

Weird Tales®

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

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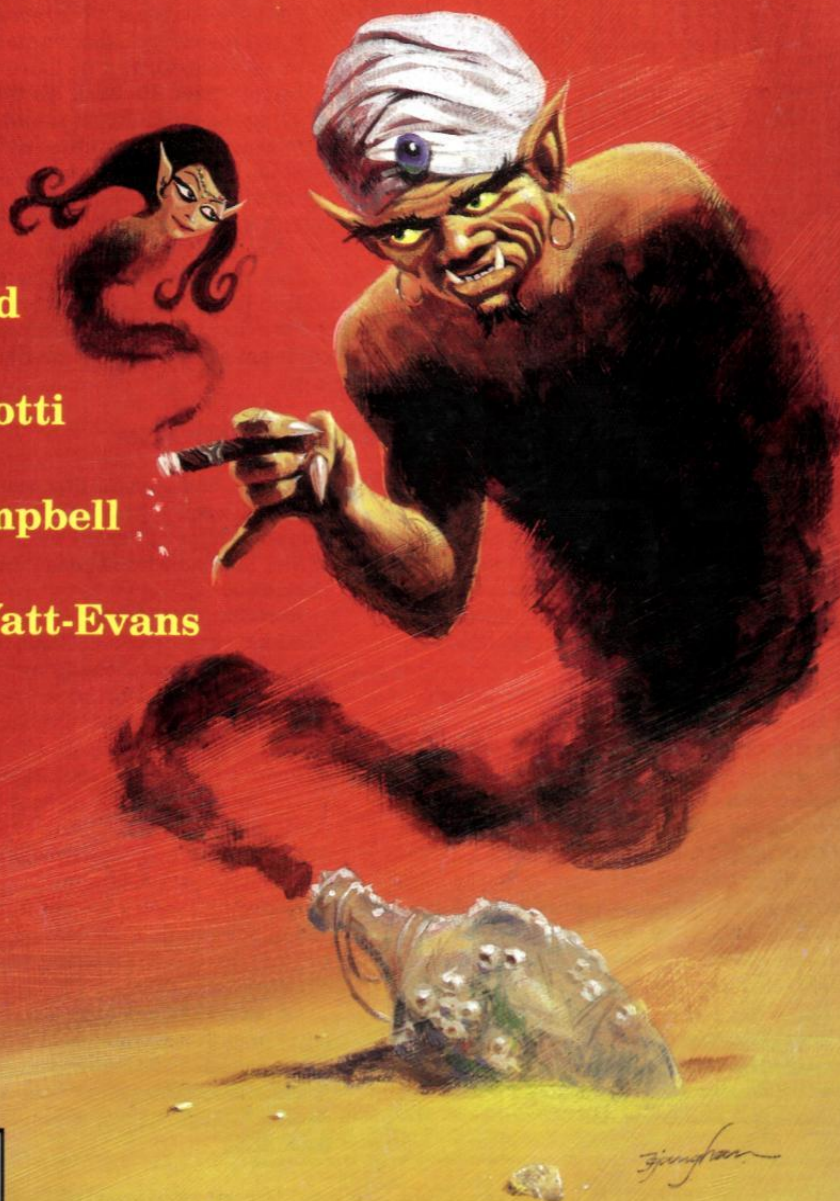
Tanith Lee

Ian MacLeod

Thomas Ligotti

Ramsey Campbell

Lawrence Watt-Evans





FOR 75 YEARS: THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

Spring 1999

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Cover by Jack Gaughan

KILL ME HIDEOUSLY	Ramsey Campbell	13
<i>He was her fatal obsession.</i>		
THE FAMILY FOOTBALL	Ian R. MacLeod	20
<i>Father was a centaur again today.</i>		
SYMPATHY FOR ZOMBIES	John Gregory Betancourt	26
<i>... and somewhat less, for certain tourists.</i>		
HIS SHADOW SHALL RISE TO A HIGHER HOUSE . . .	Thomas Ligotti	28
<i>The terrible enigma of the uncreated grave.</i>		
THE GIANT VORVIADES	Darrell Schweitzer	32
<i>Nemesis arose from the depths of dreams.</i>		
THE PIMP	Lawrence Watt-Evans	41
<i>The vampire drank so many lives — and remembered them all.</i>		
MOVIN' ON	Nicholas A. DiChario	44
<i>Possibly they were angels, or demons, or a bit of both.</i>		
THE DANCE AT WEIRDMOOR CASTLE	Lord Dunsany	51
<i>The cold was the worst, drawing him away from life.</i>		
BELLE	Tina & Tony Rath	54
<i>How could she ever live happily ever after?</i>		
UNLOCKING THE GOLDEN CAGE	Tanith Lee	56
<i>When greed and jealousy intertwine so dangerously...</i>		

VERSE

FUTILITY by Ann K. Schwader, 31. **TRIBAL SINGER** by Charles D. Eckert, 43. **TWILIGHT** by Catherine Mintz, 49. **ODE TO MY SCREEN SAVER** by Ian Watson, 50. **SENTRY** by Catherine Mintz, 65. **A DUNWICH SCHOOL PRIMER** by Darrell Schweitzer, 66.

FEATURES

THE EYRIE		4
SHADOWINGS	Douglas E. Winter	10
THE CLASSIC HORRORS: THE DWELLER IN THE GULF	Allen Koszowski	40

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Credibility vs. Credulity

We get books in the mail. That's one of the perks of being a magazine editor. Publishers send editors lots of new books for mention, review, or — sometimes — we're not entirely sure why, as when a copy of *The Tribble Handbook* showed up. We try to earn our freebies, with occasional editorial reviews, and with the convenient fact that one of your editors (Darrell) also happens to be book-reviewer for another DNA Publication, *Aboriginal Science Fiction*.

This puts us in a position to observe not just what is being published in the fantasy/horror field, but what publishers' publicists *think* belongs in the horror/-fantasy field. In the same way that science-fiction magazines get a lot of flying-saucer books, we've noticed a sudden influx of what might be called pseudo-fact books, such as two nicely illustrated volumes by W. Haden Blackman, *The Field Guide to North American Hauntings* and *The Field Guide to North American Monsters* (Three Rivers Press, trade paperback, \$15.00 each). These are both filled with very dubious-looking photos, including a very famous still from alleged Sasquatch footage (or is that Bigfootage?) on the cover of the *Monsters* volume, which, we confess, looks to us remarkably like a man in a gorilla suit. Both books are arranged the same way a field guide to birds or butterflies would be, with little charts listing each critter's (or in the case of the *Hauntings* volume, specter's) range, habits, and frequency. This last is marked by cute little icons. Thus the Jersey Devil gets four little monsters and is thus rated quite common, as is the infamous Chupacabra (The Goatsucker), although fortunately gigantic anthropophagous owls are apparently much scarcer. Both books also give the searcher handy hints (and precautions) for amateur monster (or ghost) hunters.

The *Monsters* book is done with a certain detectable amount of facetiousness, as when the Jackalope (a rabbit with huge antlers) is accredited to "American folklore and creative taxidermy," but *Hauntings* is considerably more serious, presumably aimed at people who really believe that the Hull House in Chicago is haunted by at least four hooded phantoms and a "devil baby," and that the Amityville "Horror" is to be given some sort of credence. We are not told, "some people believe this" or "it is reported" but, quite unambiguously, that these things are so. Thus both volumes are what we classify as anti-educational material, since they perpetuate untrue information and make the public more ignorant, rather than less, about the way the world around them really works.

What, you may ask, has this sort of supermarket tabloid stuff to do with *Weird Tales*®? The answer is, we hasten to assure you, very little, no more than, say, Whitley Strieber's *Communion* has anything to do with the contents of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. The two Blackman *Field Guide* books are of only marginal interest to fantasy readers or writers. It's intriguing to read some of the older folklore, such as the story of the Bell Witch of Tennessee, which was the subject of a pretty good novel by Brent Monahan recently, but otherwise the general rule seems to apply here as with the more science-fictional stuff (saucers, abductions by alien xenoproctologists), namely that once a fantastic motif filters down to the lowest levels of popular consciousness and begins to appear in "true" books for the credulous, then the motif is probably too degraded for further literary use. We will qualify that by saying that if you want to write a haunted-house story and make it conform to traditional lore on the subject, then *A Field Guide to*

American Hauntings might be worth skimming through. Such novels as Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* and Marvin Kaye's and Parke Godwin's *A Cold Blue Light* make excellent use of "true" haunted-house data. But you aren't going to produce a saleable weird tale by just dipping into *The Field Guide to American Monsters* and coming up with a beastie no one has written about yet. A story has to be a lot more than that. In fact, rather than going to the "true" material, wouldn't it be more fun to make up something which *sounds* like it belongs in a book like this but is entirely original? It's so easy to disarm the reader that way. Your editor (Darrell again) admits to deriving great amusement from the "authentic" Pennsylvanian German folklore inserted into his story "The Outside Man," which was originally published in Peter Crowther's 1994 anthology, *Narrow Houses*. It sounded very convincing, the Outside Man of the title being a kind of conscience-demon you meet in the woods when you have something really wicked in mind, whom you have to summon three times and tell your intent three times in order to make it true. This was even backed up with a spurious passage "quoted" from the otherwise quite genuine 19th century "hex" book, *The Long Lost Friend*. Maybe in time this particular Schweitzerian demon will find its way into "true" Field Guides and the like, even as did Arthur Machen's equally fictional "Angels of Mons." But the author made it up. Everything. What he'd learned from books like *The Field Guide to North American Monsters* was not the "facts" but the idiom of belief.

Okay, we'll admit it. We're skeptics, by which we mean the kind of folks who demand extraordinary proof for extraordinary claims, rather than just taking such reports on face value. We're rather doubtful about ghosts and psychic powers, regarding them as unproven, and certainly very doubtful indeed as to the existence of the Jackalope, the Jersey Devil, the Goatsucker, Mothman, or the Phantom Kangaroos of the American West. We're not very convinced by flying saucers and alien xenoproctologists either.

But *is* there a link between fakelore and fantasy? Aren't they both kinds of imaginative exercise?

It's always been our contention, although hardly our original idea, since H.P. Lovecraft said the same thing over fifty years ago, that the skeptical fantasy writer has a certain advantage, because he is in control of his material in ways a True Believer cannot be. If you honestly believe that magic works thus-and-so or that ghosts have certain characteristics, then such data are, for you, part of the realistic background of your story. If the needs of the story are otherwise, you're stuck, the same way Mark Twain got stuck about halfway through *Huckleberry Finn*. The story was going along gloriously until Twain suddenly realized that this was about a boy trying to smuggle a black man out of slavery, on a raft, on the Mississippi River, which flows *south*. American literature almost lost its greatest single book, as Twain put *Huckleberry Finn* aside for more than a year before he figured his way out of *that* one.

In fantasy, things you can't change are what we might call the eternal verities of the human heart: love hate, fear, loneliness, ambition etc. Get those right and you *can* do the equivalent of turning the Mississippi around. You can create a whole universe, up to the level of its gods. You get to *decide* whether there are ghosts or not. (One of the key questions to ask when making up original mythology is "Where do the dead go?" Perhaps they go into the belly of the great cosmic crocodile. See "To Become a Sorcerer" in *Weird Tales*® 313, in which your editor got quite a bit of mileage out of that one.)

