same as I made my way up the demoralizingly long staircase to the second floor.

The corridors were silent and empty, but for the morose figure of a guard seated before one of the alcoves, head down as if in mourning, and, from above me, the hiss of the steam radiators near the marble ceiling. Slowly, and rather enjoying the sense of privilege that comes from having a museum to oneself, I retraced my earlier route past the immense skeletons of dinosaurs ("These great creatures once trod the earth where you now walk") and down to the Hall of Primitive Man, where two Puerto Rican youths, obviously playing hooky, stood by the African wing gazing worshipfully at a Masai warrior in full battle gear. In the section devoted to Asia I paused to get my bearings, looking in vain for the squat figure in the robe. The glass case was empty. Over its plaque was taped a printed notice: "Temporarily removed for restoration."

This was no doubt the first time in forty years that the display had been taken down, and of course I'd picked just this occasion to look for it. So much for luck. I headed for the nearest staircase, at the far end of the wing. From behind me the clank of metal echoed

down the hall, followed by the angry voice of the guard. Perhaps that Masai spear had proved too great a temptation.

In the main lobby I was issued a written pass to enter the north wing, where the staff offices were located. "You want the workrooms on basement level," said the woman at the information counter; the summer's bored coed had become a friendly old lady who eyed me with some interest. "Just ask the guard at the bottom of the stairs, past the cafeteria. I do hope you find what you're looking for."

Carefully keeping the pink slip she'd handed me visible for anyone who might demand it, I descended. As I turned onto the stairwell I was confronted with a kind of vision: a blonde, Scandinavian-looking family were coming up the stairs toward me, the four upturned faces almost interchangeable, parents and two little girls with the pursed lips and timidly hopeful eyes of the tourist, while just behind them, apparently unheard, capered a grinning black youth, practically walking on the father's heels. In my present state of mind the scene appeared particularly disturbing—the boy's expression was certainly one of mockery—and I wondered if the guard who stood before the cafeteria had noticed. If he had, however, he gave no sign; he glanced without curiosity at my pass and pointed toward a fire door at the end of the hall.

The offices in the lower level were surprisingly shabby—the walls here were not marble but faded green plaster—and the entire corridor had a "buried" feeling to it, no doubt because the only outside light came from ground-level window gratings high overhead. I had been told to ask for one of the research associates, a Mr. Richmond; his office was part of a suite broken up by pegboard dividers. The door was open, and he got up from his desk as soon as I entered; I suspect that, in view of my age and grey tweed overcoat, he may have taken me for someone important.

A plump young man with sandy-colored beard, he looked like an out-of-shape surfer, but his sunniness dissolved when I mentioned my interest in the green silk robe. "And I suppose you're the man who complained about it upstairs, am I right?"

I assured him that I was not.

"Well, someone sure did," he said, still eyeing me resentfully; on

the wall behind him an Indian war-mask did the same. "Some damn tourist, maybe, in town for a day and out to make trouble. Threatened to call the Malaysian Embassy. If you put up a fuss those people upstairs get scared it'll wind up in the *Times*."

I understood his allusion; the previous year the museum had gained considerable notoriety for having conducted some really appalling—and, to my mind, quite pointless—experiments on cats. Most of the public had, until then, been unaware that the building housed several working laboratories.

"Anyway," he continued, "the robe's down in the shop, and we're stuck with patching up the damn thing. It'll probably be down there for the next six months before we get to it. We're so understaffed right now it isn't funny." He glanced at his watch. "Come on, I'll show you. Then I've got to go upstairs."

I followed him down a narrow corridor that branched off to either side. At one point he said, "On your right, the infamous zoology lab." I kept my eyes straight ahead. As we passed the next doorway I smelled a familiar odor. "It makes me think of treacle," I said.

"You're not so far wrong." He spoke without looking back. "The stuff's mostly molasses. Pure nutrient. They use it for growing microorganisms."

I hurried to keep up with him. "And for other things?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, mister. It's not my field."

We came to a door barred by a black wire grille. "Here's one of the shops," he said, fitting a key into the lock. The door swung open on a long unlit room smelling of wood shavings and glue. "You sit down over here," he said, leading me to a small anteroom and switching on the light. "I'll be back in a second." I stared at the object closest to me, a large ebony chest, ornately carved. Its hinges had been removed. Richmond returned with the robe draped over his arm. "See?" he said, dangling it before me. "It's really not in such bad condition, is it?" I realized he still thought of me as the man who'd complained.

On the field of rippling green fled the small brown shapes, still pursued by some unseen doom. In the center stood the black man, black horn to his lips, man and horn a single line of unbroken black.

"Are the Tcho-Tchos a superstitious people?" I asked.

"They *were*," he said pointedly. "Superstitious and not very pleasant. They're extinct as dinosaurs now. Supposedly wiped out by the Japanese or something."

"That's rather odd," I said. "A friend of mine claims to have met up with them earlier this year."

Richmond was smoothing out the robe; the branches of the snake-trees snapped futilely at the brown shapes. "I suppose it's possible," he said, after a pause. "But I haven't read anything about them since grad school. They're certainly not listed in the textbooks anymore. I've looked, and there's nothing on them. This robe's over a hundred years old."

I pointed to the figure in the center. "What can you tell me about this fellow?"

"Death's Herald," he said, as if it were a quiz. "At least that's what the literature says. Supposed to warn of some approaching calamity."

I nodded without looking up; he was merely repeating what I'd read in the pamphlet. "But isn't it strange," I said, "that these others are in such a panic? See? They aren't even waiting around to listen."

"Would you?" He snorted impatiently.

"But if the black one's just a messenger of some sort, why's he so much *bigger* than the others?"

Richmond began folding the cloth. "Look, mister," he said, "I don't pretend to be an expert on every tribe in Asia. But if a character's important, they'd sometimes make him larger. Anyway, that's what the Mayans did. But listen, I've really got to get this put away now. I've got a meeting to go to."

While he was gone I sat thinking about what I'd just seen. The small brown shapes, crude as they were, had expressed a terror no mere messenger could inspire. And that great black figure standing triumphant in the center, horn twisting from its mouth—that was no messenger either, I was sure of it. That was no Death's Herald. That was Death itself.

I returned to my apartment just in time to hear the telephone ringing, but by the time I'd let myself in it had stopped. I sat down in the living room with a mug of coffee and a book which had lain

untouched on the shelf for the last thirty years: *Jungle Ways,* by that old humbug, William Seabrook. I'd met him back in the twenties and had found him likable enough, if rather untrustworthy. His book described dozens of unlikely characters, including "a cannibal chief who had got himself jailed and famous because he had eaten his young wife, a handsome, lazy wench called Blito, along with a dozen of her girl friends," but I discovered no mention of a black horn-player.

I had just finished my coffee when the phone rang again. It was my sister.

"I just wanted to let you know that there's another man missing," she said breathlessly; I couldn't tell if she was frightened or merely excited. "A busboy at the San Marino. Remember? I took you there."

The San Marino was an inexpensive little luncheonette on Indian Creek, several blocks from my sister's house. She and her friends ate there several times a week.

"It happened last night," she went on. "I just heard about it at my card game. They say he went outside with a bucket of fish heads to dump in the creek, and he never came back."

"That's very interesting, but . . ." I thought for a moment; it was highly unusual for her to call me like this. "But really, Maude, couldn't he have simply run off? I mean, what makes you think there's any connection—"

"Because I took Ambrose there, too!" she cried. "Three or four times. That was where we used to meet."

Apparently Maude had been considerably better acquainted with the Reverend Mortimer than her letters would have led one to believe. But I wasn't interested in pursuing that line right now. "This busboy," I asked, "was he someone you knew?"

"Of course," she said. "I know everyone in there. His name was Carlos. A quiet boy, very courteous. I'm sure he must have waited on us dozens of times."

I had seldom heard my sister so upset, but for the present there seemed no way of calming her fears. Before hanging up she made me promise to move up the month's visit I'd expected to pay her over Christmas; I assured her I would try to make it down for

Thanksgiving, then only a week away, if I could find a flight that wasn't filled.

"Do try," she said—and, were this a tale from the old pulps, she would have added: "If anyone can get to the bottom of this, you can." In truth, however, both Maude and I were aware that I had just celebrated my seventy-seventh birthday and that, of the two of us, I was by far the more timid; so that what she actually said was, "Looking after you will help take my mind off things."

> I couldn't live a week without a private library.
> —LOVECRAFT, 2/25/1929

That's what I thought, too, until recently. After a lifetime of collecting I'd acquired thousands upon thousands of volumes, never parting with a one; it was this cumbersome private library, in fact, that helped keep me anchored to the same West Side apartment for nearly half a century.

Yet here I sit, with no company save a few gardening manuals and a shelf of antiquated best-sellers—nothing to dream on, nothing I'd want to hold in my hand. Still, I've survived here a week, a month, almost a season. The truth is, Howard, you'd be surprised what you can live without. As for the books I've left in Manhattan, I just hope someone takes care of them when I'm gone.

But I was by no means so resigned that November when, having successfully reserved seats on an earlier flight, I found myself with less than a week in New York. I spent all my remaining time in the library—the public one on Forty-second Street, with the lions in front and with no book of mine on its shelves. Its two reading rooms were the haunt of men my age and older, retired men with days to fill, poor men just warming their bones; some leafed through newspapers, others dozed in their seats. None of them, I'm sure, shared my sense of urgency: there were things I hoped to find out before I left, things for which Miami would be useless.

I was no stranger to this building. Long ago, during one of Howard's visits, I had undertaken some genealogical researches here in the hope of finding ancestors more impressive than his, and as a young man I had occasionally attempted to support myself,

like the denizens of Gissing's *New Grub Street,* by writing articles compiled from the work of others. But by now I was out of practice: how, after all, does one find references to an obscure Southeast Asian tribal myth without reading everything published on that part of the world?

Initially that's exactly what I tried; I looked through every book I could find with "Malaya" in its title. I read about rainbow gods and phallic altars and something called "the *tatai*," a sort of unwanted companion; I came across wedding rites and The Death of Thorns and a certain cave inhabited by millions of snails. But I found no mention of the Tcho-Tcho, and nothing on their gods.

This in itself was surprising. We are living in a day when there are no more secrets, when my twelve-year-old nephew can buy his own grimoire and books with titles like *The Encyclopaedia of Ancient and Forbidden Knowledge* are remaindered at every discount store. Though my friends from the twenties would have hated to admit it, the notion of stumbling across some moldering old "black book" in the attic of a deserted house—some lexicon of spells and chants and hidden lore—is merely a quaint fantasy. If the *Necronomicon* actually existed, it would be out in Bantam paperback with a preface by Lin Carter.

It's appropriate, then, that when I finally came upon a reference to what I sought, it was in that most unromantic of forms, a mimeographed film-script.

"Transcript" would perhaps be closer to the truth, for it was based upon a film shot in 1937 and that was now presumably crumbling in some forgotten vault. I discovered the item inside one of those brown cardboard packets, held together with ribbons, which libraries use to protect books whose bindings have worn away. The book itself, *Malay Memories,* by a Reverend Morton, had proved a disappointment despite the author's rather suggestive name. The transcript lay beneath it, apparently slipped there by mistake, but though it appeared unpromising—only ninety-six pages long, badly typed, and held together by a single rusty staple—it more than repaid the reading. There was no title page, nor do I think there'd ever been one; the first page simply identified the film as "Documentary—Malaya Today," and noted that it had

been financed, in part, by a U.S. government grant. The filmmaker or makers were not listed.

I soon saw why the government may have been willing to lend the venture some support, for there were a great many scenes in which the proprietors of rubber plantations expressed the sort of opinions Americans might want to hear. To an unidentified interviewer's query, "What other signs of prosperity do you see around you?" a planter named Mr. Pierce had obligingly replied, "Why, look at the living standard—better schools for the natives and a new lorry for me. It's from Detroit, you know. May even have my own rubber in it."

INT: And how about the Japanese? Are they one of today's better markets?

PIERCE: Oh, see, they buy our crop all right, but we don't really trust 'em, understand? (Smiles) We don't like 'em half so much as the Yanks.

The final section of the transcript was considerably more interesting, however; it recorded a number of brief scenes that must never have appeared in the finished film. I quote one of them in its entirety:

PLAYROOM, CHURCH SCHOOL—LATE AFTERNOON.
(DELETED)

INT: This Malay youth has sketched a picture of a demon he calls Shoo Goron. (To Boy) I wonder if you can tell me something about the instrument he's blowing out of. It looks like the Jewish *shofar,* or ram's horn. (Again to Boy) That's all right. No need to be frightened.

BOY: He no blow out. Blow in.

INT: I see—he draws air in through the horn, is that right?

BOY: No horn. Is no horn. (Weeps) Is *him.*

Miami did not produce much of an impression . . .
—LOVECRAFT, 7/19/1931

Waiting in the airport lounge with Ellen and her boy, my bags already checked and my seat number assigned, I fell prey to the sort of anxiety that had made me miserable in youth: it was a sense that

time was running out; and what caused it now, I think, was the hour that remained before my flight was due to leave. It was too long a time to sit making small talk with Terry, whose mind was patently on other things; yet it was too short to accomplish the task which I'd suddenly realized had been left undone.

But perhaps my nephew would serve. "Terry," I said, "how'd you like to do me a favor?" He looked up eagerly; I suppose children his age love to be of use. "Remember the building we passed on the way here? The International Arrivals building?"

"Sure," he said. "Right next door."

"Yes, but it's a lot farther away than it looks. Do you think you'd be able to get there and back in the next hour and find something out for me?"

"Sure." He was already out of his seat.

"It just occurs to me that there's an Air Malay reservations desk in that building, and I wonder if you could ask someone there—"

My niece interrupted me. "Oh, no he won't," she said firmly. "First of all, I won't have him running across that highway on some silly errand—" she ignored her son's protests, "—and secondly, I don't want him involved in this game you've got going with Mother."

The upshot of it was that Ellen went herself, leaving Terry and me to our small talk. She took with her a slip of paper upon which I'd written "Shoo Goron," a name she regarded with sour skepticism. I wasn't sure she would return before my departure (Terry, I could see, was growing increasingly uneasy), but she was back before the second boarding call.

"She says you spelled it wrong," Ellen announced.

"Who's she?"

"Just one of the flight attendants," said Ellen. "A young girl, in her early twenties. None of the others were Malayan. At first she didn't recognize the name, until she read it out loud a few times. Apparently it's some kind of fish, am I right? Like a suckerfish, only bigger. Anyway, that's what she said. Her mother used to scare her with it when she was bad."

Obviously Ellen—or, more likely, the other woman—had misunderstood. "Sort of a bogeyman figure?" I asked. "Well, I suppose that's possible. But a fish, you say?"

Ellen nodded. "I don't think she knew that much about it, though. She acted a little embarrassed, in fact. Like I'd asked her something dirty." From across the room a loudspeaker issued the final call for passengers. Ellen helped me to my feet, still talking. "She said she was just a Malay, from somewhere on the coast—Malacca? I forget—and that it's a shame I didn't drop by three or four months ago, because her summer replacement was part Chocha—Chocho?—something like that."

The line was growing shorter now. I wished the two of them a safe Thanksgiving and shuffled toward the plane.

Below me the clouds had formed a landscape of rolling hills. I could see every ridge, every washed-out shrub, and in the darker places, the eyes of animals.

Some of the valleys were split by jagged black lines that looked like rivers seen on a map. The water, at least, was real enough: here the cloudbank had cracked and parted, revealing the dark sea beneath.

Throughout the ride I'd been conscious of lost opportunity, a sense that my destination offered a kind of final chance. With Howard gone these forty years I still lived out my life in his shadow; certainly his tales had overshadowed my own. Now I found myself trapped within one of them. Here, miles above the earth, I felt great gods warring; below, the war was already lost.

The very passengers around me seemed participants in a masque: the oily little steward who smelled of something odd; the child who stared and wouldn't look away; the man asleep beside me, mouth slack, who'd chuckled and handed me a page ripped from his "in-flight" magazine: NOVEMBER PUZZLE PAGE, with an eye staring in astonishment from a swarm of dots. "Connect the dots and see what you'll be *least* thankful for this Thanksgiving!" Below it, half buried amid *"B'nai B'rith to Host Song Fest"* and advertisements for beach clubs, a bit of local color found me in a susceptible mood:

> **Have Fins, Will Travel**
>
> (Courtesy *Miami Herald*) If your hubby comes home and swears he's just seen a school of fish walk across the yard, don't sniff his breath for booze. He may be telling the truth! According to U. of Miami zoologists, catfish will be

> migrating in record numbers this fall and South Florida residents can expect to see hundreds of the whiskered critters crawling overland, miles from water. Though usually no bigger than your pussycat, most breeds can survive without . . .

Here the piece came to a ragged end where my companion had torn it from the magazine. He stirred in his sleep, lips moving; I turned and put my head against the window, where the limb of Florida was swinging into view, veined with dozens of canals. The plane shuddered and slid toward it.

Maude was already at the gate, a black porter beside her with an empty cart. While we waited by a hatchway in the basement for my luggage to be disgorged, she told me the sequel to the San Marino incident: the boy's body found washed up on a distant beach, lungs in mouth and throat. "Inside out," she said. "Can you imagine? It's been on the radio all morning. With tapes of some ghastly doctor talking about smoker's cough and the way people drown. I couldn't even listen after a while." The porter heaved my bags onto the cart and we followed him to the taxi stand, Maude using her cane to gesticulate. If I hadn't seen how aged she'd become I'd have thought the excitement was agreeing with her.

We had the driver make a detour westward along Pompano Canal Road, where we paused at number 311, one of nine shabby green cabins that formed a court round a small and very dirty wading pool; in a cement pot beside the pool drooped a solitary half-dead palm, as if in some travesty of an oasis. This, then, had been Ambrose Mortimer's final home. My sister was very silent, and I believed her when she said she'd never been here before. Across the street glistened the oily waters of the canal.

The taxi turned east. We passed interminable rows of hotels, motels, condominiums, shopping centers as big as Central Park, souvenir shops with billboards bigger than themselves, baskets of seashells and wriggly plastic auto toys out front. Men and women our age and younger sat on canvas beach chairs in their yards, blinking at the traffic. The sexes had merged; some of the older women were nearly as bald as I was, and men wore clothes the color of coral, lime, and peach. They walked very slowly as they

crossed the street or moved along the sidewalk; cars moved almost as slowly, and it was forty minutes before we reached Maude's house, with its pastel orange shutters and the retired druggist and his wife living upstairs. Here, too, a kind of languor was upon the block, one into which I knew, with just a memory of regret, I would soon be settling. Life was slowing to a halt, and once the taxi had roared away the only things that stirred were the geraniums in Maude's window box, trembling slightly in a breeze I couldn't even feel.