Only a doctrinaire occultist "knows" how ghosts behave or what magical spells work and how. The occultist, writing fiction, is bound by that belief, even as the realist Twain was bound by the geography of the central United States. It certainly limits possibilities. Worse yet, as Lovecraft pointed out, the believer is less likely to give such elements much buildup, since to the believer a ghost is nearly as much a part of everyday reality as a streetcar. The non-believer is more likely to see the dramatic possibilities, and to move beyond the accepted, accumulated lore, which is precisely why we, as science-fiction and fantasy readers, don't find our imaginations all that much stimulated by the likes of *The Field Guide to American Hauntings*. We can do better. Lovecraft, who did not believe in ghosts, instead invented Cthulhu and the myth of the Great Old Ones.

And speaking of phantoms, before we get on with the letters, we must mention that we're looking for a disappearing author, one **Robert G. Evans**, formerly of Pennsville, NJ. We have a story of his on hand that we'd like to buy, but our acceptance letter to him bounced. We've tried to locate him through writers' organizations, to no avail. If anybody knows where he is, please ask him to get in touch.

And some phantom publishing credits. We buy *First North American Serial Rights* for stories published in *Weird Tales*®. That's a phrase every writer should take to heart. It means we are not buying the *story* but instead renting the privilege of being the first publisher to publish it in English, in North America, in a magazine. This does not preclude stories already published in England. But some readers ask us to point this out, and so we shall. There are actually four stories from Over There making North American debuts in this issue. Ramsey Campbell's "Kill Me Hideously" first appeared in a British small-press anthology, *Dead of Night*, edited by Stephen Jones. "His Shadow Shall Rise to a Higher

House" by Thomas Ligotti originally appeared in a limited-edition, *In a Foreign Town, In a Foreign Land*, published by Durtro in 1997, and well on its way to being one of the great (and fabulously expensive) collector's items of our time: a small hardcover collection of four original Ligotti stories, published to accompany a CD of avant-garde music inspired by his work. The original sold for \$65 a copy and is well out of print. We are proud to make such a story available to the general public, as we are to resurrect Lord Dunsany's "The Dance at Weirdmoor Castle," which originally appeared in *Homes and Gardens* for December 1950 and is copyright 1950 by Lord Dunsany and reprinted by arrangement with Curtis-Brown, Ltd. on behalf of the Trustees of the Dunsany Will Trust. Darrell Schweitzer's "The Giant Vorviades" originally appeared in *Interzone* #99 in 1995.

We got more letters this time than last, which is gratifying, and suggests that maybe somebody reads these editorials.

This one, from **Marilyn Mattie Brahen** didn't have to travel far, but we think it contains good advice:

I read, with an uncomfortable sense that I was seeing a doppelganger of my former self, the disgruntled writer's letter in The Eyrie (Issue #314). "Fast food" indeed. A letter of my own was once published in Newsweek, (responding to a mainstream author who inserted a fellatio scene at the editor's request to spice up her novel), decrying a reading public who had forgotten what sirloin steak tasted like, force-fed hamburger by publishers. Since then, and countless rejections of my own writing later, I've grown up, having met an editor about seven years ago who genuinely cares about good writing. Since meeting him, I chose never to submit to Weird Tales, so that charges of nepotism shouldn't fall upon our heads, as he, now my husband, is Darrell Schweitzer. My choice, honorable though it seems on my part, was probably one of great relief to him. He has extremely sharp standards, and my writing doesn't always measure up. But I must assure that rejected author: Mr. Schweitzer is a thorough reader. Like most knowledgeable editors, he can tell by the first manuscript page if a story is potentially publishable, and if so, will give it a fair chance. He also knows the difference between mindless action and a moving plot.

At our writer's workshop, he's firmly blue-penciled my stories. Recently, he criticized a new one, pointing out flaws. I revised it and he reread it, only to tell me it still had little or no plot. "There's no conflict," he said. "Nothing happens to challenge your characters." While frustrated, I finally recognized that it lacked this basic element of fiction, and was as intriguing as "See Dick run. Run, Dick, run." And — drat — most readers long ago graduated first grade!

Now, under the circumstances (!), I do get to talk back, but wife or not, the story always comes first (Catherine de Camp once told him, the typewriter is "the other woman." I add sardonically: so are editorial criteria.) When my writing waxes poetic, and I attempt to justify it as artistic license, despite group consensus that I ought to cut the crap and get on with a story, my erudite spouse shrugs his eyebrows, and says, "Send it out and see what happens." A few rejection slips later, I come to my senses, and get back to work on that incomplete piece that revising and polishing (not wishful thinking) might make publishable. I've finally learned something from the criticism that he and our group dished out to me, as honestly as they could, trying for neat surgical cuts that wouldn't bleed too much. Invariably, I write a better story, and a few have been published.

So I suggest all disgruntled writers not quiver and fume more than a day or two when receiving a personal rejection letter. After all, it's only free advice, and we don't have to take it.

To which we can only add that the virtue of editorial advice as *free* advice is not inconsiderable. After all, there are any number of writing workshops, writing programs, and correspondence schools which expect you to pay for that advice. We will never do that at *Weird Tales*®.

That same letter in #314 also brought a comment from **Elaine Weaver**, who writes:

Choosing my favorite was not easy, but I finally settled on Tanith Lee's "Stars Above, Stars Below." The "Author's Note" at the end of this poignant tale made me smile. Contrary to the edict issued by our frustrated rejectee in The Eyrie, I did not see it coming. This is also the case with Brian Stableford's "Rent," which ended on a note both touching

and chilling. Catching the reader off-balance is one of the hallmarks of a Weird Tales storyteller, and one more reason to love the magazine.

Nevertheless I was interested to learn that the spurned writer knows exactly what the problem is with readers like me; all I want is action! No wonder I am always so tired!

Famous SF and Fantasy grandmaster **Jack Williamson** responded to an offhand comment in last issue's editorial (about not *all* of the contents of the original *Weird Tales*® being deathless classics):

I had reason to be happy that Farnsworth Wright, to fill the magazine, sometimes bought stories that were not quite classics. My first contribution was inspired by a story (I think it had to do with the Spanish conquest of Mexico, though author and title are long forgotten) that struck me as so bad that I thought I might be able to do as well. Fortunately for me, Wright seemed to agree.

Incidentally, I think he would have been proud of #314.

We point out that Jack Williamson's first story appeared, not in *Weird Tales*®, but in *Amazing*, in the December 1928 issue, five months before our eldest editor was even born. His debut in *Weird Tales*® was with "The Wand of Doom" in our October 1932 issue. His most famous appearance here was the serial, *Golden Blood*, in six parts beginning in April 1933. His most recent novel is science fiction, *The Silicon Dagger*, soon to appear from Tor.

John Peyton Cooke writes from New York:

I did not know Weird Tales was back among us until I saw the beloved logo peeking out from among the other magazines at Barnes and Noble. I bought it, of course. How could I not? Among the many unique things about the Unique Magazine is that its readers are true believers — not in the supernatural, but in Weird Tales for its own sake.

More than ample justification for Weird Tales's continued existence is provided by Brian Stableford's superb, creepy "Rent." As a gay man, a fan of vampire fiction, a Weird Tales reader, and a Weird Tales writer (#295), I must say that I have a long-standing craving for this kind of tale, especially when done with such originality and grace.

Once again, George Barr came through with an exquisite illustration, the meaning of which I failed to grasp until I was well into the tale. Those hands across the stomach!

I do, however, have one quibble with "Rent" that applies equally to any work of vampire fiction that attempts to assert that HIV/AIDS will mean "death" of the undead. If vampires have managed thus far not to be destroyed by such infectious diseases as bubonic plague, smallpox, cholera, influenza, or syphilis (not to mention rabies, endemic in vampire bats), why should we believe that they will be laid waste by HIV/AIDS?

This untenable position was central to two tales by two usually reliable horror masters: "The Bedposts of Life" by Robert Bloch (Weird Tales, Summer 1991) and "Death in Bangkok" by Dan Simmons (Playboy, June '93). In both cases the HIV/AIDS "revelation" came at the very end and, instead of destroying the vampires in question, utterly ruined any credibility the tales might otherwise have had for me. I was glad to find that in "Rent," this anemic idea ran off in a peripheral vein and did nothing to abate the full aortic thrust of the story.

Actually it would seem more likely that vampires should *cause* AIDS rather than suffer from it, since throughout the ages the vampire myth has been a disease metaphor. This is developed explicitly in the film *Nosferatu* (both versions) in which the vampire leads a troop of rats into a city and brings the plague. Further, there was recently a fascinating special on PBS about a vampirism scare that happened (for real) in New England in the 19th century. Corpses have recently been discovered in their graves very obviously disturbed after death and mutilated, often staked down, or with the legs cut off and crossed over the chest, presumably to prevent the undead from walking anywhere. This was the work of terrified rustics trying to cope with a deadly tuberculosis epidemic they could not understand or control. In any case, it only seems logical that a supernatural creature which is already dead — really a form of predatory ghost — should be immune to physical diseases.

Christopher Dunn notes that #314 was lighter weight, I thought. No bad stories, no great ones either. Well, with Lee and Stableford and Somtow you 're not going to have any bad stories.

Best is hard to say. I liked "The Haunting of the H.M.S. Dryad," but I'm never sure if light-hearted fantasy is the real stuff— though you'd think a long acquaintance with Discworld would have cured that, even if Zelazny (or Leiber!) hadn't. Liked "Until Time Cracks " and "O Tannenbaum " too.

Of course "Rent" is fine, even, yet again (so far as I know), an original approach to the vampire thing. But, after a while — well, it gets to be like another Ph.D. candidate looking for one more original bit of research on, say, "Shakespeare's Approach To . . ." The story's good, and I don't mean it isn't: tight, tense, grim, believable. But, still — more vampires? You know what I mean.

Well, yes. But you've also explained why we bought *that* story — "original, tight, tense, believable, etc." There's no denying that vampires are fashionable right now to the extent of a genuine cultural phenomenon. We won't deny, too, that we deliberately mention vampire stories on the cover in hope of selling more copies. But we also insist that vampire stories be good stories. We insist on that, far more than we insist on there being vampires present. If both happen to occur in the same story, great, it will sell copies, something no magazine editor is averse to.

Avery Hudson has difficulty choosing a favorite in #314, but ultimately settles on *Tanith Lee*, whose two-paragraph vision of winged cat people gliding through the ether from the Martian to the Egyptian desert (in the middle of the story) is one of the best prose poems I've read this year. He further adds: *It looks like you are continuing to provide fertile ground for writers and artists to experiment in traditional forms and express new concepts. After Poe's crystallization of the macabre tale in the 1840's and Lovecraft's "cosmic reality that predates human history and reason" a half-century later, weird fiction is overdue for a new idea. It would be great to see it land in Weird Tales.*

Keith B. Johnston suggests, as others have in the past, that we reprint earlier covers and illustrations, along with stories from earlier issues. We have to regretfully decline. Many *Weird Tales*® illustrations and covers have been reprinted, and certainly we couldn't do justice to them, reproducing what was a color cover in black and white on pulp paper. The book *Pulp Culture*, which we reviewed last issue, has numerous excellent reproductions of covers in it. There has been at least one book so far which consisted of nothing *but* reproductions of *Weird Tales*® covers. As for the stories, no, we don't expect you to spend thousands of dollars to acquire a complete *Weird Tales*® collection. But anthologies based on this magazine continue to appear at the rate of one every year or so. We already have a shelf of them. The original *Weird Tales*® is already one of the most reprinted-from magazines that ever existed. Also, not too expensively, the collector can acquire old copies of the magazines edited by the late Robert A.W. Lowndes, *The Magazine of Horror*, *Startling Mystery*, and *Bizarre Fantasy*, which consisted almost entirely of reprints from *Weird Tales*® and other rare pulps. They also managed to reprint virtually the entire contents to the 1931-32 rival magazine *Strange Tales*, copies of which would cost you a good \$75.00 apiece. *The Magazine of Horror* can usually be found for about \$5 a copy.

Chris Bevard apologizes for not having written before, talks about how much he enjoyed the letters pages in such independent horror comics as *Death Rattle* and Eclipse's *Tales of Terror*, and gives us his (welcome) story votes; but he also adds that he always thought handwritten letters to be "more personable." Maybe so, but we find them harder to read. We prefer typewritten letters, please.

The Most Popular story for *Weird Tales*® #314 was the result of (we are glad to say) more intense voting than previously. There were moments of suspense, and a few surprises, as one story edged the other out of the top slot, and then was in turn edged out, just barely. It was a close race, but the first place vote went to S.P. Somtow's "The Hero's Celluloid Journey," with Brian Stableford's remarkable "Rent" a very close second, and Tanith Lee's "Stars Above, Stars Below" coming in right behind that.

Editorial Book Reviews

by Darrell Schweitzer

The Cleft and Other Odd Tales

by Gahan Wilson

Tor Books, hardcover, 1998

333 pp. \$23.95

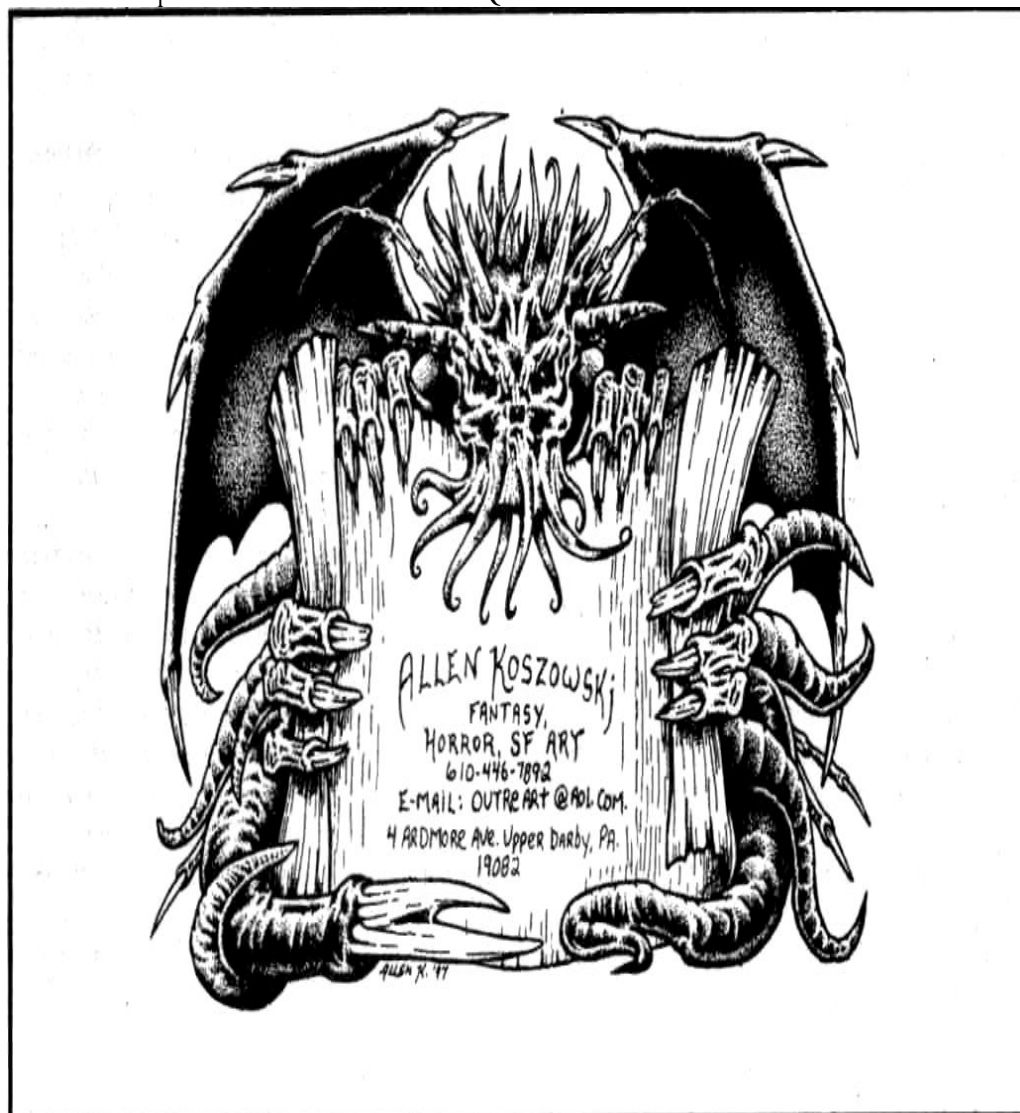
Gahan Wilson's Even Weirder

Forge, 1996, trade paperback 239 pp. \$16.95

Gahan Wilson has been a sometime contributor to *Weird Tales*® (illustrating the Robert Bloch issue, #300) with artwork and a book review column. We'd like to publish his fiction someday, as it too has the same admirable weirdness to it which has made him, since the death of Charles Addams, the macabre cartoonist (with only Edward Gorey as a possible rival). His prose fiction is far less known, because there hasn't been that much of it. *The Cleft* collects stories dating from the '60s to the '90s. The best of them are either very good jokes, like prose cartoons, or curiously profound fables (the title story), or quaintly old-fashioned little horrors, the sort you expect English adventurers to tell in the leisure of their clubs, circa 1920 — only nothing remains leisurely, safe, or predictable. Our favorite in this vein is the ink-blot story. It has no title, but the blot which keeps getting bigger and nastier as it moves through the text. Recommended, of course.

Gahan Wilson's *Even Weirder* is the most recent collection of Wilson cartoons, the title referring back to the previous one, *Still Weirder*. Who can resist Mr. Wilson's grimly humorous explorations of life and death — ? We particularly liked the internet address on the gravestone, and the Grim Reaper who carries an electronic beeper when on call.

Q



SHADOWINGS

by Douglas E. Winter



Someone said: "The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did." Precisely, and they are that which we know.

— T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*

Three Gothic Novels.

by Charles Brockden Brown.

The Library of America, hc, 914 pp., \$35.00

A man bursts spontaneously into flames. Disembodied voices speak from a closet. Religious mania incites the murder of innocents.

This is not a new novel by Stephen King, but a book that is two hundred years old: *Wieland, or The Transformation* (1798), the first novel by America's first professional writer, Charles Brockden Brown. Twenty years before Washington Irving's *Sketch Book* — and decades before Edgar Allan Poe's first short story — Brown abandoned a legal career to champion a new and uniquely American literature. *Three Gothic Novels*, which collects the best of his fiction, is a bicentennial tribute to this dimly remembered but highly influential wordsmith.

Born of Philadelphia Quakers on January 17, 1771, Brown transcended a sickly childhood and a wearying apprenticeship at law to pen a series of popular essays that convinced him, and his parents, that he could earn a living as a writer. Although his career was brief — Brown died of tuberculosis on February 22, 1810 — his ambition was intense and his output was prolific. He published six novels; founded, edited, and wrote for several literary journals; and, in the final decade of his life, crafted notable political critiques and Federalist tracts.

The weighty social commentary of William Godwin provoked Brown's first published book, *Alcuin, a Dialogue* (1798), a treatise on the rights of women and an early appeal for suffrage. The manuscript of his first novel, *Sky Walk, or The Man Unknown to Himself* (1797), was lost when his publisher died of yellow fever; but Brown labored on, creating, in less than three years, four of his novels, including the texts presented here.

A self-styled "storytelling moralist," Brown saw fiction as a moral force, but one that was populist — meant to entertain while provoking philosophical inquiry and debate. He embraced the structure and style of the Gothic romance, then twisted its impulses into a darker complexity that prefigured the insistent themes of American literature: murder, insanity, corruption, conspiracy, religious fervor, familial strife, distrust of institutions, distrust of self. Although flawed, with plots that move impulsively and illogically, and prose that ranges from the incisive to the overwrought, Brown's novels rank with, and occasionally transcend, those of his British contemporaries.

Wieland remains his best known work, and deserves its pride of place as the fountainhead of American Gothic. Although later novels demonstrate a more mature and controlled style, none surpasses the bravado of *Wieland* or its emotional intensity. Subtitled *An American Novel*, it is based upon a sensational crime of the era — a delusional father's murder of his wife and children — whose shocking circumstances were reinvented by Brown in order to explore their moral repercussions. Here, as in later novels, Brown brought more mundane Gothic concerns — romance, class, character, landscape — into collision with ultimate questions of faith, divinity, and eternity.

The narrative is an epistle from an archetypal Gothic heroine — Clara Wieland — whose placid life with her brother and his wife succumbs to a harrowing series of dire and seemingly inexplicable events: "What is man, that knowledge is so sparingly conferred upon him! that his heart should be wrung with distress, and his frame be exanimated with fear, though his safety be encompassed with impregnable walls!" Clara survives the persecution through a desperate kind of faith — a belief in revelation — but her brother's religious melancholy is sent hurtling into obsession. A mysterious voice commands him to kill

his wife and children, and the deed sculpts him into a "monument of woe" whose only salvation is death.

Like another influence, Mrs. Radcliffe, Brown offers natural, if tenuous, explanations for the apparently supernatural events of *Wieland*, assuring the reader that the bright light of rationalism will resolve most, but not all, worldly fears. The crucial terrors, Brown urges, are those of the mind; and his fascination with the pathological would haunt each of his major novels.

Arthur Mervyn, or Memoirs of the Year 1793 (1799-1800) is the longest and most daunting of Brown's works. Originally published in two parts and inspired by Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, it is set, with accomplished realism, in one of America's plague years. As the yellow fever scourges Philadelphia, the narrator rescues and befriends young Mervyn, a wayward and misunderstood lad whose true nature — abused waif or devious scoundrel — remains ambiguous to the very end. The layered and occasionally perplexing story finds Brown manipulating Gothic conventions to present a stirring argument for civic responsibility toward the impoverished, the ill, the downtrodden.

Far more intriguing and entertaining is *Edgar Huntly, or Memoirs of a Sleep Walker* (1799), which is arguably the first American detective novel, as well as the first American novel to include Native Americans. Its introduction is a brief manifesto in which Brown proposes an American literature that is liberated, like the new nation, from its European past:

America has opened new views to the naturalist and politician, but has seldom furnished themes to the moral painter. That new springs of action, and new motives to curiosity should operate; that the field of investigation, opened to us by our own country, should differ essentially from those which exist in Europe, may be readily conceived. The sources of amusement to the fancy and instruction to the heart, that are peculiar to ourselves, are equally numerous and inexhaustible. It is the purpose of this work to profit by some of these sources; to exhibit a series of adventures, growing out of the condition of our country, and connected with one of the most common and most wonderful diseases or affections of the human frame.