A dry spell. Mornings in my sister's air-conditioned parlor, luncheons with her friends in air-conditioned coffee shops. Inadvertent afternoon naps, from which I'd waken with headaches. Evening walks, to watch the sunsets, the fireflies, the TV screens flashing behind neighbors' blinds. By night, a few faint cloudy stars; by day, tiny lizards skittering over the hot pavement, or boldly sunning themselves on the flagstones. The smell of oil paints in my sister's closet, and the insistent buzz of mosquitoes in her garden. Her sundial, a gift from Ellen, with Terry's message painted on the rim. Lunch at the San Marino and a brief, halfhearted look at the dock in back, now something of a tourist attraction. An afternoon at a branch library in Hialeah, searching through its shelves of travel books, an old man dozing at the table across from me, a child laboriously copying her school report from the encyclopedia. Thanksgiving dinner, with its half-hour's phone call to Ellen and the boy and the prospect of turkey for the rest of the week. More friends to visit, and another day at the library.

Later, driven by boredom and the ghost of an impulse, I phoned the Barkleigh Hotella in North Miami and booked a room there for two nights. I don't remember the days I settled for, because that sort of thing no longer had much meaning, but I know it was for midweek; "we're deep in the season," the proprietress informed me, and the hotel would be filled each weekend till long past New Year's.

My sister refused to accompany me out to Culebra Avenue; she saw no attraction in visiting the place once occupied by a fugitive Malaysian, nor did she share my pulp-novel fantasy that, by actually living there myself, I might uncover some clue unknown to

police. ("Thanks to the celebrated author of *Beyond the Garve* . . .") I went alone, by cab, taking with me half a dozen volumes from the branch library. Beyond the reading, I had no other plans.

The Barkleigh was a pink adobe building two stories tall, surmounted by an ancient neon sign on which the dust lay thick in the early afternoon sunlight. Similar establishments lined the block on both sides, each more depressing than the last. There was no elevator here and, as I learned to my disappointment, no rooms available on the first floor; the staircase looked like it was going to be an effort.

In the office downstairs I inquired, as casually as I could, which room the notorious Mr. Djaktu had occupied; I'd hoped, in fact, to be assigned it, or one nearby. But I was doomed to disappointment. The preoccupied little Cuban behind the counter had been hired only six weeks before and claimed to know nothing of the matter; in halting English he explained that the proprietress, a Mrs. Zimmerman, had just left for New Jersey to visit relatives and would not be back till Christmas. Obviously I could forget about gossip.

By this point I was half tempted to cancel my visit, and I confess that what kept me there was not so much a sense of honor as the desire for two days' separation from Maude, who, having been on her own for nearly a decade, was rather difficult to live with.

I followed the Cuban upstairs, watching my suitcase bump rhythmically against his legs, and was led down the hall to a room facing the rear. The place smelled vaguely of salt air and hair oil; the sagging bed had served many a desperate holiday. A small cement terrace overlooked the yard and a vacant lot behind it, the latter so overgrown with weeds and the grass in the yard so long unmown that it was difficult to tell where one began and the other ended. A clump of palms rose somewhere in the middle of this no-man's-land, impossibly tall and thin, with only a few stiffened leaves to grace the tops. On the ground below them lay several rotting coconuts.

This was my view the first night when I returned after dining at a nearby restaurant. I felt unusually tired and soon went inside to sleep. The night being cool, there was no need for the air con-

ditioner; as I lay in the huge bed I could hear people stirring in the adjoining room, the hiss of a bus moving down the avenue, and the rustle of palm leaves in the wind.

I spent part of the next morning composing a letter to Mrs. Zimmerman, to be held for her return. After the long walk to a coffee shop for lunch, I napped. After dinner I did the same. With the TV turned on for company, a garrulous blur at the other side of the room, I went through the pile of books on my night-table, final cullings from the bottom of the travel shelf; most of them hadn't been taken out since the thirties. I found nothing of interest in any of them, at least upon first inspection, but before turning out the light I noticed that one, the reminiscences of a Colonel E. G. Paterson, was provided with an index. Though I looked in vain for the demon Shoo Goron, I found reference to it under a variant spelling.

The author, no doubt long deceased, had spent most of his life in the Orient. His interest in Southeast Asia was slight, and the passage in question consequently brief:

> . . . Despite the richness and variety of their folklore, however, they have nothing akin to the Malay *shugoran,* a kind of bogey-man used to frighten naughty children. The traveller hears many conflicting descriptions of it, some bordering on the obscene. (*Oran,* of course, is Malay for 'man,' while *shug,* which here connotes 'sniffing' or 'questing,' means literally, 'elephant's trunk.') I well recall the hide which hung over the bar at the Traders' Club in Singapore, and which, according to tradition, represented the infant of this fabulous creature; its wings were black, like the skin of a Hottentot. Shortly after the War a regimental surgeon was passing through on his way back to Gibraltar and, after due examination, pronounced it the dried-out skin of a rather large catfish. He was never asked back.

I kept my light on until I was ready to fall asleep, listening to the wind rattle the palm leaves and whine up and down the row of terraces. As I switched off the light I half expected to see a shadowy shape at the window, but I saw, as the poet says, nothing but the night.

The next morning I packed my bag and left, aware that my stay in the hotel had proved fruitless. I returned to my sister's house to

find her in agitated conversation with the druggist from upstairs; she was in a terrible state and said she'd been trying to reach me all morning. She had awakened to find the flower box by her bedroom window overturned and the shrubbery beneath it trampled. Down the side of the house ran two immense slash marks several yards apart, starting at the roof and continuing straight to the ground.

> My gawd, how the years fly. Stolidly middle-aged—when only yesterday I was young and eager and awed by the mystery of an unfolding world.
>
> —LOVECRAFT, 8/20/1926

There is little more to report. Here the tale degenerates into an unsifted collection of items which may or may not be related: pieces of a puzzle for those who fancy themselves puzzle fans, a random swarm of dots, and in the center, a wide unwinking eye.

Of course, my sister left the house on Indian Creek that very day and took rooms for herself in a downtown Miami hotel. Subsequently she moved inland to live with a friend in a green stucco bungalow several miles from the Everglades, third in a row of nine just off the main highway. I am seated in its den as I write this. After the friend died my sister lived on here alone, making the forty-mile bus trip to Miami only on special occasions: theater with a group of friends, one or two shopping trips a year. She had everything else she needed right here in town.

I returned to New York, caught a chill, and finished out the winter in a hospital bed, visited rather less often than I might have wished by my niece and her boy. Of course, the drive in from Brooklyn is nothing to scoff at.

One recovers far more slowly when one has reached my age; it's a painful truth we all learn if we live long enough. Howard's life was short, but in the end I think he understood. At thirty-five he could deride as madness a friend's "hankering after youth," yet ten years later he'd learned to mourn the loss of his own. "The years tell on one!" he'd written. "You young fellows don't know how lucky you are!"

Age is indeed the great mystery. How else could Terry have

emblazoned his grandmother's sundial with that saccharine nonsense?

Grow old along with me;
The best is yet to be.

True, the motto is traditional to sundials—but that young fool hadn't even kept to the rhyme. With diabolical imprecision he had written, *"The best is yet to come"*—a line to make me gnash my teeth, if I had any left to gnash.

I spent most of the spring indoors, cooking myself wretched little meals and working ineffectually on a literary project that had occupied my thoughts. It was discouraging to find that I wrote so slowly now, and changed so much. My sister only reinforced the mood when, sending me a rather salacious story she'd found in the *Enquirer*—about the "thing like a vacuum cleaner" that snaked through a Swedish sailor's porthole and "made his face all purple"—she wrote at the top, *"See? Right out of Lovecraft."*

It was not long after this that I received, to my surprise, a letter from Mrs. Zimmerman, bearing profuse apologies for having misplaced my inquiry until it turned up again during "spring cleaning." (It is hard to imagine any sort of cleaning at the Barkleigh Hotella, spring or otherwise, but even this late reply was welcome.) "I am sorry that the minister who disappeared was a friend of yours," she wrote. "I'm sure he must have been a fine gentleman.

"You asked me for 'the particulars,' but from your note you seem to know the whole story. There is really nothing I can tell you that I did not tell the police, though I do not think they ever released all of it to the papers. Our records show that our guest Mr. Djaktu arrived here nearly a year ago, at the end of June, and left the last week of August owing me a week's rent plus various damages which I no longer have much hope of recovering, though I have written the Malaysian Embassy about it.

"In other respects he was a proper boarder, paid regularly, and in fact hardly ever left his room except to walk in the back yard from time to time, or stop at the grocer's. (We have found it impossible to discourage eating in rooms.) My only complaint is that in the

middle of the summer he may have had a small colored child living with him without our knowledge, until one of the maids heard him singing to it as she passed his room. She did not recognize the language, but said she thought it might be Hebrew. (The poor woman, now sadly taken from us, was barely able to read.) When she next made up the room, she told me that Mr. Djaktu claimed the child was 'his,' and that she left because she caught a glimpse of it watching her from the bathroom. She said it was naked. I did not speak of this at the time, as I do not feel it is my place to pass judgment on the morals of my guests. Anyway, we never saw the child again, and we made sure the room was completely sanitary for our next guests. Believe me, we have received nothing but good comments on our facilities. We think they are excellent and hope you agree, and I also hope you will be our guest again the next time you come to Florida."

Unfortunately, the next time I came to Florida was for my sister's funeral late that winter. I know now, as I did not know then, that she had been in ill health for most of the previous year, but I cannot help thinking that the so-called "incidents"—the senseless acts of vandalism directed against lone women in the South Florida area, culminating in several reported attacks by an unidentified prowler—may have hastened her death.

When I arrived here with Ellen to take care of my sister's affairs and arrange for the funeral, I intended to remain a week or two at most, seeing to the transfer of the property. Yet somehow I lingered, long after Ellen had gone. Perhaps it was the thought of that New York winter, grown harsher with each passing year; I just couldn't find the strength to go back. Nor, in the end, could I bring myself to sell this house; if I am trapped here, it's a trap I'm resigned to. Besides, moving has never much agreed with me; when I grow tired of this little room—and I do—I can think of nowhere else to go. I've seen all the world I want to see. This simple place is now my home—and I feel certain it will be my last. The calendar on the wall tells me it's been almost three months since I moved in. I know that somewhere in its remaining pages you will find the date of my death.

The past week has seen a new outbreak of the "incidents." Last night's was the most dramatic by far. I can recite it almost word for

word from the morning news. Shortly before midnight Mrs. Florence Cavanaugh, a housewife living at 24 Alyssum Terrace, South Princeton, was about to close the curtains in her front room when she saw, peering through the window at her, what she described as "a large Negro man wearing a gas mask or scuba outfit." Mrs. Cavanaugh, who was dressed only in her nightgown, fell back from the window and screamed for her husband, asleep in the next room, but by the time he arrived the Negro had made good his escape.

Local police favor the "scuba" theory, since near the window they've discovered footprints that may have been made by a heavy man in swim fins. But they haven't been able to explain why anyone would wear underwater gear so many miles from water.

The report usually concludes with the news that "Mr. and Mrs. Cavanaugh could not be reached for comment."

The reason I have taken such an interest in the case—sufficient, anyway, to memorize the above details—is that I know the Cavanaughs rather well. They are my next-door neighbors.

Call it an aging writer's ego, if you like, but somehow I can't help thinking that last evening's visit was meant for me. These little green bungalows all look alike in the dark.

Well, there's still a little night left outside—time enough to rectify the error. I'm not going anywhere.

I think, in fact, it will be a rather appropriate end for a man of my pursuits—to be absorbed into the denouement of another man's tale.

Grow old along with me;
The best is yet to come.

Tell me, Howard: how long before it's my turn to see the black face pressed to my window?

The Black Tome of Alsophocus

H. P. Lovecraft and Martin S. Warnes

My memories are very confused. There is even much doubt as to where they begin; for at times I feel appalling vistas of years stretching behind me, while at other times it seems as if the present moment were an isolated point in a grey formless infinity. I am not even certain how I am communicating this message. While I know I am speaking, I have a vague impression that some strange and perhaps terrible mediation will be needed to bear what I say to the parts where I wish to be heard. My identity, too, is bewilderingly cloudy. I seem to have suffered a great shock—perhaps from some utterly monstrous outgrowth of my cycles of unique, incredible experience.

These cycles of experience, of course, all stem from that worm-riddled book. I remember when I found it—in a dimly lighted place near the black oily river where the mists always swirl. That place was very old, and the ceiling-high shelves full of rotting volumes reached back endlessly through windowless inner rooms and alcoves. There were, besides, great formless heaps of books on the floor and in crude bins; and it was in one of these heaps that I found the thing. I did not learn its title at the time, for the early pages were

missing; but it fell open toward the end and gave me a glimpse of something which sent my senses reeling.

There was a formula—a sort of list of things to say and do—which I recognized as something black and forbidden; something which I had read of before in future paragraphs of mixed abhorrence and fascination penned by those strange ancient delvers into the universe's guarded secrets whose decaying texts I loved to absorb. It was a key—a guide—to certain gateways and transitions of which mystics have dreamed and whispered since the race was young, and which lead to freedoms and discoveries beyond the three dimensions and realms of life and matter that we know. Not for centuries had any man recalled its vital substance or known where to find it, but this book was very old indeed. No printing press, but the hand of some half-crazed monk, had traced these ominous Latin phrases in uncials of awesome antiquity.

I remember how the old man leered and tittered, and made a curious sign with his hand when I bore it away. He had refused to take pay for it, and only long afterward did I guess why. As I hurried home through those narrow winding mist-cloaked waterfront streets, I had a frightful impression of being stealthily followed by softly padding feet. The centuried, tottering houses on both sides seemed alive with a fresh and morbid malignity—as if some hitherto closed channel of evil understanding had abruptly been opened. I felt that those walls and overhanging gables of mildewed brick and fungoid plaster and timber—with eyelike diamond-paned windows that leered—could hardly desist from advancing and crushing me . . . yet I had read only the least fragment of that blasphemous rune before closing the book and bringing it away.

I remember how I read the book at last—white-faced, and locked in the attic room that I had long devoted to strange searchings. The great house was very still, for I had not gone up till after midnight. I think I had a family then—though the details are very uncertain—and I know there were many servants. Just what the year was, I cannot say; for since then I have known many ages and dimensions, and have had all my notions of time dissolved and refashioned. It was by the light of candles that I read—I recall the

relentless dripping of the wax—and there were chimes that came every now and then from distant belfries. I seemed to keep track of those chimes with a peculiar intentness, as if I feared to hear some very remote, intruding note among them.

Then came the first scratching and fumbling at the dormer window that looked out high above the other roofs of the city. It came as I droned aloud the ninth verse of that primal lay, and I knew amidst my shudders what it meant. For he who passes the gateways always wins a shadow, and never again can he be alone. I had evoked—and the book was indeed all I had suspected. That night I passed the gateway to a vortex of twisted time and vision, and when morning found me in the attic room I saw in the walls and shelves and fittings that which I had never seen before.

Nor could I ever after see the world as I had known it. Mixed with the present scene was always a little of the past and a little of the future, and every once-familiar object loomed alien in the new perspective brought by my widened sight. From then on I walked in a fantastic dream of unknown and half-known shapes; and with each new gateway crossed, the less plainly could I recognize the things of the narrow sphere to which I had so long been bound. What I saw about me, none else saw; and I grew doubly silent and aloof lest I be thought mad. Dogs had a fear of me, for they felt the outside shadow which never left my side. But still I read more—in hidden, forgotten books and scrolls to which my new vision led me—and pushed through fresh gateways of space and being and life-patterns toward the core of the unknown cosmos.

I remember the night I made the five concentric circles of fire on the floor, and stood in the innermost one chanting that monstrous litany the messenger from Tartary had brought. The walls melted away, and I was swept by a black wind through gulfs of fathomless grey with the needlelike pinnacles of unknown mountains miles below me. After a while there was utter blackness, and then the light of myriad stars forming strange alien constellations. Finally I saw a green-litten plain far below me, and discerned on it the twisted towers of a city built in no fashion I had ever known or read of or dreamed of. As I floated closer to that city I saw a great square building of stone in an open space, and felt a hideous fear clutching

at me. I screamed and struggled, and after a blankness was again in my attic room sprawled flat over the five phosphorescent circles on the floor. In that night's wandering there was no more of strangeness than in many a former night's wandering; but there was more of terror because I knew I was closer to those outside gulfs and worlds than I had ever been before. Thereafter I was more cautious with my incantations, for I had no wish to be cut off from my body and from the earth in unknown abysses whence I could never return.

Nevertheless, wary as I was, still my grasp on familiar scenes faded into infiniteness as my new unholy vision asserted itself and made my every glimpse of reality seem unreal and geometrically disturbing. My hearing also became affected. The chimes that came from the distant belfries sounded more ominous, terrifyingly ethereal, as if the sound was carried by disembodied wraiths from nether regions, where tormented souls eternally cry out in anguish and pain. With every passing day I drew farther away from temporal surroundings, aeons removed from earthly perspectives, and dwelt among the unnameable. Time became extrinsic, and my memory of events and people I had known before ever I acquired the book drifted away on dim mists of unreality no matter how desperately I attempted to cling to them.

I remember the first time I heard the voices; weird unhuman sibilant voices, issuing forth from the outer reaches of blackest space, where amorphous beings cavort and caper before a great black fetor-belching idol worn by the passing of uncountable centuries. With the commencement of these voices came visions of horrifying intensity, dread chimeras of dual black and green suns, shining on towering monoliths and citadels of evil, which rose, tier upon tier, as if seeking to escape their earthly attachments. But these dreams and illusions were as nothing compared to the dread colossus that was later to encroach upon my consciousness; even now I cannot recall the horror in its entirety, but when I think on it I have an impression of vastness, of size beyond measure, and groping tentacles, pulsating, as if with an intelligence of their own, alive with malignant depravity. Around this base enormity pranced cadaverous monstrosities, their voices rising in a cacophonous chant:

"Mwl'fgah pywfg fhtagn Gh'tyaf nglyf lghya."

These horrors were with me always as was that shadow from beyond.

Still I would study the books and scrolls and pass blacker gateways into unknown dimensions, where dark beings would instruct me in arts so infernal that even the most prosaic of minds was likely to be blasted at the thought of them.

I remember how I discovered the title of the book; it was late at night as I sat poring over the vermiculated pages that I came across a passage which threw light on the mysterious volume:

"Nyarlathotep rules in Sharnoth, beyond space and time; in his gigantic ebony palace he awaits his second coming, served by his minions he broods and festers in blackest night.

"Let none meddle with spells and enchantments concerning him, for he is quick to trap the unwary. Let the ignorant beware, heed the *Black Tome,* for terrible indeed is the wrath of Nyarlathotep."

In secret delvings I had found mention of this *"Black Tome":* that legendary manuscript written centuries ago by the great necromancer Alsophocus, who lived in the land of Erongill before ever modern man had taken his first uncertain steps upon the earth.

The mystery was explained; this was indeed the blasphemous *Black Tome.* With this knowledge I eagerly began devouring all the evil lore in that book; runes of binding, naming, and shaping were all within my grasp, and I basked in my new power. New gateways and thresholds were made available, demons of the darkest reaches were at my command; but there were still barriers I dare not pass, those black unplumbed depths of space beyond Fomalhaut, where the ultimate terror lurked, crouching obscenely and gibbering blasphemies older than the stars. In Ludvig Prinn's *De Vermis Mysteriis* and the *Cultes des Goules* of the Comte d'Erlette I sought for elder secrets, but all those ancient mysteries were as nothing compared to the evil knowledge of the esoteric *Black Tome.* This book contained incantations of such awesome power that perhaps even Alhazred himself would have trembled at the contemplation of their use: the citing of Boromir, the foul secrets of the Shining Trapezohedron—that window on time and space—and the calling of great Cthulhu from his watery palace in the ocean-whelmed city of R'lyeh; they were all there, waiting for him who would be brave, or insane, enough to use them.

I was now at the height of my power; time expanded or con-

tracted at my will, and the universe revolved around my ever-growing intellect. My hold on all earthly aspects of life was broken by my occult studies, and my strength became such that I attempted the inconceivable, the passing of that final dreadful threshold, the gateway to the black secrets of beyond, where the Old Ones hold their court and plot their return to the earth from which they were banished by the Elder Gods. In my obtuse vanity I imagined that I—a tiny speck of dust in the vast cosmos of time—could pass through the black gulfs of space beyond the stars, where iniquity and chaos rule, and return with my mind intact and untouched by the aeons-old corruption that dwells there.

Again I made the five concentric circles of fire on the floor, and standing in the innermost one, invoked powers beyond all imagining with an incantation so inconceivably terrible that my hands trembled as I made the mystic passes and symbols. The walls dissolved and the great black wind swept me away through dark gulfs of space and grey regions of matter. I traveled faster than thought, past unlit planets and vistas of unknown realms which swirled and shifted across immensurable distances; the stars flashed by so rapidly that they appeared as gossamer-fine threads of brightness interlaced across the universe, minute shooting stars of brilliance shining against black aether that was darker than the fabled depths of Shung.

A minute may have passed—or perhaps a century—and still I was rushed along. The stars had thinned considerably: they were clustered in groups, as if attempting to find solace in the company of others; nothing else changed. I suffered utter loneliness on that journey; hanging suspended in space and time I appeared stationary, although the speed of my flight must have been phenomenal, and my spirit cried out at the awesome solitude and the dreadful stillness and silence of space; I was as a man entombed in a grim black sepulcher while yet alive. Aeons passed, and then I saw far ahead the last star cluster, the last light for countless millennia; beyond there was nothing but impenetrable blackness, the end of the universe. As on that earlier terrifying occasion I screamed and struggled, but to no avail; I continued on my endless quest through corridors of silence and dread.

For endless eternities I traveled, with no change except the

unsteady beating of my heart. And then it came, a green-tinged light, or perhaps only a suggestion of light; I had passed through an absence of time and matter; I had passed through Limbo. Now I was beyond the universe, unrelatable distances from the cosmos that is normally imagined; I had crossed the final threshold, that last gateway before oblivion. Ahead were the dual suns of my visions, toward which I drifted at what now seemed to be an infinitely slow speed; around these black and green prodigies rotated a single planet; I knew it for the home world, Sharnoth.

Toward this dark cold globe I floated slowly, and as I approached I saw the green-litten plain far below me, upon which rested the gigantic twisted city of my earlier visions, looking misshapen and out of proportion in the unnatural glow. Over the roofs of this dread metropolis I drifted, noting the crumbling masonry and the cracked pillars that stood stark and frightening against the broken black skyline. In all the city not a thing moved, and yet there was a feeling of life there, of evil prurient life that sensed my presence.

As I descended toward that city I felt my physical senses returning; I felt cold, ice-cold, and my fingers were numb and paralyzed. I alighted on the edge of an open space, in the center of which was a gigantic square stone building with a tall arched doorway that yawned blackly like the maw of some terrible primeval creature. From this building radiated an aura of palpable malevolence; I was stunned by the intensity of dread and despair that assailed me, and as I stood outside that monstrous edifice I remembered a small passage from the *Black Tome:*

"In an open space in the center of the city stands the palace of Nyarlathotep. Here all secrets may be learned, although the price of that learning is terrible indeed."

I knew beyond doubt that this was the abode of grim Nyarlathotep. Although the thought of entering that dark structure appalled me beyond measure, I walked unsteadily toward the doorway, my legs guided by some intelligence other than my own. Through that mighty portal I passed and into utter blackness as dark as my unlit journey through the aether to this abominable place. Gradually the impenetrable gloom gave way to the weird green glow that lit the outer planet's surface; and in that sickly

gangrenous light I saw that which no man should ever be condemned to see.

I was in a long hall with a high vaulted ceiling that was supported by pillars of purest ebony; along both sides of this chamber were lined creatures of various nightmare shapes. Khnum the ram-headed was there, as was jackal-headed Anubis and Taueret the Mother, terrible in her obesity. Leprous beings gibbered and leered, and cancerous things eyed me with malignity; through these ranks of amorphous and hellish creatures my body dragged itself against my will. Talons clawed at my arms and legs, and my stomach twisted with revulsion at the touch of diseased flesh. The air was filled with the sound of their titterings and screamings as they danced obscenely and capered around me in a blasphemous ritual of depravity; and at the far end of the hall was the most terrifying sight of all, that dread black colossus of my visions, the inhabitant of the palace, Nyarlathotep.

The Old One looked upon me intently, his gaze tearing at my soul and filling me with a horror so terrible that I screwed my eyes shut so as not to see that terrible visage of unnameable evil. Under that gaze my being began to melt away, as if it was being absorbed by some irresistible force. I was losing what little identity was left to me; my necromantic powers, which I now realized were as nothing compared to the powers of the inhabitant of this dark world, were stripped from me and scattered across the universe, never to be recovered.

Under that gaze my mind and soul were attacked from all sides by fear and loathing; I staggered as he tore at my being, peeling away my life layer by layer. Sheer desperation took hold of me, but I was powerless to fight, unable to hold back the irresistible force that overwhelmed me. Slowly something was drawn out of me, something insubstantial, but totally necessary to my future existence; I could do nothing, in my folly I had taken a step too many, and now I was paying the ultimate penalty. My vision clouded in a myopic haze; images and visions of my home and family swam before my eyes and then vanished as if they had never existed. And then, slowly at first, I felt myself melting, dissolving into nonexistence.

I rose upward, bodiless; above the heads of that nightmare throng I drifted, passing through the cold stone ceiling of the palace that was no obstacle to my progress, and out into the evil light of the planet. I was something less than alive, yet death had been made unavailable to me. The city spread out below me in a panoramic view of splendor and terror, and from that grim black edifice that was the palace of Nyarlathotep I saw a gigantic amorphous mass spreading over the whole metropolis. Slowly it radiated outward until all was hidden from sight, and when it had covered the whole landscape as far as my eyes could survey, it contracted to form once more the black colossus of my visions. Inwardly I shuddered, but as I rose ever higher, away from the city, the scene shrank to microscopic proportions and I viewed the spectacle with a more detached interest.

Gradually the land mass below me took on the appearance of a globe as I journeyed away from the planet and into the black depths of space. Hanging motionless, neither moving toward nor away from the realm of the Ancient One, I witnessed the last act in the drama that had unfolded before me. From the planet's surface there issued forth a beam of light or energy, traveling away from that world and into the starless night, voyaging, I knew, to the planet of my birth. Then all was still, and I was left totally alone in that universe beyond the stars.

My memories fade by the hour; soon I will remember nothing, soon I will be empty of all vestiges of humanity. And as I hang here, suspended in time and space as I shall be for all eternity, I feel something akin to contentment. I have peace here, a greater peace than the dead will ever know; but this peace is disturbed by one barely remembered thought, and I am glad that soon it will be put from my mind forever. I do not remember how I know this, but I am more certain of it than of my own existence. Nyarlathotep no longer walks the surface of Sharnoth, he no longer holds court in his great black palace, for that beam of light that journeyed into the dark aether carried with it the scourge of mankind.

In a small dimly lighted attic room a body stirs and raises itself to its feet. His eyes burn like smoldering black coals, and across his face plays a dreadful enigmatic smile; and as he surveys the roofs of

the city through the small dormer window, his arms rise in a gesture of triumph.

He has passed through the barriers set upon him by the Elder Gods; he is free, free to walk the earth once more, free to twist men's minds and enslave their souls. It was I who gave him his chance of escape, I, through my insane quest for power, supplied him with the means he needed for his return to earth.

Nyarlathotep walks the earth in the guise of a man, for when he took my being and my memories he also took my physical aspect. *My body now houses the immortal essence of Nyarlathotep the Terrible.*

Than Curse the Darkness

David Drake

What of unknown Africa?—H. P. LOVECRAFT

The trees of the rain forest lowered huge and black above the village, dwarfing it and the group of men in its center. The man being tied to the whipping post there was grey-skinned and underfed, panting with his struggles but no match for the pair of burly Forest Guards who held him. Ten more Guards, Baenga cannibals from far to the west near the mouth of the Congo, stood by with spears or Albini rifles. They joked and chattered and watched the huts, hoping the villagers would burst out to try to free their fellow. Then killing would be all right . . .

There was little chance of that. All the men healthy enough to work were in the forest, searching for more trees to slash in a parody of rubber gathering. The Law said that each adult male would bring four kilograms of latex a week to the agents of King Leopold; the Law did not say that the agents would teach the natives how to drain the sap without killing the trees it came from. When the trees died, the villagers would miss their quotas and die themselves, because that too was the Law—though an unwritten one.

There were still many untouched villages farther up the river.

"If you cannot learn to be out in the forest working," said a Baenga who finished knotting the victim to the post with a jerk that itself cut flesh, "we can teach you not to lie down for many weeks."

The Forest Guards wore no uniforms, but in the Congo Basin their good health and sneering pride marked them more surely than clothing could have. The pair who had tied the victim stepped back, nodding to their companion with the chicote. That one grinned, twitching the wooden handle to unfurl the ten-foot lash of square-cut hippopotamus hide. He had already measured the distance.

A naked seven-year-old slipped from the nearest hut. The askaris were turned to catch the expression on the victim's face at the first bite of the chicote, so they did not see the boy. His father jerked upright at the whipping post and screamed, "Samba!" just as the feathery hiss-*crack!* of the whip opened an eight-inch cut beneath his shoulder blades.

Samba screamed also. He was small even for a forest child, spindly and monkey-faced. He was monkey-quick, too, darting among the Guards as they spun. Before anyone could grab him he had wrapped himself around the waist of the man with the whip.

"Wau!" shouted the Guard in surprise and chopped down with the teak whip handle. The angle was awkward. One of his companions helped with a roundhouse swing of his Albini. The steel butt-plate thudded like a mallet on a tent stake, ripping off the boy's left ear and deforming the whole side of his skull. It did not tear him loose from the man he held. Two Forest Guards edged closer, holding their spears near the heads so as not to hit their fellow when they thrust.

The whipped man grunted. One of the chuckling riflemen turned in time to see him break away from the post. The rough cord had cut his wrists before it parted. Blood spattered as he took two steps and clubbed his hands against the whip-wielder's neck. The rifleman shot him through the body.

The Albini bullet was big and slow and had the punch of a medicine ball. The father spun backward and knocked one of the Baengas down with him. Despite the wound he stood again and staggered forward toward Samba. Both the remaining rifles went

off. This time, when the shots had sledged him down, five of the spearmen ran to the body and began stabbing.

The Baenga with the whip got up, leaving Samba on the ground. The boy's eyes were open and utterly empty. Lieutenant Trouville stepped over him to shout, "Cease, you idiots!" at the bellowing knot of spearmen. They parted immediately. Trouville wore a waxed moustache and a white linen suit that looked crisp save for the sweat stains under his arms, but the revolver at his belt was not for show. He had once pistoled a Guard who, drunk with arrogance and palm wine, had started to burn a village which was still producing rubber.

Now the slim Belgian stared at the corpse and grimaced. "Idiots," he repeated to the shamefaced Baengas. "Three bullets to account for, when there was no need at all to fire. Does the quartermaster charge us for spear thrusts as well as bullets?"

The askaris looked at the ground, pretending to be solely concerned with the silent huts or with scratching their insect bites. The man with the chicote coiled it and knelt with his dagger to cut off the dead man's right ear. A thong around his neck carried a dozen others already, brown and crinkled. They would be turned in at Boma to justify the tally of expended cartridges.

"Take the boy's too," Trouville snapped. "He started it, after all. And we'll still be one short."

The patrol marched off, subdued in the face of their lieutenant's wrath. Trouville was muttering, "Like children. No sense at all." After they were gone, a woman stole from the nearest hut and cradled her son. Both of them moaned softly.

Time passed, and in the forest a drum began to beat.

In London, Dame Alice Kilrea bent over a desk in her library and opened the book a messenger had just brought her from Vienna. Her hair was gathered in a mousy bun from which middle age had stripped all but a hint of auburn. She tugged abstractedly at an escaped lock of it as she turned pages, squinting down her prominent nose.

In the middle of the volume she paused. The German heading provided instructions, stating that the formula there given was a means of separating death from the semblance of life. The

remainder of the page and the three that followed it were in phonetic transliteration from a language few scholars would have recognized. Dame Alice did not mouth any of those phrases. A premonition of great trees and a thing greater than the trees shadowed her consciousness as she read silently down the page.

It would be eighteen years before she spoke any part of the formula aloud.

Sergeant Osterman drank palm wine in the shade of a baobab as usual while Baloko oversaw the weighing of the village's rubber. This time the Baenga had ordered M'fini, the chief, to wait for all the other males to be taken first. There was an ominous silence among the villagers as the wiry old man came forward to the table at which Baloko sat, flanked by his fellow Forest Guards.

"Ho, M'fini," Baloko said jovially, "what do you bring us?"

Without speaking, the chief handed over his grey-white sheets of latex. They were layered with plantain leaves. Baloko set the rubber on one pan of his scales, watched it easily overbalance the four-kilogram weight in the other pan. Instead of setting the rubber on the pile gathered by the other villagers and paying M'fini in brass wire, Baloko smiled. "Do you remember, M'fini," the Baenga asked, "what I told you last week when you said to me that your third wife T'sini would never sleep with another man while you lived?"

The chief was trembling. Baloko stood and with his forefinger flicked M'fini's latex out of the weighing pan to the ground. "Bad rubber," he said and grinned. "Stones, trash hidden in it to bring it to the weight. An old man like you, M'fini, must spend too much time trying to satisfy your wives when you should be finding rubber for the King."

"I swear, I swear by the god Iwa who is death," cried M'fini, on his knees and clutching the flapping bulk of rubber as though it were his firstborn, "it is good rubber, all smooth and clean as milk itself!"

Two of the askaris seized M'fini by the elbows and drew him upright. Baloko stepped around the weighing table, drawing his iron-bladed knife as he did so. "I will help you, M'fini, so that you will have more time to find good rubber for King Leopold."

Sergeant Osterman ignored the first of the screams, but when they went on and on he swigged down the last of his calabash and sauntered over to the group around the scales. He was a big man, swarthy and scarred across the forehead by a Tuareg lance while serving with the French in Algeria.

Baloko anticipated the question by grinning and pointing to M'fini. The chief writhed on the ground, his eyes screwed shut and both hands clutched to his groin. Blood welling from between his fingers streaked black the dust he thrashed over. "Him big man, bring no-good rubber," Baloko said. Osterman knew little Bantu, so communication between him and the Guards was generally in pidgin. "Me make him no-good man, bring big rubber now."

The burly Fleming laughed. Baloko moved closer, nudged him in the ribs. "Him wife T'sini, him no need more," the Baenga said. "You, me, all along Guards—we make T'sini happy wife, yes?"

Osterman scanned the encircling villagers whom curiosity had forced to watch and fear now kept from dispersing. In the line, a girl staggered and her neighbors edged away quickly as if her touch might be lethal. Her hair was wound high with brass wire in the fashion of a dignitary's wife, and her body had the slim delight of a willow shoot. Even in the lush heat of the equator, twelve-year-olds look to be girls rather than women.

Osterman, still chuckling, moved toward T'sini. Baloko was at his side.

Time passed. From deep in the forest came rumblings that were neither of man nor of Earth.

In a London study, the bay window was curtained against frost and the grey slush quivering over the streets. The coal fire hissed as Dame Alice Kilrea, fingers tented, dictated to her male amanuensis. Her dress was of good linen but two buttons were missing, unnoticed, from the placket, and the lace front showed signs of lunch bolted in the library . . . "and, thanks to your intervention, the curator of the Special Reading Room allowed me to handle Alhazred myself instead of having a steward turn the pages at my request. I opened the volume three times at random and read the passage on which my index finger fell.

"Before, I had been concerned; now I am certain and terrified.

All the lots were congruent, referring to aspects of the Messenger." She looked down at the amanuensis and said, "Capital on 'Messenger,' John." He nodded.

"Your support has been of untold help; now my need for it is doubled. Somewhere in the jungles of that dark continent the crawling chaos grows and gathers strength. I am armed against it with the formulas that Spiedel found in the library of Kloster-Neuburg just before his death; but that will do us no good unless they can be applied in time. You know, as I do, that only the most exalted influence will pass me into the zone of disruption at the crucial time. That time may yet be years to come, but they are years of the utmost significance to Mankind. Thus I beg your unstinting support not in my name or that of our kinship, but on behalf of life itself.

"Paragraph, John. As for the rest, I am ready to act as others have acted in the past. Personal risk has ever been the coin paid for knowledge of the truth."

The amanuensis wrote with quick, firm strokes. He was angry both with himself and with Dame Alice. Her letter had driven out of his mind thoughts of the boy whom he intended to seduce that evening in Kettners. He had known for some time that he would have to find another situation. The problem was not that Dame Alice was mad. All *women were mad, after all. But her madness had such an insidious plausibility that he was starting to believe it himself.*

As presumably her present correspondent did. And the letter to him would be addressed to "His Royal Highness . . ."

In most places the trees grew down to the water's edge, denser for being able to take sunlight from the side as well as from above. The margins of the shallow backwaters spread after each rain into sheets thick with vegetable richness and as black as the skins of those who lived along them. In drier hours there were sandbanks and easy expanses on which to trade with the forest folk.