Edgar Huntly replaces the expected tropes of the Gothic ("Puerile superstitions and exploded manners; Gothic castles and chimeras") with elements of a peculiarly American darkness ("incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness"). Its troubled narrator trails the sleepwalking enigma Huntly, who may have murdered his best friend, through a labyrinthine American frontier. His dark passage through a maze of forests, caves, and cliffs soon comes to symbolize the moral dilemma at the core of the novel: whether criminology can understand and explain a mind in nightmarish conflict.

Indeed, it is the intensely psychological nature of Brown's novels, their unreliable narrators, their morbid curiosity, their willing descent into dementia and pathology, that sets them apart from their Gothic kin — and, of course, anticipates the tales of Edgar Allan Poe (who read and was no doubt influenced by Brown). Central to the human drama, Brown observes, is the tragedy of men and women wrestling with their inherent imperfection.

A character in *Arthur Mervyn* thus offers a despairing confession:

What it was that made me thus, I know not. I am not destitute of understanding. My thirst of knowledge, though irregular, is ardent. I can talk and can feel as virtue and justice prescribe; yet the tenor of my actions has been uniform. One tissue of iniquity and folly has been my life; while my thoughts have been familiar with enlightened and disinterested principles. Scorn and detestation I have heaped upon myself. Yesterday is remembered with remorse. To-morrow is contemplated with anguish and fear; yet every day is productive of the same crimes and of the same follies.

Although his name may be forgotten, the novels of Charles Brockden Brown are a remarkable legacy, crucial not only to American fiction but also to the evolving *literature of horror and the supernatural* that would be perfected by Poe and other more famed successors, from the Shelleys to Hawthorne and Lovecraft — and, in time, to Faulkner, Shirley Jackson and, indeed, Stephen King. *Three Gothic Novels* is a welcome, if long overdue, celebration of an American original.

The Collector of Hearts: New Tales of the Grotesque

by Joyce Carol Oates.

Dutton/William Abrahams. 336 pp. \$23.95.

Invisible Writer: A Biography of Joyce Carol Oates

by Greg Johnson Dutton. 492 pp. \$34.95.

An exquisite fable called "The Sky Blue Ball" introduces *The Collector of Hearts*, a gathering of recent stories by Joyce Carol Oates. Its narrator recounts the epiphany of her adolescent solitude: While walking in a strange neighborhood, a ball is thrown to her by someone on the far side of a high brick wall. The ball is blue, beautiful and new, "like a rubber ball I'd played with years before as a little girl; a ball I'd loved and had long ago misplaced; a ball I'd loved 'and had forgotten." She returns the ball to her unseen playmate, who throws the ball back to her, and the game of catch continues until interrupted by a desperate thought: "This is the surprise I've been waiting for. For somehow I had acquired the belief that a surprise, a nice surprise, was waiting for me. I had only to merit it, and it would happen." Now the ball is flung far from her, and recovering it nearly takes her into the path of a passing truck. Shaken, she returns the ball again, but the game, it seems, is over; when she climbs the wall, she finds no one on the other side—just the ball, worn and cracked and old, its sky blue color gone.

The bittersweet nostalgia that imbues *The Collector of Hearts* is a central motif of the Anglo-American ghost story; but for Joyce Carol Oates, the past is a spectre more haunting than anything the supernatural might have to offer. These fictions confront the loss of innocence—or the gaining of guilt—through experience or, more often, as reminiscence, repeatedly underscoring the collision of now and then. The revelation of "The Sky Blue Ball" is thus reprised in "Shadows of the Evening" and several other entries, including the delirious "Fever Blisters," in which two aged lovers reunite in the once-grand hotel that was home to their adulterous affair, only to learn a simple lesson: "It isn't romantic at all."

Now that commercial publishers have debauched "horror" as an acceptable literary descriptive, it is fashionable for writers of dark and fantastic fiction to apply more discreet labels to their work. Oates styles these stories, like those of an earlier collection, *Haunted* (1994), as "Tales of the Grotesque," which suggests, somewhat unfairly, a focus on the garish, the extreme, the absurd. If anything, *The Collector of Hearts* is subdued in its imagery and its physical violence—although there are moments of almost gleeful indulgence in the stuff of splatter films. Perhaps the most notorious is "Unprintable," which reads like a paean to the legendary E.C. Comics of the 1950s: a straightfaced adventure in ironic vengeance in which a prominent pro-choice activist is tormented by the revenants of aborted fetuses.

Other tales enact familiar scenarios of generational and gender oppression in which the old (and usually male) corrupt, if not obliterate, the young (and usually female). In the surprisingly literal title story, a fiftyish judge seduces a naive, gum-cracking defendant; it is not an act of romance, but of possession and, no doubt, murder. In a similar setpiece titled only with a black rectangle, Oates essays a woman's repressed, perhaps inexpressible, memories of the shiny Sunday on which her girlhood ended in sexual abuse. What Oates brings to these otherwise obvious plotlines is a remarkable voice, often that of the victim, which gives life and meaning—and truth—to events that lesser writers would merely play out for shock or sensation.

Unfortunately, these stories, although consistently skilled, tend to suffer in the collective. Unless read sparingly and with great patience, not as a book but for an occasional story, *The Collector of Hearts* proves a blur of obsessively similar themes and characters and plots; indeed, only "The Sky Blue Ball" and a handful of other tales remain unique and memorable. "The Affliction," in particular, offers a moving metaphor for the pain of creativity, considering the valedictory exhibition of an elderly artist whose artwork, in fact, is the extirpation of a mysterious disease. "[T]he affliction isn't fatal," he learns. "It's something you can learn to live with Until you scarcely think of it until it happens. And then, of course . . . , you have no choice."

It is tempting to some to believe that writers—particularly those whose work is drawn to the dark side—are not born, but somehow bred. Clues are sought from their lives, preferably their childhoods, in the superficial belief that some dire event must have encouraged, if not engendered, their creative vision. *Invisible Writer*, the first biography of Joyce Carol Oates, offers far more reasoned and complex sensibilities. Written with Oates's cooperation by a worthy inquisitor, novelist and English professor Greg Johnson, it is a careful and detailed account of a life that is far from public. Despite a prolific literary career (and once gracing the cover of *Newsweek*), Oates is indeed invisible, known to her readers entirely through her writing. Certainly her past has its share of ghosts: an autistic sister whom Johnson portrays as an eerie doppelganger; a university friend who suffered a homicidal breakdown; Oates's own near-breakdown and recurrent health problems. Just as certainly, those ghosts have been exercised, if not exorcized, in her fiction. But in reading Johnson's account of her life and her life's work, there is no doubt that, when it comes to writing, Joyce Carol Oates—like the artist of "The Affliction"—has no choice. She was born to write.

KILL ME HIDEOUSLY

by Ramsey Campbell

illustrated by Allen Koszowski

"I don't read this kind of stuff myself, but could you sign it for my son?"

As Lisette clenched her fists on his behalf, Willy Bantam raised his heavy eyelids and gave the man ahead of her a full-lipped smile almost as wide as his plump face. "What's his name?" he said.

The man told him, and Bantam sent the son his best wishes on the title page of *The Smallest Trace of Fear*. Lisette swung her tapestry bag off her shoulder as the man retrieved the book, and the volumes in the bag nudged him none too gently at the base of his spine. She made sure he saw her place them in front of their author, who greeted her and them with exactly the smile he'd produced for her predecessor. "Sins of my youth," he remarked.

"They're not sins, and you aren't so old. I don't want them for anyone but me."

"Shall I sign them to . . ."

"Lisette."

"That's a pretty unusual name."

"Thank you," she breathed, and managed not to simper as she watched him begin to inscribe the title page of *Ravage!* She took a breath that tasted of saliva. "Would you put it in . . ."

"I am, look."

"I don't mean that. I mean, do sign them for me, I'll hold them even dearer then, but when you've finished, Willy, can I call you that..."

"That's who I was before I was William."

"You were when you wrote these, so will you be for me?"

"Anything for an old supporter."

He meant old in the sense of faithful, Lisette thought as he signed his original name. She was certain his pen was moving more fluently, happy to rediscover what it used to write. She waited for him to open *Writhe!* before she said "The thing I was going to ask you — when you write another book like these, will you put me in it?"

He didn't look up until he'd finished wishing her the best above his zippy signature, and then he gave her a straightened smile. "I'll see if I can find somebody called Lisette a role in one of the kind I write now."

"Don't be insulted, but that's no good. Shall I tell you why?"

"There are people behind you, but please."

"Because in this new one you never describe what happens to the girls who disappear."

"There's the scene where the policewoman has to try and say what she found."

"She doesn't even say three whole sentences. You used to write at least a chapter. The first girl in *Writhe!* got thirteen pages in the hardcover and sixteen in the paperback."

"My agent and my editor persuaded me you could imagine worse than I could ever describe."

Lisette saw the manager of Book Yourself frown at the queue behind her and direct more of the expression at her. "I'm not paying to imagine, I'm paying you to," she said.

"Then I hope these old excesses of mine give you your money's worth."

"I've read them. Thanks for them," Lisette said, and once they were nestling safely in her bag, hugged it to her as she marched out of the shop.

Beyond her Renault, which she'd had to park several hundred yards away, the lights of the department stores and fast-food eateries were padded with November fog. The street was deserted except for a man in a dark raincoat whose length and looseness put her in mind of a slaughterhouse. The lights lent his stiff expressionless face all the colours of a lurid paperback: As she stooped to unlock the car he arrived behind her, and she sensed a cold presence at the back of her neck: his breath as chill as his intentions, the imminent clutch of his hand? It was only the fog.

Five minutes' driving through the blurred streets of the city took her home. She lived in the middle of a row of youthful houses, each of them little wider than the garage that occupied most of the ground floor — no more than a slice of a house, she often thought, but all she needed. Having let herself into and closed the garage with the remote control, she unlocked the door that led from the garage into the house.

A narrow staircase lit by bulbs in cut-glass flowers ascended to the middle floor, half of it a kitchen and dining area, the rest solemnly described by the estate agent as a compact living space. In Lisette's case it was a library, its walls hidden by shelves stuffed with books. She crossed it to the farther staircase and climbed to the solitary bedroom.

She gave her secrets time to glimmer before she fingered the switch. The light seemed to draw the contents of the wall beyond the foot of the bed into a pattern she alone might sometime be able to

interpret. The wall was covered with jackets of second-hand Willy Bantam novels and pages torn from them, framed by two female mouths stretched wide by screams, posters for *Ravage!* and *Writhe!* which Lisette had saved from a bookshop bin. She loved the mouth from *Writhe!* most — you could see the tongue starting to grow bigger and longer and harder.

She hung her coat on the back of the door and lay on the bed, her shoulders against the headboard. She placed one of the autographed books on either side of her on the fat quilt, then she opened *Ravage!* and read the inscription, running her fingers over the back of the page to feel how it was embossed by his signature. She was making herself wait, causing all her lips to tingle with anticipation, before she turned to her favourite scene.