Gomes's dugout had already slid back into the slough, leaving in the sand the straight gouge of its keel centered in the blur of bare footprints. A score of natives still clustered around Kaminski's similar craft, fondling his bolts of bright-patterned cloth or chatting

with his paddlers. Then the steamship swung into sight around the wooded headland.

The trees had acted as a perfect muffler for the chuffing engine. With a haste little short of panic, the forest dwellers melted back into concealment. The swarthy Portuguese gave an angry order and his crew shipped their paddles. Emptied of its cargo, the dugout drew only a few inches of water and could, had there been enough warning, have slid up among the tree roots where the two-decked steamer could never have followed.

Throttled down to the point at which its stern wheel made only an occasional slapping, the government craft edged closer to Gomes. On the Upper Kasai it was a battleship, although its beamy twenty-four meters would have aroused little interest in a more civilized part of the world. Awnings protected the hundreds of askaris overburdening the side rails. The captain was European, a blond soft-looking man in a Belgian army uniform. The only other white man visible was the noncom behind the Hotchkiss swivel-mounted at the bow.

"Messieurs Gomes and Kaminski, perhaps?" called the officer as the steamship swung to, a dozen yards from the canoe. He was smiling, using his fingertips to balance his weight on the starboard bridge rail.

"You know who we are, de Vriny—damn you," Gomes shot back. "We have our patent to trade, and we pay our portion to your *Société Cosmopolite.* Now leave us!"

"Pay your portion, yes," de Vriny purred. "Gold dust and gold nuggets. Where do you get such gold, my fine mongrel friends?"

"Carlos, it's all right," called Kaminski, standing in his grounded boat. "Don't become angry—the gentleman is doing his duty to protect trade, that is all." Beneath the sombrero which he had learned to wear in the American Southwest, sweat was boiling off Kaminski. He knew his friend's volcanic temper, knew also the reputation of the blond man who was goading them. Not now! Not on the brink of the success that would gain them entrée to any society in the world!

"Trade?" Gomes was shouting. "What do they know about trade?" He shook his fist at de Vriny and made the canoe rock nervously, so that the plump Angolan woman he had married a

dozen years before put a calming hand on his leg. "You hold a rifle to the head of some poor black, pay him a ha'penny for rubber you sell in Paris for a shilling fourpence. Trade? There would be no gold coming out of this forest if the tribes didn't trust us and get a fair value for the dust they bring!"

"Well, we'll have to explore that," grinned the Belgian. "You see, your patent to trade was issued in error—it seems it was meant for some Gomez who spelled his name with a 'z'—and I have orders to escort you both back to Boma until the matter can be resolved."

Gomes's broad face went saffron. He began to slump like a snow figure on a sunny day. "They couldn't take away our patent because of a spelling mistake their own clerks made?" he whined, but his words were more a sick apostrophe than a real question.

The Belgian answered it anyway. "You think not? Don't you know who appoints the judges of our Congo oh-so-Free State? Not Jews or nigger-wenching Portuguese, I assure you."

Gomes was probably bracing his sagging bulk against the thwart, though he could indeed have been reaching for the Mauser lying across the pack in front of him. Presumably that was what the Baenga thought when he fired the first shot and blew Gomes into the water. Every Forest Guard with a rifle followed in a ragged volley that turned the canoe into a chip dancing on an ornamental fountain. Jets of wood and water and blood spouted upward.

"Christ's blood, you fools!" de Vriny cried. Then, "Well, get the rest of them too!"

Kaminski screamed and tried to follow his paddlers in a race for the tree line, but he was a corpulent man whose boots punched ankle-deep into the soft sand. The natives had no chance either. The Hotchkiss stuttered, knocking down a pair of them as the gunner checked his range. Then, spewing empty cases that hissed as they bounced into the water, the machine gun hosed bullets across the other running men. Kaminski half turned as the black in front of him pitched forward hemorrhaging bright blood from mouth and nose. That desire to see his death coming preserved the trader from it: the bullet that would otherwise have exited through his forehead instead drilled through both upper maxillary bones. Kaminski's eyes popped out as neatly as oysters into a gourmet's silver spoon. His body slapped hard enough to ripple the sand in which it came to rest face up.

The firing stopped. Capsized and sinking, Gomes's shattered dugout was drifting past the bow of the steamer. "I want their packs raised," de Vriny ordered. "Even if you have to dive for them all day. The same with the packs onshore—then burn the canoes."

"And the bodies, master?" asked his Baenga headman.

"Faugh," spat the Belgian. "Why else did the good Lord put crocodiles in this river?"

They did not take Kaminski's ear because it was white and that would attract comment. Even in Boma.

Time passed. Deep in the forest the ground spurted upward like a grapefruit hit by a rifle bullet. Something thicker than a tree bole surged, caught at a nearby human, and flung the body, no longer distinguishable as to sex or race, a quarter mile through the canopy of trees. The earth subsided then, but in places the surface continued to bubble as if made of heated tar.

Five thousand miles away, Dame Alice Kilrea stepped briskly out of her solicitors' office, having executed her will, and ordered her driver on to the Nord Deutscher-Lloyd Dock. Traveling with her in the carriage was a valise containing one ancient book and a bundle of documents thick with wax, ribbons, and gold foil—those trappings and the royal signature beneath. On the seat across from her was the American servant she had engaged only the week before as she closed her London house and discharged the remainder of her establishment. The servant, Sparrow, was a weaselly man with tanned skin and eyes the frosty color of lead cast in too hot a mold. He said little but glanced around frequently; and his fingers writhed as if with separate life.

Occasionally chance would merge the rhythm of mauls and axes splitting wood in a dozen parts of the forest. Then the thunk-*thunk*-THUNK would boom out like a beast approaching from the darkness. Around their fire the officers would pause. The Baengas would chuckle at the joke of it and let the pounding die away. Little by little it would reappear at each separate group of woodsmen, finally to repeat its crescendo.

"Like children," Colonel Trouville said to Dame Alice. The engineer and two sergeants were still aboard the *Archiduchesse Stephanie,* dining apart from the other whites. Color was not the

only measure of class, even in the Congo Basin. "They'll be cutting wood—and drinking their malafou, wretched stuff, to call it palm wine is to insult the word 'wine'—they'll be at it almost till dawn. After a time you'll get used to it. There's nothing, really, to be done, since we can only carry a day's supply of fuel on the steamer. While they of course *could* find and cut enough dry wood by a reasonable hour each night, when one is dealing with the native mind . . ."

De Vriny and Osterman joined in their colonel's deprecating laughter. Dame Alice managed only a preoccupied smile. During the day, as the craft steamed upriver from the Stanley Pool, she had stared at the terrain in which her battle would be joined: heavy forest, here mostly a narrow belt fringing the watercourse but later to become a sprawling, barely penetrable expanse. The trees climbed to the edge of the water and mushroomed over the banks. Dame Alice could imagine that where the stream was less than the Congo's present mile breadth, the branches would meet above in laced blackness.

Now at night, blackness was complete even on the lower river. It chilled her soul. The equatorial sunset was not a curtain of ever-thickening gauze but a knife blade that separated the hemispheres. On this side was death, and neither the laughter of the Baenga askaris nor the goblets of Portuguese wine being drunk around Trouville's campfire could alter that.

Captain de Vriny swigged and eyed the circle. He was a man of middle height with the roundedness of a bear, a seeming softness which tended to mask the cruelty beneath. Across from him, Sparrow dragged on the cigarette he had rolled and lit his face orange. The captain smiled. Only because his mistress, the mad noblewoman, had demanded it did Sparrow sit with the officers. He wore a cheap blue-cotton shirt, buttoned at the cuffs, and denim trousers held up by suspenders. Short and narrow-chested, Sparrow would have looked foolish even without the waist belt and the pair of huge double-action revolvers hanging from it.

Dame Alice was unarmed by contrast. Like the men she wore trousers, hers tucked into low-heeled boots. De Vriny looked at her and, shaping his mocking smile into an expression of friendly interest, said, "It surprises me, Dame Alice, that a woman as well

born and, I am sure, delicate as yourself would want to accompany an expedition against some of the most vicious submen on the globe."

Dame Alice lifted the faintly bulbous tip of her nose and said, "It's no matter of wanting, captain." She eyed de Vriny with mild distaste. "I don't suppose you want to come yourself—unless you like to shoot niggers for lack of better sport? One does unpleasant things because someone must. One has a duty."

"What the captain is suggesting," put in Trouville, "is that there are no lines of battle fixed in this jungle. A spearman may step from around the next tree and snick—end all your plans—learned though we are sure they must be."

"Quite," agreed Dame Alice, "and so I brought Sparrow here—" she nodded to her servant, "—instead of trusting to chance."

All heads turned again toward the little American. In French, though the conversation had previously been in English to include Sparrow, de Vriny said, "I hope he never falls overboard. The load of iron-mongery he carries will sink him twenty meters through the bottom muck before anyone knows he's gone."

Again the Belgians laughed. In a voice as flat and hard as the bottom of a skillet, Sparrow said, "Captain, I'd surely appreciate a look at your nice pistol there."

De Vriny blinked, uncertain whether the question was chance or if the American had understood the joke of which he had been made the butt. Deliberately, his composure never more than dented, the Belgian unhooked the flap of his patent-leather holster and handed over the Browning pistol. It was small and oblong, its blued finish gleaming like wet sealskin in the firelight.

Sparrow rotated the weapon, giving its exterior a brief scrutiny. He thumbed the catch in the grip and stripped out the magazine, holding it so that the light fell on the uppermost of its stack of small brass cartridges.

"You are familiar with automatic pistols, then?" asked Trouville in some surprise at the American's quick understanding of a weapon rarely encountered on his native continent.

"Naw," Sparrow said, slipping the magazine back home. His fingers moved like those of a pianist performing scales. "It's a gun, though. I can generally figure how a gun works."

"You should get one like it," de Vriny said, smiling as he took the weapon back from Sparrow. "You would find it far more comfortable to carry than those—yours."

"Carry a toy like that?" the gunman asked. His voice parodied amazement. "Not me, captain. When I shoot a man, I want him dead. I want a gun what'll do the job if I do mine, and these forty-fives do me jist fine, every time I use 'em." Sparrow grinned then, for the first time. De Vriny felt his own hands fumble as they tried to reholster the Browning. Suddenly he knew why the askaris gave Sparrow so wide a berth.

Dame Alice coughed. The sound shattered the ice that had been settling over the men. Without moving, Sparrow faded into the background to become an insignificant man with narrow shoulders and pistols too heavy for his frame.

"Tell me what you know about the rebellion," the Irishwoman asked quietly in a liquid, attractive voice. Her features led one to expect a nasal whinny. Across the fire came snores from Osterman, a lieutenant by courtesy, but in no other respect an officer. He had ignored the wine for the natives' own malafou. The third calabash had slipped from his numb fingers, dribbling only a stain onto the ground as the bearded Fleming lolled back in his camp chair.

Trouville exchanged glances with de Vriny, then shrugged and said, "What is there ever to know about a native rebellion? Every once in a while a few of them shoot at our steamers, perhaps chop a concessionaire or two when he comes to collect the rubber and ivory. Then we get the call—" the colonel's gesture embraced the invisible *Archiduchesse Stephanie* and the dozen Baenga canoes drawn up on the bank beside her. "We surround the village, shoot the niggers we catch, and burn the huts. End of rebellion."

"And what about their gods?" Dame Alice pressed, bobbing her head like a long-necked diving bird.

The colonel laughed. De Vriny patted his holster and said, "*We* are God in the Maranga Concession."

They laughed again and Dame Alice shivered. Osterman snorted awake, blew his nose loudly on the blue sleeve of his uniform coat. "There's a new god back in the bush, yes," the Fleming muttered.

The others stared at him as if he were a frog declaiming Shakespeare. "How would you know?" de Vriny demanded in

irritation. "The only Bantu words you know are 'drink' and 'woman.' "

"I can talk to B'loko, can't I?" the lieutenant retorted in a voice that managed to be offended despite its slurring. "Good ol' Baloko, we been together long time, long time. Better fella than some white bastards I could name . . ."

Dame Alice leaned forward, the firelight bright in her eyes. "Tell me about the new god," she demanded. "Tell me its name."

"Don' remember the name," Osterman muttered, shaking his head. He was waking up now, surprised and a little concerned to find himself center of the attention not only of his superiors but also of the foreigner who had come to them in Boma as they readied their troops. Trouville had tried to shrug Dame Alice aside, but the Irishwoman had displayed a patent signed by King Leopold himself . . . "Baloko said it, but I forget," he continued, "and he was drunk too, or I don' think he would have said. He's afraid of that one."

"What's that?" Trouville interrupted. He was a practical man, willing to accept and use the apparent fact that Osterman's piggish habits had made him a confidant of the askaris. "One of our Baenga headmen is afraid of a Bakongo god?"

Osterman shook his greying head again. Increasingly embarrassed but determined to explain, he said, "Not their god, not like that. The Bakongos, they live along the river, they got their fetishes just like any niggers. But back in the bush, there's another village. Not a tribe; a few men from here, a few women from there. Been gitting together one at a time, a couple a year, for Christ . . . maybe twenty years. They got the new god, they're the ones who started the trouble. They say you don' have to pay your rubber to the white men, you don' have to pray to any fetish. Their god gonna come along and eat up everything. Any day now."

Osterman rubbed his eyes blearily, then shouted, "Boy! Malafou!"

A Krooman in breeches and swallow-tailed coat scurried over with another calabash. Osterman slurped down the sweet brain-stunning fluid in three great gulps. He began humming something meaningless to himself. The empty container fell, and after a time the Fleming began to snore again.

The other men looked at one another. "Do you suppose he's right?" the captain asked Trouville.

"He could be," the slim colonel admitted with a shrug. "They might well have told him all that. He's not much better than a nigger himself despite the color of his skin."

"He's right," said Dame Alice, looking at the fire and not at her companions. Ash crumbled in its heart and a knot of sparks clawed toward the forest canopy. "Except for one thing. Their god isn't new, it isn't new at all. Back when the world was fresh and steaming and the reptiles flew above the swamps, it wasn't new either. The Bakongo name for it is Ahtu. Alhazred called it Nyarlathotep when he wrote twelve hundred years ago." She paused, staring down at her hands tented above the thin yellow wine left in her goblet.

"Oh, then you *are* a missionary," de Vriny exclaimed, glad to find a category for the puzzling woman. Her disgusted glance was her reply. "Or a student of religions?" de Vriny tried again.

"I study religions only as a doctor studies diseases," Dame Alice said. She looked at her companions. Their eyes were uncomprehending. "I . . ." she began, but how did she explain her life to men who had no conception of devotion to an ideal? Her childhood had been turned inward to dreams and the books lining the cold library of the Grange. Inward, because her outward body was that of an ugly duckling who everyone knew had no chance of becoming a swan. And from her dreams and a few of the very oldest books had come hints of what it is that nibbles at the minds of all men in the darkness. Her father could not answer or even understand her question, nor could the vicar. She had grown from a persistent child into an iron-willed woman who lavished on her fancy energies which her relatives felt would have been better spent on the Church . . . or, perhaps, on breeding spaniels.

And as she had grown, she had met others who felt and *knew* what she did.

She looked around again. "Captain," she said simply, "I have been studying certain—myths—for most of my life. I've come to believe that some of them contain truths or hints of truths. There are powers in the universe. When you know the truth of those powers, you have the choice of joining them and working to bring

about their coming—for they are unstoppable—or you can fight, knowing there is no ultimate hope for your cause and going ahead anyway. Mine was the second choice." Drawing herself even more rigidly straight, she added, "Someone has always been willing to stand between Mankind and Chaos. As long as there have been men."

De Vriny snickered audibly. Trouville gave him a dreadful scowl and said to Dame Alice, "And you are searching for the god these rebels pray to?"

"Yes. The one they call Ahtu."

From the score of firelit glades around them came the thunk-*thunk*-THUNK of ax and wedge, then the booming native laughter.

"Osterman and de Vriny should have their men in position by now," said the colonel, pattering his fingertips on the bridge rail as he scanned the wooded shoreline. "It's about time for me to land, too."

"Us to land," Dame Alice said. She squinted, straining forward to see the village the Belgian force was preparing to assault. "Where are the huts?" she finally asked.

"Oh, they're set back from the shore some hundreds of meters," Trouville explained offhandedly. "The trees hide them, but the fish weirs—" he pointed out the lines of upright sticks rippling foam tracks down the current, "—are a good enough guide. We've stayed anchored here in the stream so that the villagers would be watching us while the forces from the canoes downriver surrounded them."

Muffled but unmistakable, a shot thudded in the forest. A volley followed, drawing with it faint screams.

"Bring us in," ordered the colonel, tugging at the left half of his moustache in his only sign of nervousness.

The *Archiduchesse* grated as her bow nuzzled into the trees, but there was no time now for delicacy. Forest Guards streamed past the Hotchkiss and down the gangplank into the jungle. The gunner was crouched behind the metal shield that protected him only from the front. Tree boles and their shadows now encircled him on three sides.

"I suppose it will be safe enough on the shore," said Trouville,

adjusting his harness as if for parade instead of battle. "You can accompany me if you wish—and if you stay close by."

"All right," said Dame Alice, as if she would not have come without his permission. Her hand clutched not a pistol but an old black-bound book. "If we're where you think, though, you'll need me very badly before you're through here. Especially if it takes till sunset." She swung down the companionway behind Trouville. Last of all from the bridge came Sparrow, grimy and small and deadly as a shark.

The track that wound among the trunks was a narrow line hammered into the loam by horny feet. It differed from a game trail only in that shoulders had cleared the foliage to greater height. The Baengas strode it with some discomfort—they were a Lower Congo tribe, never quite at home in the upriver jungles. Trouville's step was deliberately nonchalant, while Dame Alice tramped gracelessly and gave an accurate impression of disinterest in her physical surroundings. Sparrow's eyes twitched warily as they always did. He carried his hands waist-high and over his belted revolvers.

The clearing was an anticlimax. The score of huts in the center had been protected by a palisade of sorts, but the first rush of the encircling Baengas had smashed great gaps in it. Three bodies, all of them women, lay spilled in the millet fields outside. Within the palisade were more bodies, one of them an askari with a long iron spearhead crosswise through his rib cage. About a hundred villagers, quavering but alive, had been forced together in the compound in front of the chief's beehive hut by the time the force from the steamer arrived. Several huts were already burning, sending up shuddering columns of black smoke.

Trouville stared at the mass of prisoners, solidified by fear into the terrible stinking apathy of sheep in the slaughtering chute. "Yes . . ." he murmured appreciatively. His eyes had already taken in the fact that the fetishes which normally stood to the right or left of a well-to-do family's doorway were absent in this village. "Now," he asked, "who will tell me about the new god you worship?"