"... Sally had never known why he called them his ghoulies until she kicked him there. When he went into a crouch she thought she had put him out of action long enough for her to run, and then he jerked his head up, gleefully licking his lips. His hands came for her, except they were no longer just hands. His thumbs had stiffened and swelled huge. One moist throbbing thumb forced her mouth open, and the member slid over her tongue. The shock was so intense it was beyond shock, it was an experience she wouldn't have dared admit even to herself she'd dreamed of. She felt his other hand push her skirt above her waist and slide her panties down her helpless legs, and then the pulsing erection that was his other thumb slid deep into her. She would have gasped if she'd been able, and not only because of that — because a slick lengthening finger had found her nether orifice and wormed its way in. The rhythmic penetration was reaching for her deepest self from too many directions to withstand, and as wave after wave of forbidden ecstasy swept away the last of her control she fell back on the bed. When his face above hers began to change there was nothing she could do. . . ."

There was plenty Lisette could do if she put her mind to it. She pushed one thumb in and out of her mouth, she bit down on it as the other stroked her clitoris and forged deeper while a finger poked between her buttocks. She moaned, she gasped, she writhed on the bed, raising her knees high and flinging her legs wide. She came within an inch of convincing herself.

When she was too exhausted to counterfeit any more pleasure she let all her muscles sag. For just a moment that state considered feeling like the release she'd laboured to achieve, and then the dead weight of frustration settled on her. It was waiting in the night whenever she lurched awake, and she was hardly aware of having slept when the bedside clock began to squeak at her to get ready for work.

Her car felt like a helmet not a great deal more metallic than her head. It gave her only just enough protection from the traffic, cars and lorries battling to be first past holes in the roads. All the workers crowding into the city were of a single mind that compelled them to rush along the pavements and bunch at crossings and flock across the roadways whenever lights summoned them. She parked as close to the glass doors of the Civic Coordination building as she could, then she buzzed to be let in.

A blank-walled lift carried her to the fifth floor. The switchboard room might as well have been window-less, since supervisor Bertha insisted on pulling down the blind as soon as the sun appeared in the window. Though the lines weren't due to open for five minutes, the girls were at their boards. "Here's Lisette," Vi said, blowing on her nails. "Bet she doesn't care if Tommo lives or dies."

"Double bet she's never seen him in her life," said Doris, appraising her face in a pocket mirror.

Bertha held up a hand as if to check it was as pale as the unsunned sky. "Hush now, ladies. She may not even know who our favourite gentleman is."

"Of course I do. He's one of your soapy people who's on every night. I wouldn't be watching him even if I had a television," Lisette said, and once the chorus of incredulity had passed its crescendo "I've a date with a man at a bookshop."

"I thought you saw him last night," protested Doris.

"That's why I am tonight."

"Is he one of your horrors?"

"He's the best there's ever been or will be," said Lisette, switching on her computer terminal as her board winked at her.

The caller was desperate for the times of a bus that had changed its route, the sort of call she and her colleagues dealt with every day. The world was full of people trying to catch up with it, and everybody had to find their own way of coping. Perhaps her workmates managed by doing away with their imaginations, she thought, and had to pity them for their need to care about someone who didn't exist. The point was to find out all you could about yourself, to store up that secret until you were alone with it, the prize you gave yourself at the end of the day — except that tonight she meant to win herself a bonus.

She dined swiftly at a Bunny Burger opposite the car park, then she drove to the next town. She was able to park almost outside another branch of Book Yourself that appeared to have brought many of its neighbours with it from her town for company. She let herself into the shop, and Willy Bantam saw her at once.

He didn't look at her again until the dozen people ahead of her had taken turns to linger. A fat man with a stammer moved aside at last, leaving her the aroma of his armpits, and the author met her eyes. "Back again," she said.

He was producing his smile when he saw the books she'd brought. "That's right, I signed these for you."

"Are you truly not going to write any more like them?"

"Nothing's changed since yesterday."

"Then I shouldn't make you. I've thought what you can do for me instead."

"What's that?"

She opened *Ravage!* at her chapter and turned it towards him. "Put me in this one."

"Put you ...How..."

"Cross Sally out and put my name instead. The way you describe her you could have been thinking of me. Here, use my pen."

When he didn't take it she planted it between his thumb and forefinger, and pressed her thighs together to contain an inadvertent stirring. "You only use her name five times. It won't take long," she said to enliven him. "She's Nell in *Writhe!* too, isn't she? Could she be your girlfriend?"

"It doesn't work like that."

"Here I am, then. Just this one," Lisette said, nudging the book towards him. "Don't worry, I won't sue."

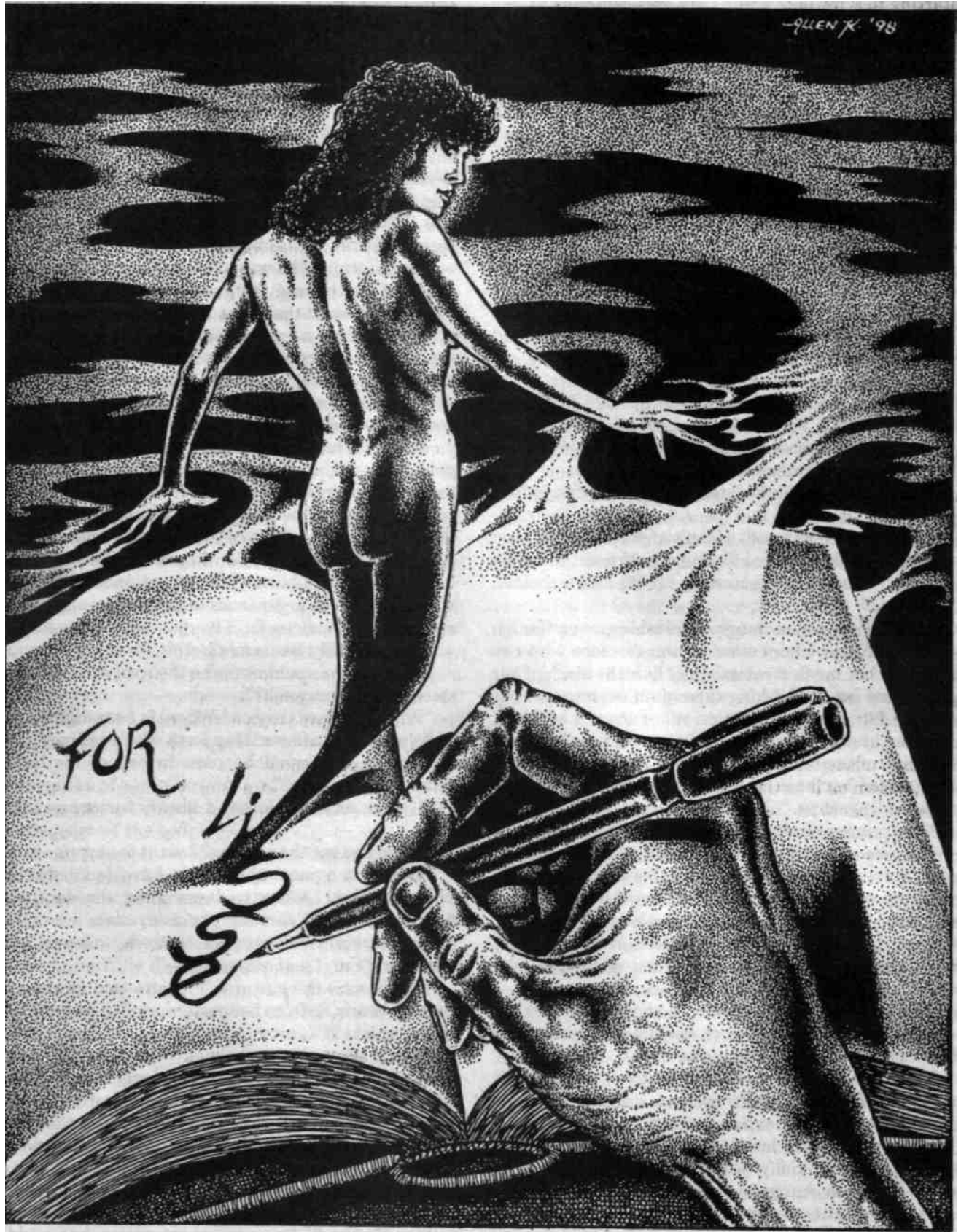
He raised the pen, but only to level it at her. "For what?"

"Using me for the worst you could think of."

He laid the pen at the very edge of the table and pulled his hand back. "That's yours."

"Can't you use that kind of pen?"

"I can't use any for what you want."



"No, you don't understand. I said I wouldn't sue you, as if I could when it's me who asked for it. I won't be any trouble, I promise."

"Then please don't be," the author said, and looked past her.

"Are you embarrassed? Hasn't anyone ever told you why they read your books? All us girls want to be his victims," Lisette said, turning to the next in line, "don't we?"

The girl seemed in danger of blushing, even though that would upset her colour scheme — face white as bone and not much meatier, spiky hair the black of her gloves and boots and long tube of an overcoat — but managed to respond with no more than a series of alarmed blinks. "We do even if we won't say," Lisette told the author, and had to regain her voice, because he'd closed her book and was sliding it towards her with his fingertips. "Couldn't you just...?"

"Your name's in it. You can't ask more than that."

"Oh, *thank* you." It seemed hardly possible that he could have substituted her name five times while she was busy with the other girl, but it would be worse than ungrateful of her to inspect the book in his presence. One acknowledgment of herself had to be all the magic Lisette needed. She bore her broad smile past the queue and smiled all the way home.

The garage closed itself behind her, the stairs lit the way to her bedroom. She took her time over removing her coat and unbuttoning the front of her dress, enjoying the delicious tension. She lay on the bed and took out *Ravage!*, which parted its pages at her chapter as though it was as eager to open as her body. Then her mouth widened, but no longer in a smile. Sally; Sally, Sally, Sally — Sally. Not a single use of the name had been changed to hers.

He'd lied to her, she thought shrilly as a scream, and then she saw he might only have told her he'd already signed the book. If he'd taken advantage of her willingness to trust him, that was worse than lying. Everything of importance in her room — the Willy Bantam books, the fragments of them on the walls — seemed implicated in the betrayal; the mouths were jeering at her. She flung herself off the bed and was on her way to the stairs before she realised the bookshop would be shut by the time she drove back.

She'd been made to look enough of a fool. That wasn't her kind of victim. When she felt calm enough she reopened the book and read the description of herself — long slim legs, trim waist, full breasts, blonde hair halfway down her back. Only the name was false. "Not for long," she promised, and kept repeating it as she lay at the edge of sleep.

Next morning she was at the office twenty minutes ahead of Bertha and the girls. She might as well not have bothered: at that hour Bassinet Press was represented only by an answering machine. She left a message for someone who was privy to Willy Bantam's movements to call her at the enquiry office by name, then waited most of the morning while nobody did. No doubt whoever should have called would be going for an extended lunch as Lisette understood everyone in publishing did, and so she had to contact them before they turned into a machine. The moment Bertha wasn't there to see her phoning out Lisette dialled Bassinet Press and spoke low. "I left a message for Willy Bantam's person. Can I have them now?"

"I'll give you publicity," the receptionist said, which struck Lisette as a generous offer until another voice announced "Publicity."

"Are you Willy Bantam's girl?"

"Mr Bantam's publicist is on the road with him. Can she call you next week?"

"What road are they on? Where is he tonight?"

"Nowhere, I believe. May I ask who's calling?"

"I'm an old friend he used in one of his books. Where's he on next?"

"I think he's reading at a library tomorrow afternoon."

"Have you got the address? I want to surprise him."