As black against a darkness, so the new fear rippling across faces already terrified. Near the Belgian stood an old man, face knobbed by a pattern of ritual scarring. He was certainly a priest, though

without a priest's usual trappings of feathers and cowrie shells. Haltingly he said, "Lord, l-lord, we have no new gods."

"You lie!" cried Trouville. His gloved fingertip sprang out like a fang. "You worship Ahtu, you lower-than-the-apes, and he is a poor weak god whom our medicine will break like a stick!"

The crowd moaned and surged backward from the colonel. The old priest made no sound at all, only began to tremble violently. Trouville looked at the sky. "Lieutenant Osterman," he called to his burly subordinate, "we have an hour or so till sunset. I trust you can get this carrion—" he pointed to the priest, "—to talk by then. He seems to know something. As for the rest . . . de Vriny, take charge of getting the irons on them. We'll decide what to do with them later."

The grinning Fleming slapped Baloko on the back. Each seized one of the priest's arms and began to drag him toward the shade of a baobab tree. Osterman started to detail the items he needed from the steamer, and Baloko, enthusiastic as a child helping his father to fix a machine, rattled the list off in translation to a nearby askari.

The evening breeze brought a hint of relief from the heat and the odors, the oily scent of fear and the others more easily identified. Osterman had set an overturned bucket over the plate of burning sulphur to smother it out when no longer needed. Reminded by Trouville, he had also covered the brush of twigs he had been using to spread the gluey flames over the priest's genitals. Then, his work done, he and Baloko had strolled away to add a bowl of malafou to the chill, "Thank you, lieutenant," which was all the praise Trouville had offered for their success.

The subject of their ministrations—eyes closed, wrists and ankles staked to the ground—was talking. "They come, we let them," he said, so softly and quickly that Trouville had to strain to mutter out a crude translation for Dame Alice. "They live in forest, they not bother our fish. Forest here evil, we think. We feel god there, we not understand, not know him. All right that anybody want, wants to live in forest."

The native paused, turning his head to hawk phlegm into the vomit already pooled beside him. Dame Alice squatted on the

ground and riffled the pages of her book unconsciously. She had refused to use the downturned bucket for a stool. Sparrow paid only scant attention to the prisoner. His eyes kept picking across the clearing, thick and raucous now with Baengas and their leg-shackled prisoners; the men and the trees beyond them. Sparrow's face shown with the frustrated intensity of a man certain of an ambush but unable to forestall it. Shadows were beginning to turn the dust the color of the noses of his bullets.

The priest continued. The rhythms of his own language were rich and firm, reminding Dame Alice that behind Trouville's choppy French were the words of a man of dignity and power—before they had brought him down. "All of them are cut men. First come boy, no have ears. His head look me, like melon that is dropped. Him, he hear god Ahtu calling do what god tell him.

"One man, he not have, uh, manhood. God orders, boy tells him . . . he, uh, he quickens the ground where Ahtu sleeps.

"One man, he only half face, no eyes . . . him sees, he sees Ahtu, he tells what becoming, uh, is coming. He—"

The priest's voice rose into a shrill tirade that drowned out the translation. Trouville dispassionately slapped him to silence, then used a rag of bark cloth in his gloved hand to wipe blood and spittle from the fellow's mouth. "There are only three rebels in the forest?" he asked. If he realized that the priest had claimed the third man was white, he was ignoring it completely.

"No, no . . . many men, a ten of tens, maybe more. Before we not see, not see cut men only now and now, uh, again, in the forest. Now god is ripe and, uh, his messengers . . ."

Only a knife edge of sun could have lain across the horizon, for the whole clearing was darkening to burnt umber where it had color at all. The ground shuddered. The native pegged to it began to scream.

"Earthquake?" Trouville blurted in surprise and concern. Rain-forest trees have no deep taproots to keep them upright, so a strong wind or an earth tremor will scatter giants like straw in the threshing yard.

Dame Alice's face showed concern not far from panic, but she wholly ignored the baobab tottering above them. Her book was open and she was rolling out syllables from it. She paused, turned

so that the pages opened to the fading sun; but her voice stumbled again, and the earth pitched. It was sucking in under the priest whose fear so gripped him that, having screamed out his breath, he was unable to draw another one.

"Light!" Dame Alice cried. "For Jesus' sake, light!"

If Trouville heard the demand against the litany of fear rising from the blacks, guards, and prisoners alike, he did not understand. Sparrow, his face a bone mask, dipped into his shirt pocket and came out with a match which he struck alight with the thumb of the hand that held it. The blue flame pulsed above the page, steady as the ground's motion would let the gunman keep it. Its light painted Dame Alice's tight bun as she began to cry words of no meaning to any of her human audience.

The ground gathered itself into a tentacle that spewed up from beneath the prisoner and hurled him skyward in its embrace. One hand and wrist, still tied to a deep stake, remained behind.

Two hundred feet above the heads of the others, the tentacle stopped and exploded as if it had struck a plate of lightning. Dame Alice had fallen backward when the ground surged, but though the book dropped from her hands she had been able to shout out the last words of what was necessary. The blast that struck the limb of earth shattered also the baobab. Sparrow, the only man able to stand on the bucking earth, was knocked off his feet by the shock wave. He hit and rolled, still gripping the two handguns he had leveled at the afterimage of the light-shot tentacle.

Afterward they decided that the burned-meat odor must have been the priest, because no one else was injured or missing. Nothing but a track of sandy loam remained of the tentacle, spilled about the rope of green glass formed of it by the false lightning's heat.

Colonel Trouville rose, coughing at the stench of ozone as sharp as that of the sulphur it had displaced. "De Vriny!" he called. "Get us one of these devil-bred swine who can guide us to the rebel settlement!"

"And who'll you be finding to guide you, having seen this?" demanded the Irishwoman, kneeling now and brushing dirt from the fallen volume as if more than life depended on her care.

"Seen?" repeated Trouville. "And what have they seen?" The fury

in his voice briefly stilled the night birds. "They will not guide us because one of them was crushed, pulled apart, burned? And have I not done as much myself a hundred times? If we need to feed twenty of them their own livers, faugh! the twenty-first will lead us—or the one after him will. This rebellion must end!"

"So it must," whispered Dame Alice, rising like a champion who has won a skirmish but knows the real test is close at hand. She no longer appeared frail. "So it must, if there's to be men on this earth in a month's time."

The ground shuddered a little.

Nothing moved in the forest but the shadows flung by the dancers around the fire. The flames spread them capering across the leaves and tree trunks, distorted and misshapen by the flickering.

They were no more misshapen than the dancers themselves as the light displayed them.

From a high quivering scaffold of njogi cane, three men overlooked the dance. They were naked so that their varied mutilations were utterly apparent. De Vriny started at the sight of the one whose pale body gleamed red and orange in the firelight; but he was a faceless thing, unrecognizable. Besides, he was much thinner than the plump trader the Belgian had once known.

The clearing was a quarter-mile depression in the jungle. Huts, mere shanties of withe-framed leaves rather than the beehives of a normal village, huddled against one edge of it. If all had gone well, Trouville's askaris were deployed beyond the hut with Osterman's group closing the third segment of the ring. All should be ready to charge at the signal. There would not even be a fence to delay the spearmen.

Nor were there crops of any kind. The floor of the clearing was smooth and hard, trampled into that consistency by thousands of ritual patterns like the one now being woven around the fire. In, out, and around—crop-limbed men and women who hobbled if they had but one foot; who staggered, hunched, and twisted from the whippings that had left bones glaring out of knots of scar tissue; who followed by touch the motions of the dancers ahead of them if their own eye sockets were blank holes.

There was no music, but the voices of those who had tongues drummed in a ceaseless chant: "Ahtu! Ahtu!"

"The scum of the earth," whispered de Vriny. "Low foreheads, thick jaws; skin the color of a monkey's under its hair. Your Mr. Darwin was right about man's descent from the apes, Dame Alice—if these brutes are, in fact, kin to man."

"Not *my* Mr. Darwin," the Irishwoman replied.

The Krooman steward, in loincloth now instead of tailcoat, was behind the three whites with a hissing bull's-eye lantern. Dame Alice feared to raise its shutter, though, and instead ran her fingers nervously along the margins of her open book. Three other blacks, armed only with knives, stood by de Vriny as couriers in case the whistle signals were not enough. The rest of the captain's force was invisible, spread to either side of him along the margin of the trees.

"Don't like this," Sparrow said, shifting his revolvers a millimeter in their holsters to make sure they were free in the leather. "Too many niggers around. Some of 'em are apt to be part of the mob down there, coming back late from a hunt or something. Any nigger comes running up in the dark and I'm gonna let 'im hold one."

"You'll shoot no one without my order," de Vriny snapped. "The colonel may be sending orders, Osterman may need help—this business is going to be dangerous enough without some fool killing our own messengers. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you talking." A stray glimmer of firelight caught the throbbing vein in Sparrow's temple.

Rather than retort, the Belgian turned back to the clearing. After a moment he said, "I don't see this god you're looking for."

Dame Alice's mouth quirked. "You mean you don't see a fetish," she said. "You won't. Ahtu isn't a fetish."

"Well, what kind of damned god *is* he then?" de Vriny asked in irritation.

The Irishwoman considered the question seriously, then said, "Maybe they aren't gods at all, him and the others . . . it and the others Alhazred wrote of. Call them cancers, spewed down on earth ages ago. Not life, surely, not even *things*—but able to shape, to misshape things into a semblance of life and to grow and to grow and to grow."

"But grow into *what,* madam?" de Vriny pressed.

"Into what?" Dame Alice echoed sharply. Her eyes flashed with the sudden arrogance of her bandit ancestors, sure of themselves if of nothing else in the world. "Into this earth, this very planet, if unchecked. And we here will know tonight whether they can be checked yet again."

"Then you seriously believe," de Vriny began, sucking at his florid moustache to find a less offensive phrasing. "You believe that the Bakongos are worshiping a creature which would, will, begin to rule the world if you don't stop it?"

Dame Alice looked at him. "Not 'rule,' the world," she corrected. "Rather *become* the world. This thing, this seed awakened in the jungle by the actions of men more depraved and foolish than I can easily believe . . . this existence, unchecked, would permeate our world like mold through a loaf of bread, until the very planet became a ball of viscid slime hurtling around the sun and stretching tentacles toward Mars. Yes, I believe that, captain. Didn't you see what was happening last night in the village?"

The Belgian only scowled in perplexity.

A silver note sang from across the broad clearing. De Vriny grunted, then put his long bosun's pipe to his lips and sounded his reply even as Osterman's signal joined it.

The dance broke apart as the once-solid earth began to dimple beneath men's weight.

The Forest Guards burst out of the tree line with cries punctuated by the boom of Albini rifles. "Light!" ordered Dame Alice in a crackling alto, and the lantern threw its bright fan across the book she held. The scaffolding moved, seemed to sink straight into ground turned fluid as water. At the last instant the three figures on it linked hands and shouted, "Ahtu!" in triumph. Then they were gone.

In waves as complex as the sutures of a skull, motion began to extend through the soil of the clearing. A shrieking Baenga, spear raised to thrust into the nearest dancer, ran through one of the quivering lines. It rose across his body like the breaking surf, and he shrieked again in a different tone. For a moment his black-headed spear bobbled on the surface. Then it, too, was engulfed with a faint plop that left behind only a slick of blood.

Dame Alice started chanting in a singsong, molding a tongue

meant for liquid Irish to a language not meant for tongues at all. A tremor in the earth drove toward her and those about her. It had the hideous certainty of a torpedo track. Sparrow's hands flexed. De Vriny stood stupefied, the whistle still at his lips and his pistol drawn but forgotten.

The three couriers looked at the oncoming movement, looked at each other . . . disappeared among the trees. Eyeballs white, the Krooman dropped his lantern and followed them. Quicker even than Sparrow, Dame Alice knelt and righted the lantern with her foot. She acted without missing a syllable of the formula stamped into her memory by long repetition.

Three meters away, a saw-blade of white fire ripped across the death advancing through the soil. The weaving trail blasted back toward the center of the clearing like an ant run blown by carbon disulphide.

De Vriny turned in amazement to the woman crouched so that the lantern glow would fall across the black-lettered pages of her book. "You did it!" he cried. "You stopped the thing!"

The middle of the clearing raised itself toward the night sky, raining down fragments of the bonfire that crowned it. Humans screamed—some at the touch of the fire, others as tendrils extruding from the towering center wrapped about them.

Dame Alice continued to chant.

The undergrowth whispered. "Behind you, captain," Sparrow said. His face had a thin smile. De Vriny turned, calling a challenge. The brush parted and a few feet in front of him were seven armed natives. The nearest walked on one foot and a stump. His left hand gripped the stock of a Winchester carbine; its barrel was supported by his right wrist since there was a knob of ancient scar tissue where the hand should have been attached.

De Vriny raised his Browning and slapped three shots into the native's chest. Blood spots sprang out against the dark skin like additional nipples. The black coughed and jerked the trigger of his own weapon. The carbine was so close to the Belgian's chest that its muzzle flash ignited the linen of his shirt as it blew him backward.

Sparrow giggled and shot the native through the bridge of his nose, snapping his head around as if a horse had kicked him in the face. The other blacks moved. Sparrow killed them all in a ripple of fire that would have done justice to a Gatling gun. The big

revolvers slammed alternately, Sparrow using each orange muzzle flash to light a target for his other hand. He stopped shooting only when there was nothing left before his guns; nothing save a writhing tangle of bodies too freshly dead to be still. The air was thick with white smoke and the fecal stench of death. Behind the laughing gunman, Dame Alice Kilrea continued to chant.

Pulsing, rising, higher already than the giants of the forest ringing it, the fifty-foot-thick column of what had been earth dominated the night. A spear of false lightning jabbed and glanced off, freezing the chaos below for the eyes of any watchers. From the base of the main neck had sprouted a ring of tendrils, ruddy and golden and glittering overall with inclusions of quartz. They snaked among the combatants as flexible as silk; when they closed, they ground together like millstones and spattered blood a dozen yards up the sides of the central column. The tendrils made no distinction between Forest Guards and the others who had danced for Ahtu.

Dame Alice stopped. The column surged and bent against the sky, its peak questing like the muzzle of a hunting dinosaur. Sparrow hissed, "For the love of *God,* bitch!" and raised a revolver he knew would be useless.

Dame Alice spoke five more words and flung her book down. The ground exploded in gouts of cauterizing flame.

It was not a hasty thing. Sparks roared and blazed as if the clearing were a cauldron into which gods poured furnaces of molten steel. The black column that was Ahtu twisted hugely, a cobra pinned to a bonfire. There was no heat, but the light itself seared the eyes and made bare flesh crawl.

With the suddenness of a torn puffball, Ahtu sucked inward. The earth sagged as though in losing its ability to move it had also lost all rigidity. At first the clearing had been slightly depressed. Now the center of it gaped like a drained boil, a twisted cylinder fed by the collapsing veins it had earlier shot through the earth.

When the blast came it was the more stunning for having followed a relative silence. There was a rending crash as something deep in the ground gave way; then a thousand tons of rock and soil blew skyward with volcanic power behind them. Where the earth had trembled with counterfeit life, filaments jerked along after the main mass. In some places they ripped the surface as much as a mile into the forest. After a time, dust and gravel began to strinkle down

on the trees, the lighter particles marking the canopy with a long flume downwind while larger rocks pattered through layer after layer of the hindering leaves. But it was only dirt, no different from the soil for hundreds of miles around into which trees thrust their roots and drew life from what was lifeless.

"Goddamn if you didn't kill it," Sparrow whispered, gazing in wonderment at the new crater. There was no longer any light but that of the hooked moon to silver the carnage and the surprising number of Forest Guards straggling back from the jungle to which they had fled. Some were beginning to joke as they picked among the bodies of their comrades and the dancers.

"I didn't kill anything," Dame Alice said. Her voice was hoarse, muffled besides by the fact that she was cradling her head on her knees. "Surgeons don't kill cancers. They cut out what they can find, knowing that there's always a little left to grow and spread again . . ."

She raised her head. From across the clearing, Colonel Trouville was stepping toward them. He was as dapper and cool as always, skirting the gouge in the center, skirting also the group of Baengas with a two-year-old they must have found in one of the huts. One was holding the child by the ankles to drain all the blood through its slit throat while his companions gathered firewood.

"But without the ones who worshiped it," Dame Alice went on, "without the ones who drew the kernel up to a growth that would have been . . . the end of man, the end of life here in any sense you or I or those out there would have recognized it . . . It'll be more than our lifetimes before Ahtu returns. I wonder why those ones gave themselves so wholly to an evil that would have destroyed them first?"

Sparrow giggled again. Dame Alice turned from the approaching Belgian to see if the source of the humor showed on the gunman's face.

"It's like this," Sparrow said. "If they was evil, I guess that makes us good. I'd never thought of that before, is all."

He continued to giggle. The laughter of the Baengas echoed him from the clearing as they thrust the child down on a rough spit. Their teeth had been filed to points which the moonlight turned to jewels.

The Faces at Pine Dunes

Ramsey Campbell

When his parents began arguing Michael went outside. He could still hear them through the thin wall of the trailer. "We needn't stop yet," his mother was pleading.

"We're stopping," his father said. "It's time to stop wandering."

But why should she want to leave here? Michael gazed about the trailer park—the Pine Dunes Caravanserai. The metal village of trailers surrounded him, cold and bright in the November afternoon. Beyond the dunes ahead he heard the dozing of the sea. On the three remaining sides a forest stood: remnants of autumn, ghosts of color, were scattered over the trees; distant branches displayed a last golden mist of leaves. He inhaled the calm. Already he felt at home.

His mother was persisting. "You're still young," she told his father.

She's kidding! Michael thought. Perhaps she was trying flattery. "There are places we haven't seen," she said wistfully.

"We don't need to. We need to be here."

The slowness of the argument, the voices muffled by the metal wall, frustrated Michael; he wanted to be sure that he was staying

here. He hurried into the trailer. "I want to stay here. Why do we have to keep moving all the time?"

"Don't come in here talking to your mother like that," his father shouted.

He should have stayed out. The argument seemed to cramp the already crowded space within the trailer; it made his father's presence yet more overwhelming. The man's enormous wheezing body sat plumped on the couch, which sagged beneath his weight; his small frail wife was perched on what little of the couch was unoccupied, as though she'd been squeezed tiny to fit. Gazing at them, Michael felt suffocated. "I'm going out," he said.

"Don't go out," his mother said anxiously; he couldn't see why. "We won't argue any more. You stay in and do something. Study."

"Let him be. The sooner he meets people here, the better."

Michael resented the implication that by going out he was obeying his father. "I'm just going out for a walk," he said. The reassurance might help her; he knew how it felt to be overborne by the man.