There was a pause that might have denoted reluctance, so that Lisette was searching the depths of herself for some further persuasiveness when her informant returned with the address, followed by a question: "Can I just take your —"

"Don't spoil the surprise," Lisette said as she saw Bertha returning from her customary five-minute visit to the toilet. "Thank you for calling," she added, she hoped not too suspiciously loud.

She had apparently fooled the supervisor, but perhaps not Vi or Doris. She didn't say a word to any of her colleagues until she'd had lunch amid the tinny clattering of the basement canteen, followed by several strolls around the car park in pursuit of her clouds of breath to use up the rest of

her lunch break. As soon as she was back at her desk, releasing Vi from hers, she said to Bertha "I know it's short notice, but could I have tomorrow afternoon off?"

Bertha turned from adjusting the blind, an irregularity of which had dared to admit a scrap of muffled sunlight. "Is it an emergency?"

Lisette grew aware that Doris was idle and listening. "It wouldn't seem like one to everybody, but —"

"Then we can't treat it as one, can we?" Bertha said with what might even have been a hint of genuine regret. "You know the rules as well as anyone. Forty-eight hours' notice of leave except in cases of absolute emergency."

This had never made sense to Lisette — it wasn't as though a substitute worker would be brought in. "I know you wouldn't want to be made an exception of and cause bad feeling," Bertha said, at which Doris gave a nod of agreement so meaningful it might well have contained a threat of telling tales.

Lisette pressed her headphones to her ears as an enquiry summoned her. Her professional voice sounded detached from her, entering her head from outside, but that wasn't new. A worse impression was, however — a sense that instead of being the role she played in order to afford her real life, this empty unfulfilled automaton serving a faceless public would soon be the whole of herself. It wouldn't be while she had any imagination left, she vowed, and remembered Willy Bantam's novels waiting on her bed. Her imagination wouldn't let her down so long as she refrained from wasting it on trying to concoct excuses she didn't need.

She'd hardly reached her bedroom and thrown off her coat when she opened *Ravage!* on her lap, its hard rounded spine digging into her crotch. From her bag she took the pen Willy Bantam had held. It felt cold, but grew warmer as she ran a finger up and down it while she used it to cross out the name that had supplanted hers in *Ravage!* Once she had written her own name everywhere it belonged she found the description of her in *Writhe!* and made it hers too, then she hugged the books to her and rocked back and forth on the edge of the bed.

That night her sleep was uninterrupted, even by dreams. The clock had to repeat its squeak to rouse her. She dressed at her leisure and strolled to the phone box at the end of the road, where she told Doris she was too ill to go to work. Back home she sat on her bed and stroked the Willy Bantam books until it was time to go to him.

She would have left earlier except for not wanting to be conspicuous when she arrived, but the two hours she gave herself proved not to be enough. Winds like tastes of a blizzard threw her car about the motorway and thwarted her even approaching the speed she would have risked. When at last she found the library, she was twenty minutes late.

It was one of several concrete segments surrounding a circular parking area, a plate that might have held a cake the segments had been part of. Besides the library there was a church, a police station, a fraud investigation office. Though the plate was several hundred yards around, it was almost covered with cars, so that Lisette was growing sweaty with desperation when she saw a space outside the library. It was reserved for the Disability Advisement Executive, but Lisette felt her need was greater. She parked as straight as she had time for and dashed into the library, where a notice-board tried to confuse her with a list of the day's events: a sale of videocassettes, a meeting of a writers' group, a demonstration of origami, a seminar for teenage parents, a course called "The Koran Can Be Fun" . . . The guest of the writers' group was William Bantam. Far better, the girl at Bassinet Press had misinformed Lisette. He wasn't due to start for five minutes.

Lisette hurried to the end of a corridor papered with posters for counselling services and found herself a seat in the midst of the large loud audience. She squeezed her bag of books between her thighs as a murmur of appreciation greeted the appearance of their author. He wasn't even bothering to look for her: he must believe she was either satisfied with his autograph or overcome by his trick. Then he rounded the table at the end of the room and saw her.

His jaw didn't quite drop, but his lips parted audibly before they snapped together. He poured himself a glass of water and downed half of it, then he set about reading from *The Smallest Trace of Fear*. He read the scene in which a willowy brunette became obsessed with the idea that she was being followed by the same car with different number-plates and was pitifully grateful to be picked up by her new boyfriend until she heard the rattle of several metal rectangles from behind her seat... "Dot dot dot is about the size of it," Lisette muttered, convinced he'd selected the chapter as a gibe at her. "Drip drip drip, more like." That everyone else present seemed impressed struck her as not merely a joke but a bad influence on him. She listened while people praised his subtlety and restraint and went on about his technique, all of them presumably writers so unsuccessful they had nothing better to do than sit at his new clay feet. Soon she was waving her hand, but Bantam and the librarian who was choosing questioners ignored her. As the author finished telling a woman that he didn't think publishers were biased against her or her class or her gender,

Lisette sprang to her feet. "Can I speak now?"

Dozens of heads turned to find her wanting. "Are you a writer?" a long-faced shaky bald man demanded on behalf of all of them.

"Yes I am, and I wouldn't be except for Willy Bantam."

Bantam was searching for somebody else to recognise, but all the hands except hers had gone down. "What's your question?" the librarian said.

"I want to read you how it ought to be." Lisette pulled out the book: not her favourite — she was keeping that all for herself— but *Writhe!*

"Lisette had been dreaming Frank was still alive," she read, raising her voice as people who could see the book began to murmur. "When she felt her calf being stroked she thought he had come back, and in a way he had. As the caress passed over her knee she parted her thighs. The long soft object squirmed between them, and that was when she knew something was wrong. But the worm that had crawled into her bed had stiffened, and as she gasped it thrust deep into her, spattering her with graveyard earth ..."

The murmur of the audience had grown louder and more defined — tuts, throat-clearings, embarrassed coughs — and at this point it produced a voice. "You should save that kind of thing for reading when you're by yourself."

A girl brandished a copy of *Writhe!* "That's Mr Bantam's story, only she's not called that in it."

"She should be," Lisette said.

The girl gaped at her. "Is she supposed to be you?"

"Do you need to ask when you've read the book?"

The girl looked away, and so did everyone else. Lisette might have borne that much disbelief, but then she heard a muffled titter. "She's me all right. She always was," Lisette declared. "Willy put me in even if he didn't know he did. You heard him say he doesn't know where some of his ideas come from. You can't deny it's me when everyone can see me, Willy Bantam."

The bald man, shaking more than ever, broke the silence. "*Did* you have anyone in mind as your victim, Mr Bantam?"

"I'm glad you asked me that. There's only one person an author ever really writes about, and that's himself."

"That's stupid. How can he make out any of the girls are him?" Lisette protested, attempting to provoke a laugh with hers. "He's a Willy, not a Connie. Not a Cunt. Not a Pussy," she said, louder as the librarian gestured urgently at a uniformed guard. "Don't bother, I'm going," she said, grinning at the pairs of knees that flinched out of her way as she made for the aisle. "Just you remember everybody here knows I was in your books when you were Willy Bantam. I'll always be in them now."

She'd marched only a few yards out of the room when she heard hoots of incredulous laughter. What was he saying about her? She might have gone back to find out if the guard hadn't been following her, his face a doleful warning. She strode away, hugging her bagful of books so tightly they seemed to throb in time with her heart, to be transforming themselves into her flesh.

Long before she arrived home the fog was beckoning the night. The lights in her garage and upstairs were harsher than she was expecting. The one in her bedroom spotlighted her on the bed, naked except for *Ravage!* between her legs. "I'm there now, Willy Bantam," she murmured, and rubbed herself against the book as she crouched forward to read her scene. She didn't know how many times she read it before she had to acknowledge it was no use. He'd intervened between her and the book — his smug indifferent face and his words in public had, and the jeering of his audience.

It wasn't until the binding gave an injured creak that she observed she was about to rip the book in half. Instead she closed it slowly as though it, or some thought it was capable of prompting, would tell her how to proceed. The notion kept her company in bed, and as the night settled into the depths of itself she saw what she must do.

The alarm had to make several efforts to waken her. Since the staff at Bassinet Press started work later than she did, her tardiness hardly mattered. She reached the office at least a minute before the switchboards were due to open, but Bertha frowned hard enough to darken her sunless face. "We'd given up on you. Are you better?"

"Getting there."

"We didn't think it was like you to have to stay off with a case of the girlies."

"Maybe I'm becoming a woman," Lisette said, and closed herself in with her headphones, ignoring the looks Vi and Doris exchanged. She dealt with enquiries until Bertha waddled off to relieve herself and remake her makeup, at which point Lisette suffered the next call to carry on twitching its light on her board while she rang Bassinet Press. "Will you put me through to William Bantam's editor, please."

"May I have a name?"

"Someone they'll want to speak to."

Quite soon a deeper female voice said "Mel Daun-ton."

"Are you the editor Mr Bantam has to talk to?"

"I'm the one he does. Sorry, can I ask who's calling?"

"You ought to be sorry. You should know who I am. He talked to you about me."

"You'll forgive me if I don't —"

"You and his agent and him got together to talk about what I could imagine before he wrote his new book."

"I don't know where you could have got that impression, Miss, Mrs —"

"He said it in front of witnesses at the bookshop here in town, so don't bother trying to tell me it isn't true. You can't take advantage of me any more than he can. Do you know what he wanted me to believe when I saw him yesterday? That the description of me in his books isn't me."

"I did hear something about that. If I can —"

"I'll bet he didn't tell you he said he was me. Even I haven't got the imagination to believe that."

"I'm glad to hear it. Can I ask what you actually —"

"I want compensation for the way he used me and then said he never did. I'm not talking about money. As long as you and his agent tell him what to write, I want us all to agree how he can put me in his next book."

"That might take some arranging. Give me your number and I'll call you back."

"It doesn't matter when we all have to meet, I'll come," said Lisette, ignoring Vi and Doris, both of whom were staring at her. It wasn't until they turned to gaze past her that she realised what was wrong, not that she cared. A glance over her shoulder revealed Bertha in the doorway, hands on hips. "I'll call you tomorrow," Lisette said into the mouthpiece.

"I may not be here then, so if you could give me your —"

"I know what you're up to. Never mind trying to send someone to shut me up. I'll be there when you're discussing his next book," Lisette said, and cut her off.

She waited for Bertha to move into her view. The supervisor looked so unhappy and reluctant to speak that Lisette stood up at once. "You needn't say it. I'm fired," she cried, flinging the earphones at the switchboard. "Don't worry, I'm going to a better place," she said, snatching her coat off its hook, and stamped on whatever Bertha attempted to say to her back.

She was out of the only job she'd ever had, and already forgetting it. She knew who she really was, and before long everybody would. On her way home she parked in a side street she would previously have found too unpatrolled to brave and bought a tape recorder in a pawnbroker's. One of several men who were huddled under sacks in the doorway of a derelict pub erected his bottle at her for lack of anything more manageable. "I'll have worse in me than that," she told him.

It was almost noon, but it might as well have been dusk. Swollen lumps of light hovered above the pavements, thick glowing veils hung before the shops. The world had grown soft and remote from her, and the interior of her house seemed as distant: the closing of the garage, the climbing of the stairs, the crossing of the room full of redundant books. Only her bedroom was alive for her, and once she was naked she pressed herself against the wall that was papered with samples of Willy Bantam. She ran her fingertips around the screaming lips, she licked the pages of *Ravage!* The faint taste of ink seemed more nourishing than any meal. When she felt entirely ready she switched on the tape recorder and held in her hand the pen he'd touched, and widened her legs on the bed.