At the door he glanced back. His mother had opened her mouth, but his father said, "We're staying. I've made my decision." And he'd lie in it, Michael thought, still resentful. All the man could do was lie there, he thought spitefully; that was all he was fat for. He went out, sniggering. The way his father had gained weight during the past year, his coming to rest in this trailer park reminded Michael of an elephant's arrival at its graveyard.

It was colder now. Michael turned up the hood of his anorak. Curtains were closing and glowing. Trees stood, intricately precise, against a sky like translucent papery jade. He began to climb the dunes toward the sea. But over there the sky was blackened; a sea dark as mud tossed nervously and flopped across the bleak beach. He turned toward the forest. Behind him sand hissed through grass.

The forest shifted in the wind. Shoals of leaves swam in the air, at the tips of webs of twigs. He followed a path which led from the Caravanserai's approach road. Shortly the diversity of trees gave way to thousands of pines. Pine cones lay like wattled eggs on beds of fallen needles. The spread of needles glowed deep orange in the early evening, an orange tapestry displaying rank upon rank of slender pines, dwindling into twilight.

The path led him on. The pines were shouldered out by stouter trees, which reached overhead, tangling. Beyond the tangle the blue of the sky grew deeper; a crescent moon slid from branch to branch. Bushes massed among the trunks; they grew higher and closer as he pushed through. The curve of the path would take him back toward the road.

The ground was turning softer underfoot. It sucked his feet in the dark. The shrubs had closed over him now; he could hardly see. He struggled between them, pursuing the curve. Leaves rubbed together rustling at his ear, like desiccated lips; their dry dead tongues rattled. All at once the roof of the wooden tunnel dropped sharply. To go farther he would have to crawl.

He turned with difficulty. On both sides thorns caught his sleeves; his dark was hemmed in by two ranks of dim captors. It was as though midnight had already fallen here, beneath the tangled arches; but the dark was solid and clawed. Overhead, netted fragments of night sky illuminated the tunnel hardly at all.

He managed to extricate himself, and hurried back. But he had taken only a few steps when his way was blocked by hulking spiky darkness. He dodged to the left of the shrub, then to the right, trying irritably to calm his heart. But there was no path. He had lost his way in the dark. Around him dimness rustled, chattering.

He began to curse himself. What had possessed him to come in here? Why on earth had he chosen to explore so late in the day? How could the woods be so interminable? He groped for openings between masses of thorns. Sometimes he found them, though often they would not admit his body. The darkness was a maze of false paths.

Eventually he had to return to the mouth of the tunnel and crawl. Unseen moisture welled up from the ground, between his fingers. Shrubs leaned closer as he advanced, poking him with thorns. His skin felt fragile, and nervously unstable; he burned, but his heat often seemed to break, flooding him with the chill of the night.

There was something even less pleasant. As he crawled, the leaning darkness—or part of it—seemed to move beside him. It was as though someone were pacing him, perhaps on all fours, outside the tunnel. When he halted, so did the pacing. It would reach the end of the tunnel just as he did.

Nothing but imagination, helped by the closely looming tree trunks beyond the shrubs. Apart from the creaking of wood and the rattling sway of leaves, there was no sound beyond the tunnel—certainly none of pacing. He crawled. The cumbersome moist sounds that accompanied the pacing were those of his own progress. But he crawled more slowly, and the darkness imitated him. Wasn't the thorny tunnel dwindling ahead? It would trap him. Suddenly panicking, he began to scramble backward.

The thorns hardly hindered his retreat. He must have broken them down. He emerged gasping, glad of the tiny gain in light. Around him shrubs pressed close as ever. He stamped his way back along what he'd thought was his original path. When he reached the hindrance he smashed his way between the shrubs, struggling and snarling, savage with panic, determined not to yield. His hands were torn; he heard cloth rip. Well, the thorns could have that.

When at last he reached an open space his panic sighed loudly out of him. He began to walk as rapidly as seemed safe, toward where he remembered the road to be. Overhead black nets of branches turned, momentarily catching stars. Once, amid the enormous threshing of the woods, he thought he heard a heavy body shoving through the nearby bushes. Good luck to whoever it was. Ahead, in the barred dark, hung little lighted windows. He had found the trailer park, but only by losing his way.

He was home. He hurried into the light, smiling. In the metal alleys pegged shirts hung neck down, dripping; they flapped desperately on the wind. The trailer was dark. In the main room, lying on the couch like someone's abandoned reading, was a note: OUT, BACK LATER. His mother had added DON'T GO TO BED TOO LATE.

He'd been looking forward to companionship. Now the trailer seemed too brightly lit, and false: a furnished tin can. He made himself coffee, leafed desultorily through his floppy paperbacks, opened and closed a pocket chess set. He poked through his box of souvenirs: shells, smooth stones; a minute Bible; a globe of synthetic snow within which a huge vague figure, presumably meant to be a snowman, loomed outside a house; a dead flashlight fitted with a set of clip-on Halloween faces; a dull grey ring whose metal swelled into a bulge over which colors crawled slowly, changing.

The cardboard box was full of memories: the Severn valley, the Welsh hills, the garishly glittering mile of Blackpool; he couldn't remember where the ring had come from. But the memories were dim tonight, uninvolving.

He wandered into his parents' room. It looked to him like a secondhand store for clothes and toiletries. He found his father's large metal box, but it was locked as usual. Well, Michael didn't want to read his old books anyway. He searched for contraceptives, but as he'd expected, there were none. If he wasn't mistaken, his parents had no need for them. Poor buggers. He'd never been able to imagine how, out of proportion as they seemed to be, they had begot him.

Eventually he went out. The incessant rocking of the trailer, its hollow booming in the wind, had begun to infuriate him. He hurried along the road between the pines; wind sifted through needles. On the main road buses ran to Liverpool. But he'd already been there several times. He caught a bus to the opposite terminus.

The bus was almost empty. A few passengers rattled in their lighted pod over the bumpy country roads. Darkness streamed by, sometimes becoming dim hedges. The scoop of the headlamps set light to moths, and once to a squirrel. Ahead the sky glowed, as if with a localized dawn. Lights began to emerge from behind silhouetted houses; streets opened, brightening.

The bus halted in a square, beside a village cross. The passengers hurried away, snuggling into their collars. Almost at once the street was deserted, the bus extinguished. Folded awnings clattered, tugged by the wind. Perhaps after all he should have gone into the city. He was stranded here for—he read the timetable: God, two hours until the last bus.

He wandered among the grey stone houses. Streetlamps glared silver; the light coated shop windows, behind whose flowering of frost he could see faint ghosts of merchandise. Curtains shone warmly, chimneys smoked. His heels clanked mechanically on the cobbles. Streets, streets, empty streets. Then the streets became crowded, with gleaming parked cars. Ahead, on the wall of a building, was a plaque of colored light: FOUR IN THE MORNING. A club.

He hesitated, then he descended the steps. Maybe he wouldn't fit

in with the brand-new sports car set, but anything was better than wandering the icy streets. At the bottom of the stone flight, a desk stood beside a door to colored dimness. A broken-nosed man wearing evening dress sat behind the desk. "Are you a member, sir?" he said in an accent that was almost as convincing as his suit.

Inside was worse than Michael had feared. On a dance floor couples turned lethargically, glittering and changing color like toy dancers. Clumps of people stood shouting at each other in county accents, swaying and laughing; some stared at him as they laughed. He heard their talk: motorboats, bloody bolshies, someone's third abortion. He didn't mind meeting new people—he'd had to learn not to mind—but he could tell these people preferred, now they'd stared, to ignore him.

His three pounds' membership fee included a free drink. I should think so too, he thought. He ordered a beer, to the barman's faint contempt. As he carried the tankard to one of the low bare tables he was conscious of his boots, tramping the floorboards. There was nothing wrong with them, he'd wiped them. He sipped, making the drink last, and gazed into the beer's dim glow.

When someone else sat at the table he didn't look at her. He had to glance up at last, because she was staring. What was the matter with her, was he on show? Often in groups he felt alien, but he'd never felt more of a freak than here. His large-boned arms huddled protectively around him, his gawky legs drew up.

But she was smiling. Her stare was wide-eyed, innocent, if somehow odd. "I haven't seen you before," she said. "What's your name?"

"Michael." It sounded like phlegm; he cleared his throat. "Michael. What's yours?"

"June." She made a face as though it tasted like medicine.

"Nothing wrong with that." Her hint of dissatisfaction with herself had emboldened him.

"You haven't moved here, have you? Are you visiting?"

There was something strange about her: about her eyes, about the way she seemed to search for questions. "My parents have a caravan," he said. "We're in the Pine Dunes Caravanserai. We docked just last week."

"Yeah." She drew the word out like a sigh. "Like a ship. That must be fantastic. I wish I had that. Just to be able to see new things all the time, new places. The only way you can see new things here is taking acid. I'm tripping now."

His eyebrows lifted slightly; his faint smile shrugged.

"That's what I mean," she said, smiling. "These people here would be really shocked. They're so provincial. You aren't."

In fact he hadn't been sure how to react. The pupils of her eyes were expanding and contracting rapidly, independently of each other. But her small face was attractive, her small body had large firm breasts.

"I saw the moon dancing before," she said. "I'm beginning to come down now. I thought I'd like to look at people. You wouldn't know I was tripping, would you? I can control it when I want to."

She wasn't really talking to him, he thought; she just wanted an audience to trip to. He'd heard things about LSD. "Aren't you afraid of starting to trip when you don't mean to?"

"Flashbacks, you mean. I never have them. I shouldn't like that." She gazed at his skepticism. "There's no need to be afraid of drugs," she said. "All sorts of people used to trip. Witches used to. Look, it tells you about it in here."

She fumbled a book out of her handbag; she seemed to have difficulty in wielding her fingers. *Witchcraft in England*. "You can have that," she said. "Have you got a job?"

It took him a moment to realize that she'd changed the subject. "No," he said. "I haven't left school long. I had to have extra school because of all the moving. I'm twenty. I expect I'll get a job soon. I think we're staying here."

"That could be a good job," she said, pointing at a notice behind the bar: TRAINEE BARMAN REQUIRED. "I think they want to get rid of that guy there. People don't like him. I know a lot of people would come here if they got someone friendly like you."

Was it just her trip talking? Two girls said good-bye to a group, and came over. "We're going now, June. See you shortly."

"Right. Hey, this is Michael."

"Nice to meet you, Michael."

"Hope we'll see you again."

Perhaps they might. These people didn't seem so bad after all. He drank his beer and bought another, wincing at the price and gazing at the job notice. June refused a drink: "It's a downer." They talked about his travels, her dissatisfactions, and her lack of cash to pay for moving. When he had to leave she said, "I'm glad I met you. I like you." And she called after him, "If you got that job I'd come here."

Darkness blinded him. It was heavy on him, and moved. It was more than darkness: it was flesh. Beneath him and around him and above him, somnolent bodies crawled blindly. They were huge; so was he. As they shifted incessantly he heard sounds of mud or flesh.

He was shifting too. It was more than restlessness. His whole body felt unstable; he couldn't make out his own form—whenever he seemed to perceive it, it changed. His mind was unstable too; it felt too full, of alien chunks that ground harshly together. Memories or fantasies floated vaguely through him. Stone circles. Honeycombed mountains; glimmering faces like a cluster of bubbles in a cave mouth. Enormous dreaming eyes beneath stone and sea. A labyrinth of thorns. His own face. But why was his own face only a memory?

He woke. Dawn suffocated him like grey gas; he lay panting. It was all right. It hadn't been his own face that he'd seemed to remember in the dream. His body hadn't grown huge. His large bones were still lanky. But there was a huge figure, nonetheless. It loomed above him at the window, its spread of face staring down at him.

He woke, and had to grab the dark before he could find the light switch. He twisted himself to sit on the edge of the couch, legs tangled in the blankets, so as not to fall asleep again. Around him the trailer was flat and bright, and empty. Beyond the ajar door of his parents' room he could see that their bed was smooth and deserted.

He was sure he'd had that dream before—the figure at the window. Somehow he associated it with a windmill, a childhood memory he couldn't locate. Had he been staying with his grandparents? The dream was fading in the light. He glanced at his clock:

two in the morning. He didn't want to sleep again until the dream had gone.

He stood outside the trailer. A wind was rising; a loud whisper passed through the forest, unlit trailers rocked and creaked a little at their moorings; behind everything, vast and constant, the sea rushed vaguely. Scraps of cloud slid over the filling moon; light caught at them, but they slipped away. His parents hadn't taken the car. Where had they gone? Irrationally, he felt he knew, if only he could remember. Why did they go out at night so much?

A sound interrupted his musing. The wind carried it to him only to snatch it away. It seemed distant, and therefore must be loud. Did it contain words? Was someone being violently ill, and trying to shout? The moon's light flapped between a procession of dark clouds. A drunk, no doubt, shouting incoherently. Michael gazed at the edge of the forest and wondered about his parents. Light and wind shifted the foliage. Then he shrugged. He ought to be used to his parents' nocturnal behavior by now.

He slammed the door. His dream was still clinging to him. There had been something odd about the head at the window, besides its size. Something about it had reminded him unpleasantly of a bubble. Hadn't that happened the first time he'd had the dream? But he was grinning at himself: never mind dreams, or his parents. Think of June.

She had been in the club almost every evening since he'd taken the job, a month ago. He had dithered for a week, then he'd returned and asked about the notice. Frowning, the barman had called the manager—to throw Michael out? But June had told them her parents knew Michael well. "All right. We'll give you six weeks and see how you do." The barman had trained him, always faintly snooty and quick to criticize. But the customers had begun to prefer Michael to serve them. They accepted him, and he found he could be friendly. He'd never felt less like an outsider.

So long as the manager didn't question June's parents. June had invited Michael to the cottage a couple of times. Her parents had been polite, cold, fascinated, contemptuous. He'd tried to fit his lanky legs beneath his chair, so that the flares of his trousers would cover up his boots—and all the while he'd felt superior to these

people in some way, if only he could think of it. "They aren't my kind of people either," June had told him, walking to the club. "When can we go to your caravan?"

He didn't know. He hadn't yet told his parents about her; the reaction to the news of his job hadn't been what he'd hoped. His mother had gazed at him sadly, and he'd felt she was holding more of her feelings hidden, as they all had to in the cramped trailer. "Why don't you go to the city? They'll have better jobs there."

"But I feel at home here."

"That's right," his father had said. "That's right." He'd stared at Michael strangely, with a kind of uneasy joy. Michael had felt oppressed, engulfed by the stare. Of course there was nothing wrong, his father had become uneasy on hearing of his son's first job, his first step in the world, that was all.

"Can I borrow the car to get to the club?"

His father had become dogmatic at once; his shell had snapped tight. "Not yet. You'll get the key soon enough."

It hadn't seemed worth arguing. Though his parents rarely used the car at night, Michael was never given the key. Where *did* they go at night? "When you're older" had never seemed much of an explanation. But surely their nocturnal excursions were more frequent now they'd docked at Pine Dunes? And why was his mother so anxious to persuade him to leave?

It didn't matter. Sometimes he was glad that they went out; it gave him a chance to be alone, the trailer seemed less cramped, he could breathe freely. He could relax, safe from the threat of his father's overwhelming presence. And if they hadn't gone out that night he would never have met June.

Because of the wanderings of the trailer he had never had time for close friendships. He had felt more attached to this latest berth than to any person—until he'd met June. She was the first girl to arouse him. Her small slim body, her bright quick eyes, her handfuls of breast—he felt his body stirring as he thought of her.

For years he'd feared he was impotent. Once, in a village school, a boy had shown him an erotic novel. He'd read about the gasps of pleasure, the creaking of the bed. Gradually he'd realized why that troubled him. The walls of the trailer were thin; he could always

hear his father snoring or wheezing, like a huge fish stranded on the shore of a dream. But he had never heard his parents copulating.

Their sexual impulse must have faded quickly, soon after he was born—as soon, he thought, as it had served its purpose. Would his own be as feeble? Would it work at all? Yes, he'd gasped over June, the first night her parents were out. "I think it'd be good to make love on acid," she'd said as they lay embraced. "That way you really become one, united together." But he thought he would be terrified to take LSD, even though what she'd said appealed deeply to him.

He wished she were here now. The trailer rocked; his parents' door swung creaking, imitated by the bathroom door, which often sprang open. He slammed them irritably. The dream of the bubbling head at the window—if that had been what was wrong with it—was drifting away. Soon he'd sleep. He picked up *Witchcraft in England*. It looked dull enough to help him sleep. And it was June's.

Naked witches danced about on the cover, and on many of the pages. They danced obscenely. They danced lewdly. They chanted obscenely. And so on. They used poisonous drugs, such as belladonna. No doubt that had interested June. He leafed idly onward; his gaze flickered impatiently.

Suddenly he halted, at a name: Severnford. Now that *was* interesting. We can imagine, the book insisted, the witches rowing out to the island in the middle of the dark river, and committing unspeakable acts before the pallid stone in the moonlight; but Michael couldn't imagine anything of the kind, nor did he intend to try. Witches are still reputed to visit the island, the book told him before he interrupted it and riffled on. But a few pages later his gaze was caught again.

He stared at this new name. Then reluctantly he turned to the index. At once words stood out from the columns, eager to be seen. They slipped into his mind as if their slots had been ready for years. Exham. Whitminster. The Old Horns. Holihaven. Dilham. Severnford. His father had halted the trailer at all of them, and his parents had gone out at night.

He was still staring numbly at the list when the door snapped

open. His father glanced sharply at him, then went into the bedroom. "Come on," he told Michael's mother, and sat heavily on the bed, which squealed. To Michael's bewildered mind his father's body seemed to spread as he sat down, like a dropped jelly. His mother sat obediently; her gaze dodged timidly, she looked pale and shrunken—by fear, Michael knew at once. "Go to bed," his father told him, raising one foot effortfully to kick the door shut. Almost until dawn Michael lay in the creaking unstable dark, thinking.

"You must have seen all sorts of places," June said.

"We've seen a few," said Michael's mother. Her eyes moved uneasily. She seemed nervously resentful, perhaps at being reminded of something she wanted desperately to forget. At last, as if she'd struggled and found courage, she managed to say, "We may see a few more."

"Oh, no we won't," her husband said. He sat slumped on the couch, as though his body were a burden he'd had to drop there. Now that there were four people in the trailer he seemed to take up even more room; his presence overwhelmed all the spaces between them.

But Michael refused to be overwhelmed. He stared at his father. "What made you choose the places we've lived?" he demanded.

"I had my reasons."

"What reasons?"

"I'll tell you sometime. Not now, son. You don't want us arguing in front of your girl friend, do you?"

Into the embarrassed silence June said, "I really envy you, being able to go everywhere."