"Willy? Willy Bantam? I know you're going to hear this. I'm not angry with you any more. I can't be angry when we're going to collaborate. This is how I'll die in your next book. You won't be able to resist me. Are you listening?"

When she saw the flare of red that indicated the machine was, she closed her eyes. "Lisette pulled the cap off the famous horror writer's pen. No protection for her. She traced the contours of her full breasts with the tip, she ran it over her flat trim stomach and up and down her long slim thighs, oh, and then she thrust it deep, ah . . ."

Before too long she was able to form words again, and meanwhile her other sounds kept the tape recorder working. "She felt it penetrate her virginity," she gasped, and steadied her voice. "She felt the ink that was his essence flow into her, tingling through her body. She felt herself starting

to imagine like him, see into the depths of him, see things he would never have dared to see by himself. Now if she could just . . . just put them into words. ..."

"That's as much as she managed to say," the policeman said, and switched off the tape. "By the sound of it she passed out shortly after."

"And then ..." Bantam prompted.

"And then she lay there for weeks before anyone found her. She hadn't any friends or family, just books."

"I hope nobody's going to blame me for that."

"Most of them weren't yours," said the policeman, and paused long enough for his gaze to become heavily ambiguous. "We shouldn't need to trouble you further. Nobody can say you encouraged her."

"They better hadn't try." For an instant the author saw the woman as the sound of her taped voice had conjured her up — an unwelcome presence in the midst of his audience, at least middle-aged and already grey, flat-chested, thick-limbed, less than five feet tall and almost half as broad. "I wish someone else had," he said.

The policeman pushed himself out of the only chair and held up the tape recorder. "Will you want this when we've finished with it?"

"For what? No thanks."

"You won't be doing what she wanted."

"Writing about her? Too many of the papers already have."

"I can see you wouldn't want to get yourself a worse reputation," the policeman said.

Bantam saw him out of the apartment and out of his mind. He'd survived remarks more pointed than that in the course of his career. The woman on the tape was harder to forget, but a large glass of brandy helped, and put him in a working mood. Working cured anything. He sat on the bed with his lap-top word processor and reached out to turn towards him the photograph of his ex-wife, faded by years of sunlight and dust. He could almost feel her breasts filling his hands, feel her slim waist, long slim legs.

"Bitch," he said almost affectionately, and began to write. Q



THE FAMILY FOOTBALL

by Ian R. MacLeod

illustrated by Allen Koszowski

Dad came home as a centaur that day. He rapped his hooves impatiently on the front door for someone to let him in. Me and my sister Anne were playing rats on the kitchen floor, running around the table legs and ticking Mum's legs with our whiskers as she fixed tea.

"Go see to your Dad," Mum snapped at me, "and you should be past these silly games. You know how much I hate those long pink tails."

I wandered grumpily down the hall, climbing back into human form as I did so. Dad's horse-and-man shape loomed through the frosted glass. He humphed at me when I opened the door as though I'd been a long time coming, then pushed past and trotted into the lounge. He tried to sit down on the sofa, gave up, and clumsily bent his four legs to lower himself down on the carpet.

"You should be doing your homework, Son," he said as I stood watching from the doorway. "I'll do it all straight after tea."

"Well, just don't expect . . ." he winced. The long joints of his equine legs were hurting in the position he was sitting. As he changed into the shape of a large labrador, I stood waiting for the end of a sentence I knew by heart. "... don't expect to play football afterwards."

I nodded. If I hadn't already known what he was saying, his dog's vocal chords would have given me few clues. Dad was a physically clumsy man. He often changed shapes on the way home on the train when he'd had a bad day at work to try to get it out of his system. But no matter what shape he took, he was never able to make himself either well understood or comfortable.

At tea, we all came as ourselves. Only babies did otherwise, squirming from half-formed shape to shape as I could still (and with some disgust) remember Anne doing in her high chair.

Mum said, "I went to see Doctor Shaw today."

"Oh," Dad said, not looking, chasing a few stray peas around the plate with his fork.

"He says they'll need to do more tests to see what the problem is."

"You can get the time off at the shop?"

"They have to give it, don't they? It's the law."

"I told you when you started there, it's a mistake to work anywhere where there's no union."

"Well, I'm going to go anyway, day after tomorrow. I'm sick of. . . sick of this thing."

Mum was gazing down at her plate. She'd only given herself baked beans on a slice of toast instead of the gammon and egg the rest of us had. It had been the same now for two or three months, since her problem had started. She really couldn't face up to meat, and would have been happier — if she could have faced the indignity—climbing trees and nibbling at bits of green stuff out in the garden.

Anne and I had caught her doing just that on a couple of occasions when we were home all day at half term. Hanging upside down from the almond tree with her apron flapping over her face. She'd shooed us all the way out of the house, her face flushing between anger and embarrassment.

"You've got rights," Dad said. "Just you tell me if they cause you any trouble."

Mum said nothing. She dropped her fork onto the tablecloth with her good left hand, leaving a streak of tomato. I knew even then that she was going through a bad time, what with her right hand. At the moment, she had it hidden beneath the table, not so much because she didn't want us to see it — she'd given up after the first few weeks wearing gloves and bandages except when she went out of the house — but because she hated having to look at it herself. Her right hand was hairy, hairy with hairs that only petered out around her elbow. And it had the three long hooked claws of *Brandypus griesus*, the three-toed sloth or ai. It had been a mystery to us all how she'd even come up with that shape in the first place, as Mum wasn't a great changer, and was never very imaginative about it when she did. But it had happened in the night when she was asleep, which was always more difficult because you didn't have the normal control.

She put it down to the cheese she'd had before she'd gone to bed, and some wildlife programme she'd been watching — which was odd, because all the rest of us could remember seeing that night was a quiz programme, some football, and the news. "Well anyway," she said. "Tomorrow's another day."

"That's right," said Dad. "And I'm due some overtime from all the supplementary bills we've had to send out. How about we get a baby sitter for these two here and go out for a few drinks."

Anne piped in, "Please, not Mrs Bossom again."

But Mum shook her head anyway. "I'm sorry dear. I've promised to take the kids over for tea to see Gran. Of course, I'll leave something nice for you to microwave."

Dad nodded and chewed his food, glaring across at the microwave.

I finished homework at about eight, and ran out to play football on the balding patch of grass in front of our houses. Anne came too, and the rest of our gang were there, apart from Harry Blaines, whose parents were having marital difficulties and were always taking him off with them to see some counsellor as though the whole thing was his fault.

There was a problem: the last time we'd played, Charlie Miller had lobbed our plastic ball over the high fence into the Halls' back garden. The Halls were a mad and angry couple, and spent most of the time at home having rows and flying around the place as birds, pecking at each other and at anyone who dared to ring the doorbell.

We all stood around arguing in the twilight. But then I remembered something — there was an old leather football in our garage. Cracked and deflated, it had been there for as long as I could remember, tucked out of sight and reach behind the old paint tins. On the off-chance that it might be of use, I went in, found the steps and pulled it down in a shower of rust and cobwebs. The odd thing was this; when I managed to fit in the nozzle of my bicycle pump, it began to wheeze and expand even before I started to inflate it.

I played in the side attacking the goal towards the brick wall by the row of garages. We all sprouted tentacles on our heads to distinguish us from the other side. As usual, I was centre forward. So were the rest of the team — Charlie, Bob, Peter, the two Ford sisters — apart from Anne, who was the smallest and ended up in goal between the piles of trainer tops and pullovers. For some reason, she decided she could do the job better as a baby stegosaurus. I had to go over and have a quiet word with her after we had let in five quick and quite unnecessary goals.

"Saw your Mama in that shop today," John Williams came over and said to me as I stood rubbing a bruised feeler and catching my breath. "The shirt department. That's where she works, isn't it?" "What if she does?" I said.

"You should have seen her. There was this man wanted his shirt taken out of the wrapper. You know, all the bits of card and the pins. Jesus H. Christ, your poor Mum was all over the bloody counter. Hasn't got two proper hands these days, has she?"

"At least she is my Mum," I said, which — as John Williams had a family who were all step-this-or-that — was a good below-the-belt swipe. I followed it off with a good below-the-belt kick.

When we'd finally finished fighting, we both felt better, and pleased with ourselves for being tough. I'd turned into a grizzly bear by then, and John was a tiger. But as always when you were fighting, you could never really manage the shape well enough to do any damage. That was probably a good thing, as I didn't really hate him anyway. He was just a loud-mouthed brat.

We got back to the game. The final score was Side With The Tentacles, 14: Side Without, 17. In my view, at least five of the latter goals would have been disallowed if there had been a referee. An argument started over whether we should settle the thing on penalties.

That was when Mum came out. She was in her old blue dressing gown and I could tell that something was the matter from the way she didn't try to hide her hand. Without saying a word to anyone, she walked out beneath the widening pools of streetlight and bent down to pick up the football. She said something to it, and held it close to her. Everyone just stood staring as she walked back inside.

Me and Anne followed her back into the house a few minutes after. It was getting dark by then, and penalties were out of the question anyway.

Next day at school was pretty ordinary. Steven Halier got into trouble in Maths for changing into a porcupine, and was hauled out to the front. We all laughed when Mister Craig pulled off Steven's shoe before he'd had time to properly change back into it and plonked it there on the desk, bits of shoe-leather, flesh and spines all mangled up together. As punishment, he made Steven leave class without the opportunity to get the thing back on, and he had to hobble around the playground all through the lunch break with only half a foot.

I always kept well away from Anne at school. She was four years below me, and beneath my heights of third form dignity. The girls in her year were all crazy about horses, and took turns changing into one so that the others could take rides. The whole thing looked incredibly stupid from where I was standing by the goalposts on the playing fields, talking about the mysteries of the universe and whether Jane Jolly in the year above us had really got glandular fever or had actually been missing all term so she could have an abortion. Still, I recognised my little sis as she lumbered past me along the touchline, hoofed and on all fours. It was generally easy enough to tell someone you knew well no matter what shape they were in. She was stumbling with a cheap-looking plastic bridle, having trouble with the weight of the fat girl classmate on her back.

After lunch, just as history was starting, Anne and I were both called to the headmaster's office. The headmaster was sitting behind his desk in the form of a big teddy bear. We both let out a sigh of relief to see him that way — Mister Anderson often assumed that shape, but only when he was in a good mood and wasn't after your blood. It wasn't a terribly attractive teddy bear — the eyes really did look like glass buttons — but he entertained the idea that it made him appear friendly and approachable.

"I've had a phone call from your Father at work," he said. "He's had to go off to the hospital now. It's your Mother, I'm afraid. She's been taken ill. Your Grandmother's coming round here to the school to pick you up."

Gran arrived a few minutes later in her little Austin and drove us back to the bungalow that she and Grandad had moved into after he retired from the fire service. Grandad didn't come, of course; Grandad didn't go anywhere now, except for walks. It had been a big family story about what had happened to him when he retired, one of those things that had gone past the stage of being sad — or even a joke — and was now simply accepted. After the first few job-free weeks of gardening and sitting around in the pub drinking more than he could afford, Grandad had started to get depressed. He said it was dog's life, doing nothing every day. Why, he'd ten men under him when he was working, with people's lives at stake. The Christmas when I was about six, Grandad had changed into a black and white mongrel with a jaunty eye patch, and he had never changed back since.