"You'd like to, would you?" Michael's mother said.

"Oh, yes. I'd love to see the world."

His mother turned from the stove. "You ought to. You're the right age for it. It wouldn't do Michael any harm, either."

For a moment her eyes were less dull. Michael was glad: he'd thought she would approve of June's wanderlust—that was one reason why he'd given in to June's pleas. Then his father was speaking, and his mother dulled again.

"Best to stay where you're born," his father told June. "You won't find a better place than here. I know what I'm talking about."

"You should try living where I do. It'd kill your head in no time."

"Mike feels at home here. That's right, isn't it, son? You tell her."

"I like it here," Michael said. Words blocked his throat. "I mean, I met you," he hawked at June.

His mother chopped vegetables: chop, chop, chop—the sound was harsh, trapped within the metal walls. "Can I do anything?" June said.

"No, thank you. It's all right," she said indifferently. She hadn't accepted June yet, after all.

"If you're so keen on seeing the world," his father demanded, "what's stopping you?"

"I can't afford it, not yet. I work in a boutique, I'm saving the money I'd have spent on clothes. And then I can't drive. I'd need to go with someone who can."

"Good luck to you. But I don't see Mikey going with you."

Well, ask *me!* Michael shouted at her, gagged (by his unsureness: she mightn't have had him in mind at all). But she only said, "When I travel I'm going to have things from everywhere."

"I've got some," he said. "I've kept some things." He carried the cardboard box to her, and displayed his souvenirs. "You can have them if you like," he said impulsively; if she accepted he would be more sure of her. "The flashlight only needs batteries."

But she pushed the plastic faces aside, and picked up the ring. "I like that," she said, turning it so that its colors spilled slowly over one another, merging and separating. She whispered, "It's like tripping."

"There you are. I'm giving it to you."

His father stared at the ring, then a smile spread his mouth. "Yes, you give her that. It's as good as an engagement, that ring."

Michael slid the ring onto her finger before she could change her mind; she had begun to look embarrassed. "It's lovely," she said. "Have we time for Mike to take me for a walk before dinner?"

"You can stay out for an hour if you like," his mother said, then anxiously: "Go down to the beach. You might get lost in the woods, in the fog."

The fog was ambiguous: perhaps thinning, perhaps gathering again. Inside a caravan a radio sang Christmas carols. A sharp-edged bronze sun hung close to the sea. Sea and fog had merged, and might be advancing over the beach. June took Michael's hand as they climbed the slithering dunes. "I just wanted to come out to talk," she explained.

So had he. He wanted to tell her what he'd discovered. That was his main reason for inviting her: he needed her support in confronting his parents, he would be too disturbed to confront them alone—he'd needed it earlier when he'd tried to interrogate his father. But what could he tell her? I've found out my parents are witches? You know that book you lent me—

"No, I didn't really want to talk," she said. "There were just too many bad vibes in there. I'll be all right, we'll go back soon. But they're strange, your parents, aren't they? I didn't realize your father was so heavy."

"He used to be like me. He's been getting fatter for the last few months." After a pause he voiced his worst secret fear: "I hope I never get like him."

"You'll have to get lots of exercise. Let's walk as far as the point."

Ahead along the beach, the grey that lay stretched on the sea was land, not fog. They trudged toward it. Sand splashed from his boots; June slid, and gripped his hand. He strained to tell her what he'd found out, but each phrase he prepared sounded more absurd: his voice echoed hollowly, closed into his mind. He'd tell her—but not today. He relaxed, and felt enormously relieved; he enjoyed her hand small in his. "I like fog," she said. "There are always surprises in it."

The bronze sun paced them, sinking. The sea shifted restlessly, muffled. To their left, above the dunes, trees were a flat mass of prickly fog. They were nearly at the point now. It pulled free of the grey, darkening and sharpening. It looked safe enough for them to climb the path.

But when they reached the top it seemed hardly worth the effort. A drab patch of beach and dunes, an indistinct fragment of sea scattered with glitterings of dull brass, surrounded them in a soft unstable frame of fog. Otherwise the view was featureless, except for a tree growing beside the far dunes. Was it a tree? Its branches

seemed too straight, its trunk too thick. Suddenly troubled, Michael picked his way over the point as far as he dared. The fog withdrew a little. It wasn't a tree. It was a windmill.

A windmill by the sea! "My grandparents lived here," he blurted.

"Oh, did they?"

"You don't understand. They lived near that windmill. It's the same one, I know it is."

He still wasn't sure whether she felt his confusion. Memories rushed him, as if all at once afloat: he'd been lying on the couch in his grandparents' decrepit trailer, the huge head had loomed at the window, vague with dawn. It must have been a dream then too.

He followed June down the path. Chill fog trailed them, lapping the point. His thoughts drifted, swirling. What did his discovery mean? He couldn't remember his grandparents at all, not even what they'd looked like. They had been his father's parents—why had the man never mentioned them? Why hadn't he remarked that they'd lived here? The sun slid along the rim of the sea, swollen as though with glowing blood. Had his grandparents also been witches?

"Did Mike's grandparents live here, then?" June said.

His mother stared at her. The spoon and saucepan she was holding chattered like nervous teeth. He was sure she was going to scream and throw everything away—the utensils, her self-control, the mask behind which she'd hidden to protect him: for how long? For the whole of his childhood? But she stammered, "How did you know that?"

"Mike told me. The windmill just reminded him."

"Is dinner ready?" Michael interrupted. He wanted to think everything out before questioning his father. But June was opening her mouth to continue. The trailer was crowded, suffocating. Shut up! he screamed at her. Get out! "Were they born here, then?" June said.

"No, I don't think so." His mother had turned away and was dishing vegetables. June went to hold the dishes. "So why did they come here?" she said.

His mother frowned, turning her back; within her frown she was searching. "To retire," she said abruptly.

His father nodded and smiled to himself, squeezing forward his

ruff of chins. "You could retire from the human race here," June said sourly, and he wheezed like a punctured balloon.

As the four ate dinner, their constraint grew. Michael and June made most of the conversation; his parents replied shortly when at all, and watched. His mother observed June uneasily; he read dislike in her eyes, or pity. He felt irritably resentful, her uneasiness made his skin nervous. Night edged closer to the windows, blank-faced.

His father leaned back as if his weight had toppled the chair, which creaked loudly. He patted his quaking stomach. "Just storing it up for the winter," he said, winking at June.

His arms flopped around her shoulders and Michael's. "You two go well together. Don't they, eh?"

But his wife said only, "I'm going to bed now. I'm very tired. Perhaps we'll see you again," which sounded like dutiful politeness.

"I hope so," June said.

"I know we will," Michael's father said expansively.

Michael walked June to the bus stop. "I'll see you at the club," she said through a kiss. Smoldering cones of yellow light led the bus away, and were engulfed. As he walked back, twisted shapes of fog bulked between the trees. Nearby in the dark, something shifted moistly.

He halted. What had it been? Blurred trees creaked with a deadened sound, thin trails of fog reached out for him from branches. He'd heard a shifting, deep in the dark. A vague memory plucked at him. He shivered as if to shake it free, into the chill clinging night. A restless moist shifting. He felt as though the depths of the forest were reaching for his mind with ambiguous tatters of grey. He strode rapidly toward the invisible light. Again he heard the slow moist shifting. Only the sea, he told himself. Only the sea.

As he emerged into the open, the clouds parted and the moon rolled free. The enormous shape in the open space glistened with moonlight. The unstable head turned its crawling face toward him.

The dream trailed him to Liverpool, to the central library, although the space and the head had faded before he could make

them out—if indeed he had wanted to. But a rush of rain, and the bright lights of the library, washed the dream away. He hurried up the wide green stairs to the Religion and Philosophy Section.

He pulled books from the shelves. *Lancashire Witches. North-West Hauntings. Ghostly Lancashire.* The banality of their covers was reassuring; it seemed absurd that his parents could be mixed up in such things. Yet he couldn't quite laugh. Even if they were, what could he do? He slammed the books angrily on a table, startling echoes.

As he read he began to feel safer. Pine Dunes wasn't indexed in *North-West Hauntings.* His attention strayed fascinated into irrelevances. The hanged man's ghost in Everton Library. The poltergeist of the Palace Hotel, Birkdale. Jokey ghost stories in Lancashire dialect, ee lad. Rain and wind shook the windows, fluorescent light lay flat on the tables. Beyond a glass partition people sat studying, library staff clattered up and down open staircases, carrying scraps of paper. Reassured, he turned to *Lancashire Witches.* Pine Dunes. It was there, on three pages.

When he made himself search the pages they didn't say much. Over the centuries, witches had been rumored to gather in the Pine Dunes forest. Was that surprising? Wouldn't they naturally have done so, for concealment? Besides, these were only rumors; few people would have bothered struggling through the undergrowth. He opened *Ghostly Lancashire,* expecting irrelevances. But the index showed that Pine Dunes covered several pages.

The author had interviewed a group the other books ignored: the travelers. Their stories were unreliable, he warned, but fascinating. Few travelers would walk the Pine Dunes road after dark; they kept their children out of the woods even by day. A superstitious people, the author pointed out. The book had been written thirty years ago, Michael reminded himself. And the travelers gave no reason for their nervousness except vague tales of something unpleasantly large glimpsed moving beyond the most distant trees. But surely distance must have formed the trees into a solid wall; how could anyone have seen beyond?

One traveler, senile and often incoherent, told a story. A long time ago he, or someone else—the author couldn't tell—had

wandered back to the travelers' camp, very drunk. The author didn't believe the story, but included it because it was vivid and unusual. Straying from the road, the man had become lost in the forest. Blinded by angry panic, he'd fought his way toward an open space. But it wasn't the camp, as he'd thought. He had lost his footing on the slippery earth and had gone skidding into a pit.

Had it been a pit, or the mouth of a tunnel? As he'd scrabbled, bruised but otherwise unhurt, for a foothold on the mud at the bottom, he'd seen an opening that led deeper into darkness. But the darkness had been moving slowly and enormously toward him, with a sound like that of a huge shifting beneath mud. The darkness had parted loudly, resolving itself into several sluggish forms that glistened dimly as they advanced to surround him. Terror had hurled him in a leap halfway up the pit; his hands had clamped on rock, and he'd wrenched himself up the rest of the way. He'd run blindly. In the morning he'd found himself full of thorns on a sprung bed of undergrowth.

So what did all that prove? Michael argued with himself on the bus to Pine Dunes. The man had been drunk. All right, so there were other tales about Pine Dunes, but nothing very evil. Why shouldn't his parents go out at night? Maybe they were ghost-hunters, witch-hunters. Maybe they were going to write a book about their observations. How else could such books be written? His mind was becoming desperate as he kept remembering his mother's masked fear.

His parents were asleep. His father lay beached on the bed, snoring flabbily; beyond his stomach his wife could hardly be seen. Michael was glad, for he hadn't known what to say to them. He wheeled out the bicycle he'd bought from his first month's wages.

He cycled to the Four in the Morning. His knees protruded on either side of him, jerking up and down. Hedges sailed by slowly; their colors faded and dimmed into twilight. The whirr of his dynamo caught among the leaves. He struggled uphill, standing on the pedals. Dim countryside opened below him, the sea glinted dully. As he poised on the edge of the downhill rush he knew how he could unburden himself, or begin to. Tonight he would tell June everything.

But she didn't come to the club. People crowded in; the lights painted them carelessly monochrome. Discotheque records snarled and thumped, swirls of tobacco smoke glared red, pink, purple. Michael hurried about, serving. Dim wet discolored faces jostled to reach him, shouting, "Mike! Mike!" Faces rose obsessively to the surface of the jostling: June's, who wasn't there; his mother's, her eyes trying to dodge fear. He was suffocating. His frustration gathered within him; he felt swollen, encumbered. He stared at luridly pink smoke while voices called. "I've got to go home," he told the barman.

"Had enough, have you?"

"My parents aren't well. I'm worried."

"Strange you didn't say so when you came in. Well, I've managed by myself before." He turned away, dismissing Michael. "You'll have to make do with me tonight," he told the shouting.

The last of the lit streets faded behind Michael. The moon was full, but blurred by unkempt fields of cloud; it showed him only a faint windy swaying that surrounded him for miles. When he confronted his father, what would his mother do? Would she break down? If she admitted to witchcraft and said it was time Michael knew, the scene would be easier—if she did. The moon struggled among plump clouds, and was engulfed.

He cycled fast up the Pine Dunes road. Get there, don't delay to reconsider. Gravel ground together squeaking beneath his wheels; his yellow light wobbled, plucking at trees. The depths of the forest creaked; distant tree trunks were pushed apart to let a huge unstable face peer through. He was overtired—of course there was nothing among the far trees but dark. He sped into the Caravanserai; random patches of unlit trailers bobbed up and faded by. His trailer was unlit too.

Perhaps his parents weren't there. He realized furiously that he felt relieved. They were in there all right, they'd be asleep. He would wake his father, the man might betray himself while still half-asleep. He'd dazzle his father awake, like an interrogator. But his parents' bed was empty.

He punched the wall, which rang flatly. His father had outwitted him again. He stared around the room, enraged. His father's huge

suits dangled emptily, like sloughed skin; his mother's clothes hid in drawers. His father's metal box of books sat on top of the wardrobe. Michael glanced resentfully at it, then stared. It was unlocked.

He lifted it down and made to sit on his parents' bed. But that made him feel uneasy; he carried the box into the main room. Let his father come in and find him reading. Michael hoped he would. He tugged at the lid, which resisted then sprang open with a loud clang.

He remembered that sound. He'd heard it when he was quite young, and his mother's voice, pleading: "Let him at least have a normal childhood." After a moment he'd heard the box closed again. "All right. He'll find out when it's time," he'd heard his father say.

The box contained no printed books, but several notebooks. They had been written in by numerous people; the inks in the oldest notebook, whose spine had given way, were brown as old bloodstains. Some of the writing in the latest book was his mother's. Odd pages showed rough maps: The Old Horns, Exham, Whitminster, though none of Pine Dunes. These he recognized; but he couldn't understand a word of the text.

Most of it was in English, but might as well not have been. It consisted largely of quotations copied from books; sometimes the source was indicated—*Necro, Revelations Glaaki, Garimiaz, Vermis, Theobald,* whatever they were. The whole thing reminded him of pamphlets issued by cranky cults—like the people who gave all their worldly goods to a man in America, or the others who'd once lured Michael into a seedy hotel for a personality profile, which they'd lied would be fun. He read, baffled.

After a while he gave up. Even the entries his mother had written made no sense. Some of the words he couldn't even pronounce. Kuthullhoo? Kuthoolhew? And what was supposed to be so Great about it, whatever it was?

He shrugged, sniggering a little. He didn't feel so worried now. If this was all his parents were involved in, it seemed silly but harmless. The fact that they'd concealed it from him so successfully for so long seemed to prove as much. They were so convincingly

normal, it couldn't be anything very bad. After all, many businessmen belonged to secret societies with jargon nobody else could understand. Maybe his father had been initiated into this society as part of one of the jobs he'd taken in his wanderings!

One thing still troubled Michael: his mother's fear. He couldn't see what there was to fear in the blurred language of the notebooks. He made a last effort, and let the books fall open where they would—at the pages that had been read most frequently.

What a waste of time! He strained his mind, but the pages became more bewildering still; he began to laugh. What on earth was "the millennial gestation"? Something to do with "the fosterling of the Great Old Ones"? "The hereditary rebirth"? "Each of Its rebirths comes closer to incarnation"? "When the mind opens to all the dimensions will come the incarnation. Upon the incarnation all minds will become one." Ah, that explains it! Michael sniggered wildly. But there was more: "the ingestion," "the mating beyond marriage," "the melting and merging"—

He threw the book angrily into the box. The skin of his eyes crawled hotly; he could hardly keep them open, yet he was wasting his time reading this. The trailer rocked as something huge tugged at it: the wind. The oldest, spineless, notebook began to disintegrate. As he knocked it square, an envelope slipped out.

It was addressed in his father's large handwriting; the last word had had to be cramped. TO MICHAEL: NOT TO BE OPENED UNTIL AFTER I AM GONE. He turned it over and began to tear, but his hand faltered. He'd been unreasonable enough to his father for one day. After a moment he put the envelope unopened in his pocket, feeling sly and ashamed. He replaced the box, then he prepared to sleep. In the dark he tried to arrange his limbs on the sagging couch. Rocking, the trailer sounded like a rusty cradle.

He slept. He wasn't sure whether he was asleep when he heard his mother's low voice. He must be awake, for he could feel her breath on his face. "Don't stay here." Her voice trembled. "Your girl friend's got the right idea. Go away with her if that's what you want. Just get away from here."

His father's voice reached for her out of the dark. "That's enough. He's asleep. You come to bed."

Silence and darkness settled down for the night. But in the night, or in Michael's dream, there were noises: the stealthy departure of a car from the park; heavy footsteps trying not to disturb the trailer; the gingerly closing of his parents' door. Sleep seemed more important.

His father's voice woke him, shouting into the bedroom. "Wake up. The car's gone. It's been stolen."

Daylight blazed through Michael's eyelids. He was sure at once what had happened. His father had hidden the car, so that nobody could get away. Michael lay paralyzed, waiting for his mother's cry of panic. Her silence held time immobile. He squeezed his eyelids tighter, filling his eyes with red.

"Oh," his mother said at last, dully. "Oh, dear."

There was more in her voice than resignation: she sounded lethargic, indifferent. Suddenly Michael remembered what he'd read in June's book. Witches used drugs. His eyes sprang wide. He was sure that his father was drugging his mother.

It didn't take the police long to find the car, abandoned and burnt out, near the windmill. "Kids, probably," one of the policemen said. "We may be in touch with you again." Michael's father shook his head sadly, and they left.

"I must have dropped the car keys while we were out." Michael thought his father hardly bothered to sound convincing. Why couldn't he tell the man so, confront him? Because he wasn't sure; he might have dreamed the sounds last night— He raged at his own cowardice, staring at his mother. If only he could be certain of her support! She wandered desultorily, determinedly cleaning the trailer, as though she were ill but expecting company.

When his gagged rage found words at last it weakened immediately. "Are you all right?" he demanded of her, but then could only stammer, "Do you think you'd better see a doctor?"

Neither of his parents responded. His unsureness grew, and fed his frustration. He felt lethargic, unable to act, engulfed by his father's presence. Surely June would be at the club tonight. He had to talk to someone, to hear another interpretation; perhaps she would prove that he'd imagined everything.

He washed and shaved. He was glad to retreat, even into the

cramped bathroom; he and his parents had been edging uneasily around one another all day—the trailer made him think unpleasantly of a tin can full of squirming. As he shaved, the bathroom door sprang open, as it often did. His father appeared behind him in the mirror, staring at him.

Steam coated the mirror again. Beneath the steam, his father's face seemed to writhe like a plastic mask on fire. Michael reached to clear the mirror, but already his father and the man's emotions were upon him. Before Michael could turn his father was hugging him violently, his flesh quivering as though it would burst. Michael held himself stiff, refusing to be engulfed. What are you doing? Get away! In a moment his father turned clumsily and plodded out. The trailer rumbled, shaking.

Michael sighed loudly. God, he was glad that was over. He finished shaving and hurried out. Neither of his parents looked at him; his father pretended to read a book, and whistled tunelessly; his mother turned vaguely as he passed. He cycled to the club.

"Parents all right?" the barman said indifferently.

"I'm not sure."

"Good of you to come." Perhaps that was sarcasm. "There's some things for you to wash."

Michael could still feel his father's clinging embrace; he kept trying to wriggle it away. He welcomed the press of bodies at the bar, shouting, "Mike!"—even though June wasn't among them. He welcomed the companionship of ordinary people. He strode expertly about, serving, as the crowd grew, as smoke gathered. He could still feel swollen flesh pressed hotly against his back. He won't do that to me again, he thought furiously. He'll never— A tankard dropped from his hand, beneath a beer tap. "Oh, my God," he said.

"What's up with you now?" the barman demanded.

When his father had embraced him, Michael had thought of nothing but escape. Now at last he realized how final his father's gesture had been. "My parents," he said. "They're, they're worse."

"Just sent you a message, did they? Off home again now, I suppose? You'd better see the manager, or I will— Will you watch that bloody beer you're spilling!"

Michael slammed shut the tap and struggled through the crowd.

People grimaced sympathetically at him, or stared. It didn't matter, his job didn't matter. He must hurry back to head off whatever was going to happen. Someone bumped into him in the doorway, and hindered him when he tried to push them aside. "What's the matter with you?" he shouted. "Get out of the way!" It was June.

"I'm really sorry I didn't come last night," she said. "My parents dragged me out to dinner."

"All right. Okay. Don't worry."

"You're angry. I really am sorry, I wanted to see you— You're not going, are you?"

"Yes, I've got to. Look, my parents aren't well."

"I'll come back with you. We can talk on the way. I'll help you look after them." She caught at his shoulder as he tried to run upstairs. "Please, Mike. I'll feel bad if you just leave me. We can catch the last bus in five minutes if we run. It'll be quicker than your bike."

God! She was worse than his father! "Listen," he snarled, having clambered to street level. "It isn't ill, they aren't ill," he said, letting words tumble wildly as he tried to flee. "I've found out what they do at night. They're witches."

"Oh, no!" She sounded shocked but delighted.

"My mother's terrified. My father's been drugging her." Now that he was able to say so, his urgency diminished a little; he wanted to release all he knew. "Something's going to happen tonight," he said.

"Are you going to try and stop it? Let me come too. I know about it. I showed you my book." When he looked doubtful she said, "They'll have to stop when they see me."

Perhaps she could look after his mother while he confronted his father. They ran to the bus, which sat unlit in the square for minutes, then dawdled along the country roads, hoping for passengers who never appeared. Michael's frustration coiled tighter again. He explained to June what he'd discovered: "Yeah," she kept saying, excited and fascinated. Once she began giggling uncontrollably. "Wouldn't it be weird if we saw your father dancing naked?" He stared at her until she said, "Sorry." Her pupils were expanding and contracting slightly, randomly.

As they ran along the Pine Dunes road the trees leaned closer, creaking and nodding. Suppose his parents hadn't left the trailer yet? What could he say? He'd be tongue-tied again by his unsureness, and June would probably make things worse. He gasped with relief when he saw that the windows were dark, but went inside to make sure. "I know where they've gone," he told June.

Moonlight and unbroken cloud spread the sky with dim milk; dark smoky breaths drifted across the glow. He heard the incessant restlessness of the sea. Bare black silhouettes crowded beside the road, thinly intricate against the sky. He hurried June toward the path.

Why should his parents have gone that way? Something told him they had—perhaps the maze he remembered, the tunnel of undergrowth: that was a secret place. The path wound deeper into the woods, glinting faintly; trees rapidly shuttered the glow of the moon. "Isn't this fantastic," June said, hurrying behind him.

The pines gave out, but other trees meshed thickly overhead. The glimpses of flat whitish sky, smoldering with darker cloud, dwindled. In the forest everything was black or blanched, and looked chill, although the night was unseasonably mild. Webs of shadow lay on the path, tangling Michael's feet; tough grass seized him. Bushes massed around him, towering, choking the gaps between trees. The glimpses of sky were fewer and smaller. "What's that?" June said uneasily.

For a moment he thought it was the sound of someone's foot, unplugging itself from the soft ground: it sounded like a loud slow gulp of mud. But no, it wasn't that. Someone coughing? It didn't sound much like a human cough. Moreover, it sounded as though it were straining to produce a sound, a single sound; and he felt inexplicably that he ought to know what that was.

The bushes stirred, rattling. The muddy sound faded, somewhere ahead. There was no point in telling June his vague thoughts. "It'll be an animal," he said. "Probably something's caught it."

Soon they reached the tunnel. He knelt at once and began to crawl. Twigs scraped beside his ears, a clawed dry chorus. He found the experience less disturbing now, less oppressive; the

tunnel seemed wider, as though someone stout had recently pushed his way through. But behind him June was breathing heavily, and her voice fluttered in the dark. "There's something following us outside the tunnel," she said tightly, nervously.

He crawled quickly to the end and stood up. "There's nothing here now. It must have been an animal."

He felt odd: calm, safe, yet slyly and elusively excited. His eyes had grown equal to the dark. The trees were stouter, and even closer; they squeezed out masses of shrub between them. Overhead, a few pale scraps of sky were caught in branches. The ground squelched underfoot, and he heard another sound ahead: similar, but not the same.

June emerged panting. "I thought I'd finished tripping. Where are we going?" she said unevenly. "I can't see."

"This way." He headed at once for a low opening in the tangled growth. As he'd somehow expected, the passage twisted several times, closing almost impenetrably, then widened. Perhaps he'd noticed that someone before him had thrust the bushes apart.

"Don't go so fast," June said in the dark, almost weeping. "Wait for me."

Her slowness annoyed him. His indefinable excitement seemed to affect his skin, which crawled with nervousness like interference on the surface of a bubble. Yet he felt strangely powerful, ready for anything. Wait until he saw his father! He stood impatiently, stamping the mushy ground, while June caught up with him. She gripped his arm. "There it is again," she gasped.

"What?" The sound? It was only his feet, squelching. But there was another sound, ahead in the tangled creaking dark. It was the gurgling of mud, perhaps of a muddy stream gargling ceaselessly into the earth. No: it was growing louder, more violent, as though the mud were straining to spew out an obstruction. The sound was repeated, again and again, becoming gradually clearer: a single syllable. All at once he knew what it was. Somewhere ahead in the close dark maze, a thick muddy voice was struggling to shout his name.

June had recognized the sound too, and was tugging at his arm. "Let's go back," she pleaded. "I don't like it. Please."

"God," he scoffed. "I thought you were going to help me." The muddy sounds blurred into a mumble, and were gone. Twigs shook in the oppressive dark, squeaking hollowly together. Suddenly, ahead of him, he heard his father's voice; then, after a long silence, his mother's. Both were oddly strained and muffled. As though this were a game of hide-and-seek, each had called his name.

"There," he said to June. "I haven't got time to take you back now." His excitement was mounting, his nervous skin felt light as a dream. "Don't you want to look after my mother?" he blurted.

He shouldered onward. After a while he heard June following him timidly. A wind blundered through the forest, dragging at the bushes. Thorns struggled overhead, clawing at the air; the ground gulped his feet, sounding to his strained ears almost like words. Twice the walls of the passage tried to close, but someone had broken them apart. Ahead the passage broadened. He was approaching an open space.

He began to run. Bushes applauded like joyful bones. The thick smoky sky rushed on, fighting the moonlight. The vociferous ground was slippery; he stumbled as he ran, and almost tripped over a dark huddle. It was his parents' clothes. Some of them, as he glanced back impatiently, looked torn. He heard June fall slithering against bushes. "Don't!" she cried. But he had reached the space.

It was enclosed by trees. Ivy thickened the trunks and had climbed to mat the tangle overhead; bushes crowded the cramped gaps between the trees. In the interstices of the tangle, dark sky smoldered.

Slowly his eyes found the meager light; outlines gathered in the clearing, dimmer than mist. Bared wooden limbs groped into the space, creaking. The dimness sketched them. He could see now that the clearing was about thirty feet wide, and roughly circular. Dimness crawled on it, as though it were an infested pond. At the far side, a dark bulk stood between him and the trees.

He squinted painfully, but its shape persisted in eluding him. Was it very large, or was the dark lying? Across the clearing mud coughed and gurgled thickly, or something did. Dimness massed on the glistening shape. Suddenly he saw that the shape was moving lethargically, and alive.

June had hung back; now she ran forward, only to slip at the edge of the clearing. She clutched his arm to steady herself, then she gazed beyond him, trembling. "What is it?" she cried.

"Shut up," he said savagely.

Apart from her interruption, he felt more calm than he had ever felt before. He knew he was gazing at the source of his dreams. The dreams returned peacefully to his mind and waited to be understood. For a moment he wondered whether this was like June's LSD. Something had been added to his mind, which seemed to be expanding awesomely. Memories floated free, as though they had been coded deep in him: wombs of stone and submarine depths; hovering in a medium that wasn't space, somehow linked to a stone circle on a hill; being drawn closer to the circle, toward terrified faces that stared up through the night; a pregnant woman held writhing at the center of the circle, screaming as he hovered closer and reached for her. He felt primed with centuries of memories. Inherited memories, or shared; but whose?

He waited. All was about to be clarified. The huge bulk shifted, glistening. Its voice, uncontrollably loud and uneven, struggled muddily to speak. The trees creaked ponderously, the squashed bushes writhed, the sky fled incessantly. Suddenly, touched by an instinct he couldn't define, Michael realized how he and June must look from the far side of the clearing. He took her arm, though she struggled briefly, and they stood waiting: bride and bridegroom of the dark.

After a long muddy convulsion in the dimness, words coughed free. The voice seemed unable to speak more than a phrase at a time; then it would blur, gurgling. Sometimes his father's voice, and occasionally his mother's—high-pitched, trembling—seemed to help. Yet the effect was disturbing, for it sounded as though the muddy voice were attempting muffled imitations of his parents. He held himself calm, trusting that this too would be clarified in due course.

The Great Old Ones still lived, the halting voice gurgled loudly. Their dreams could reach out. When the human race was young . . . and strayed near the Old Ones . . . the dreams could reach into the womb . . . and make the unborn in their image. Something like

his mother's voice spoke the last words, wavering fearfully. June struggled, but he gripped her arm.

Though the words were veiled and allusive, he understood instinctively what was being said. His new memories were ready to explain. When he read the notebooks again he would understand consciously. He listened and gazed, fascinated. He was in awe of the size of the speaking bulk. And what was strange about the head? Something moved there, rapid as the whirl of colors on a bubble. In the dark the face seemed to strain epileptically, perhaps to form words.

The Old Ones could wait, the voice or voices told him. The stars would come right. The people the Old Ones touched before birth . . . did not take on their image all at once . . . but gradually, down the centuries. Instead of dying, they took on the form . . . that the Old Ones had placed in the womb of an ancestor. Each generation came closer to the perfect image.

The bulk glistened as though flayed; in the dimness it looked pale pink, and oddly unstable. Michael stared uneasily at the head. Swift clouds dragged darknesses over the clearing and snatched them away. The face looked so huge, and seemed to spread. Wasn't it like his father's face? But the eyes were swimming apart, the features slid uncontrollably across the head. All this was nothing but the antics of shadows. A tear in the clouds crept toward the dimmed moon. June was trying to pull away. "Keep still," he snarled, tightening his grip.

They would serve the Old Ones, the voice shouted thickly, faltering. That was why they had been made: to be ready when the time came. They shared the memories of the Old Ones . . . and at the change their bodies were transformed . . . into the stuff of the Old Ones. They mated with ordinary people . . . in the human way, and later . . . in the way the Old Ones had decreed. That way was . . .

June screamed. The tear in the clouds had unveiled the moon. Her cry seemed harsh enough to tear her throat. He turned furiously to silence her; but she dragged herself free, eyes gaping, and fled down the path. The shadow of a cloud rushed toward the clearing. About to pursue June, he turned to see what the moon had revealed.

The shadow reached the clearing as he turned. For a moment he saw the huge head, a swollen bulb which, though blanched by moonlight, reminded him of a mass dug from within a body. The glistening lumpy forehead was almost bare, except for a few strands that groped restlessly over it—strands of hair, surely, though they looked like strings of livid flesh.

On the head, seeming even smaller amid the width of flesh, he saw his mother's face. It was appallingly dwarfed, and terrified. The strands flickered over it, faster, faster. Her mouth strained wordlessly, gurgling.

Before he could see the rest of the figure, a vague gigantic squatting sack, the shadow flooded the clearing. As it did so, he thought he saw his mother's face sucked into the head, as though by a whirlpool of flesh. Did her features float up again, newly arranged? Were there other, plumper, features jostling among them? He could be sure of nothing in the dark.

June cried out. She'd stumbled; he heard her fall, and the thud of her head against something: then silence. The figure was lumbering toward him, its bulk quaking. For a moment he was sure that it intended to embrace him. But it had reached a pit, almost concealed by undergrowth. It slid into the earth, like slow jelly. The undergrowth sprang back rustling.

He stood gazing at June, who was still unconscious. He knew what he would tell her: she had had a bad LSD experience, that had been what she'd seen. LSD reminded him of something. Slowly he began to smile.

He went to the pit and peered down. Faint sluggish muddy sounds retreated deep into the earth. He knew he wouldn't see his parents for a long time. He touched his pocket, where the envelope waited. That would contain his father's explanation of their disappearance, which he could show to people, to June.

Moonlight and shadows raced nervously over the pit. As he stared at the dark mouth he felt full of awe, yet calm. Now he must wait until it was time to come back here, to go into the earth and join the others. He remembered that now; he had always known, deep in himself, that this was home. One day he and June would

return. He gazed at her unconscious body, smiling. Perhaps she had been right; they might take LSD together, when it was time. It might help them to become one.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

A. A. ATTANASIO was born in Newark, New Jersey, but has traveled widely and now resides in New York City. The author initially encountered H. P. Lovecraft in his seventh-grade literature class: *The Colour Out of Space* disguised beneath a jacket for Sir Walter Scott. Attanasio's first science fiction novel, *Emblems and Rites,* has been accepted for publication by William Morrow and Company.

RAMSEY CAMPBELL was born, and lives, in Liverpool, which has provided a setting for many of his stories. Since 1973 he has been a full-time writer and also reviews films for BBC Radio Merseyside. Such spare time as he has is occupied by listening to music from Bach to Tippett, reading far less than he would like, relaxing with jigsaws, and watching wrestling matches. His collections include *The Inhabitant of the Lake, Demons by Daylight,* and *The Height of the Scream,* and his most recent novels are *The Face That Must Die* and *To Wake the Dead.* One of his ambitions is to write a single successful Lovecraftian story.

BASIL COPPER is one of the most prolific writers in this field. For thirty years he was a journalist, and ultimately editor of a Kent newspaper, but he has been a professional author since 1970. Not all of his nearly sixty books repose within the domain of the macabre, but those which do include such renowned collections as *From Evil's Pillow, And Afterward, the Dark, When Footsteps Echo,* and *Voices of Doom;* the Gothic thriller *Necropolis;* and a science fiction epic, *The Great White Space.* More recently Copper has donned deerstalker and inverness to create a new series of adventures featuring the London detective Solar Pons.

DAVID DRAKE lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where he is assistant town attorney. Previously he was attached as interrogator to the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment in Vietnam, and his stories based on that experience have appeared in *Analog, Fantasy and Science Fiction,* and *Galaxy.* Drake is the author of a fantasy novel, *The Dragon Lord,* and of the science fiction collection *Hammer's Slammers.*

STEPHEN KING is the most phenomenally successful horror writer of his generation, whose novels such as *Carrie, The Shining, 'Salem's Lot,* and *The Stand* have become contemporary American classics of the genre. King has long been an admirer of Lovecraft, and his contribution to the present volume was conceived during a period of residency in London where he visited a fellow writer, Peter Straub, in Crouch End: an innocent beginning for a nightmarish story. Current and forthcoming books by this author include the novel *Firestarter* and a nonfiction study, *Stephen King's Danse Macabre.*

T. E. D. KLEIN lives in New York City in an apartment on the West Side, surrounded by fantasy books, Hopper paintings, a pet mouse, a preserved tarantula, sculptures, and much else. After receiving degrees from Brown and Columbia Universities, he spent a year teaching high school in Maine and three years working in the Paramount Pictures story department. He has written articles for the *New York Times,* and his fiction has appeared in various anthologies, including the *Year's Best Horror* series.

FRANK BELKNAP LONG is the only member of the original Lovecraft Circle to be represented in this anthology. His affectionate and informative memoir of those days, *HPL: Dreamer on the Nightside,* is available from Arkham House, which also has published two collections of his weird tales, *The Hounds of Tindalos* and *The Rim of the Unknown,* his short Mythos novel *The Horror from the Hills,* and a volume of poetry, *In Mayan Splendor.* In *Dreamer on the Nightside* he compares his fiction with Lovecraft's: "My own stories followed a somewhat different pattern in their approach to the macabre and were less cosmic." But Lovecraft approved of his work and undoubtedly would have enjoyed the present nostalgic story, "Dark Awakening."

H. P. LOVECRAFT is the most influential American author of weird fiction in this century. Among the many writers who acknowledge his influence are Robert Bloch, Ray Bradbury, August Derleth, Henry Kuttner, Fritz Leiber, and Colin Wilson, nor should one forget the *Illuminatus!* trilogy or the Lovecraftian jokes of Gahan Wilson. His collected fiction, and five volumes of his letters, are obtainable from Arkham House in editions uniform with this book.

BRIAN LUMLEY was born in Horden, a colliery village in County Durham on the northeast coast of England, and serves as a sergeant in the British Royal Military Police. The author loves "Robert E. Howard, Lovecraft, budgies, his wife, three kids, kite-soaring, his typewriter, fish and chips, and brandy." Three volumes of his Lovecraftian fiction remain in print from Arkham House, though his most recent novel is the historical fantasy *Khai of Ancient Khem.*

MARTIN S. WARNES was born in Bradford, England, where he works in the textile industry. "The Black Tome of Alsophocus" is a posthumous completion of the 1934 Lovecraftian fragment "The Book," previously published in *Dagon and Other Macabre Tales.*