Gran now accepted Grandad that way, taking him for walks, buying tins of good-quality dog food at the supermarket, sending him to kennels and going off on holidays on her own. And so did the whole family. Not that Grandad was a particularly fun sort of dog to have around, the kind that you could throw sticks for and get into scrapes with. He was past sixty after all, crotchety half the time with rheumatism, his muzzle going grey. Still, he came up to me and Anne in the hall of their bungalow with his tail wagging. I patted his head let him lick my hand for a while before Gran took us into the lounge.

Gran made us both sit down. She still hadn't said anything about Mum. Grandad scratched his ear and curled up in front of the gas fire, which, as always — and even now in the middle of summer — was on, and muttering to itself.

"My dears, you both look worried," she said — which I suppose we probably did. It hadn't really occurred to us that Mum might be seriously ill, but once before when she had gone into hospital to have something done, we'd had to spend a whole week with Gran in the bungalow whilst Dad went to work and tried to cook himself spam fritters at home for tea. Grandad and Gran were fine in small doses, but not to stay with.

"Your Mum's really not that bad," Gran added. "But you know she's been having trouble with that hand of hers. Now," she leaned forward, as though she was sharing a secret, "it's started to spread. And she can't do a thing about it."

We went to see Mum in hospital that evening. The three-toed sloth business with her hand hadn't so much spread as taken over. She wasn't in any of the usual wards, but in a new place at the back of the maternity wing that had bare concrete floors and smelled like a zoo. Mum was behind bars, hanging upside down from an old branch, with big brown eyes staring out. The doctor warned us not to try to put our hands through the bars, because Mum had really lost all control, and, although sloths were herbivores, they could give you a nasty bite. Anne began to cry. She thought a herbivore was like cancer. I was older, and I guessed the truth — that Mum becoming a sloth wasn't that different to what had happened to Grandad, and that even though she hadn't done it deliberately, it was probably a kind of mental thing.

Mum just hung there, looking at us, her flattened muzzle gently twitching. She had a long shaggy coat that hung down around her, and the doctor explained that in the wild — and if Mum really had been a three-toed sloth — it would have been green with a special kind of algae. It was pretty boring really, and the chocolates and the stack of old women's magazines Gran had made us bring were obviously a waste of time. So as Gran twittered on uselessly through the bars about the WWI fete, me and Anne opened up the chocolates and started munching them and squabbling over the centres, wandering along the cages to see who else was here.

They were an odd-looking bunch. You can usually spot a shape-changed human from the real thing a mile off, but most of these were different. If it hadn't been for the medical charts with the names and graphs hanging by the padlocked doors, you'd never have guessed that most of them weren't what they pretended to be. Even Grandad, who'd been a mongrel for nearly five years now, wasn't anything like this convincing.

There was a lama, a coyote, a huge insect with mandibles like a lawnmower, and a creature-from-the-black-lagoon-thing that seemed to be rotting at the fins and smelled like an old canal. There were bubbling tanks filled with fishes. One of the was recognisably a catfish, but was scooting around the bottom of the tank on wheels. At the far end, there was a plastic chair behind a rope that we thought was just a chair until it moved when Anne climbed over and tried to sit on it.

"What's that supposed to be?" Anne asked, pointing to a patch of turf in a glass case. I looked at the medical charts clipped to the side. It said: *Lumbricus terrestris*. I'd just done that in science and was able to tell Anne that it meant an earthworm.

Dad arrived soon afterwards. He'd picked up a big bouquet of roses from the caravan that sold flowers in the hospital carpark, and pushed them towards Mum through a flap in the bars. Mum reached out a long, lugubrious hand and took them. One by one, she ate the lot, thorns and all. Between wincing, Anne and I could hardly stop ourselves from laughing.



We didn't have to stay with Gran and Grandad that night. Dad had taken time off from work. That was a relief— we didn't even mind the soggy spam fritters too much, although at the same time it was a little worrying. I mean, I thought as the three of us sat in the lounge watching TV afterwards, this in-the-head business must be a lot worse than the secret-down-below business that had got Mum into hospital before. By chance, the people in the soap opera we were watching were sitting around in someone's kitchen talking about another of the characters who had supposedly become ill a couple of episodes before but was probably leaving the series. They were all in the shape of armadillos — which Dad said was the only way these people could act — and there were subtitles in case you had any difficulty understanding what they were saying. It seemed that the ill character had had a nervous breakdown, and that, like Mum, he was in a special wing of the local hospital. A nervous breakdown, was, I decided, exactly what Mum was having.

Dad was grumpy. He shooed us off to bed like we didn't have any right to our usual books and baths. He didn't even ask if we'd done our homework, which any other time would have been reassuring.

Anne and I both climbed out of bed and squatted out of sight in the shadows at the top of the stairs as Dad rang up various relatives to explain what had happened. Mostly, it was an extended version of the stuff he'd told us, with the business about the hand and how Mum had been tired lately. But the last phone call he made to Mum's sister Joan was slightly different.

"Yeah," he said, sitting back on the creaky chair by the phone. "I guess it's all made it come back to her."

Dad nodded vigorously as Aunt Joan said something to him.

"Funny thing is," he said. "I thought she'd got over this thing years ago. I mean, you were there then, and I wasn't."

Eventually, he put down the phone and went back into the lounge, closing the door, turning up the TV loud as though he was trying to hide his thoughts. What thing, I wondered, lying awake in bed long after the house had gone silent. I was in one of those sweaty, tossy states when you're not sure whether you're awake or dreaming. I woke up fully with the figures of my alarm clock showing past two, and found that I had three long black claws on each hand, and that I was covered with hair. Although I changed back with no difficulty, the incident scared me. I knew now that what Mum had was a head-thing, but did that mean it couldn't be hereditary?

Next morning, me and Anne went to school as though it was any other day. The only difference was that Dad dropped us off in the car on his way to visit Mum at the hospital. Word had got around. All the teachers were nice to us that day, and even the other kids. Everyone seemed to know about Mum. I glared at John Williams when he came up to me during break, silently daring him to say the kind of thing that had got us into the fight when we were playing football. But one look at his face told me that it had gone beyond all that — that he actually felt sorry for me. More than anything, I think it was that that made me realise that Mum really was ill.

Gran and Grandad were there with Dad when we went to see Mum at the hospital that evening. And Grandad was human. Anne didn't even recognise him. He looked pretty neat, the way you want your Grandad to look when you're a kid, not old and stooped and smelly, but with silver hair brushed back and long, in a white colonial suit with a dark blue waistcoat and paisley cravat bulging out at the collar. The only thing he hadn't changed the jaunty black patch over one eye. It was probably a kind of birthmark.

Dad was very edgy. He'd come as a snake and kept climbing up over the bars as though he wanted to get into the cage with Mum, although at the same time he obviously didn't want to.

There was a doctor there too. A different doctor from the one we'd seen the night before. He was in a suit, and from the way he talked, I guessed he was a head-doctor, the type that you see in films. I thought, Oh no, we're going to end up like Harry Blaines, going to family therapy, but he turned out to be young and quite nice, and kept saying that he really thought Mum was doing well. She was eating plenty of leaves and fruit, and hanging there by her long arms the way sloths were apparently supposed to.

Back at home, Dad made us stay at the table in the kitchen after we'd eaten, which was the last thing we really wanted, what with the taste of his cooking and the room still filled with smoke from the blackened frying pan. But he said it was time we had a talk, and we knew from the look on his face (he'd turned back from a snake to drive the car home) that he really meant it.

"Your Mum," he said, "she didn't have a happy childhood. Well, she was a woman by then really, the time I'm talking about."

"But it was before she met you," I said, and Dad gave me a look as though he guessed that we'd been listening to him on the phone to Aunt Joan last evening. For some reason, the thought of being a sneak made me turn into an elephant. It was embarrassing — but for a while, I just couldn't help it.

Ignoring me — not even making his usual warning about the strength of the furniture — Dad went on; "Your Mum had a — a difficult time when she was in her late teens."

I nodded, my trunk swinging slightly and knocking over the bottle of brown sauce before I had a chance to pull it back in. If Mum was late teens at the time, I guessed that it probably had to do with sex and babies. From my experience, there was not much else that kids of that age got up to, apart from maybe doing drugs and stealing cars, and I couldn't see Mum ever being like that.

"She wasn't very happy," I suggested, "and now she's not feeling happy again."

Dad nodded, and then he shook his head. "That's exactly it. ..."

I thought he was going to say something more. And from the way Dad had his mouth half-open, he obviously thought so too. But, looking at us, he changed his mind.

Afterwards, me and Anne decided we might as well go out and play. Dad was shut in the lounge watching TV, one of those wrestling matches where they put Godzilla against King Kong and you can tell it's just people really and nothing like as good as the special effects you get in films. I looked around for the football, but it had gone from the garage. Dad had obviously hidden it, but I had a pretty good idea where to look — he and Mum were never very imaginative about hiding things. The football was tucked away with the dust under Mum and Dad's bed.

It was a good game that evening. And close. For once, Anne played out of goal — and she wasn't bad either, scoring twice, and with only one of them an own goal. We forgot about the time. Dad came out in his vest when it was almost dark and we were just having fun. He went mad when he saw the ball we were using. He put his hand up to hit me, and only just managed to stop himself.

Dad took the ball inside and dumped it in the sink in the kitchen, wrapped up in a towel as though he could hardly bear to touch it.

He found me staring at it when I came down after my bath to get a drink of orange.

"Son, I'm sorry about what happened on the green," he said, patting my shoulder with a shaky hand. "But under no circumstances are you ever to touch that football. Not you or even Annie. Not ever again."

I didn't say anything, and I didn't sleep much. In the morning, Dad took the football along with him when he dropped us off on the way to the hospital. He had it in on the front passenger seat, still wrapped up in the towel. To stop it rolling, he had put the seatbelt around it.

Grandad picked us up from school that evening. He was still a human, but I wasn't too keen on the idea of him driving Gran's Austin: normally, he travelled around in it with his head out of the back window, barking at pedestrians.

"Is Mum any better?" I asked, sitting on the front passenger seat beside him, thinking how odd it was to be talking to this smart grey-haired gent.

"I think she is," he said, smiling.

Grandad was keeping his eye firmly on the road. The skin around the dark patch on his left eye was crinkled. I could tell he was working up to saying something more.

"What has your Dad told you?" he asked.

From the back, picking the white dog hairs off her school blazer, Anne chirped, "He told us that Mum wasn't very happy once."

"Not very happy." Grandad shifted into gear as the lights changed. The car gave a jerk and nearly stalled. Grandad was okay at driving, but not that good. "I suppose that's right. You're, ah, both very young for the thing I'm going to have to tell you now. But we've spoken to the doctors at the hospital, and we reckon it's the best way. If you want your Mum to get better . . . you do want that, don't you?"

We both said yes. We were driving along the high street past the shops now. A couple of salamanders

were lounging in the sun outside the new DIY superstore. I recognised them as tough older kids from school.

"Your Mum had a baby when she was . . . when she was far too young. Before she even met your Dad. You understand what that means?"

We both nodded. I decided it wasn't worth the bother of letting Grandad know that I'd worked that much out already.

"So we thought we could have the baby adopted. You know, given to some people who couldn't have a baby, but wanted one. It was a kind of. . . family secret."

"That the baby was adopted?" I asked.

"No." Grandad grated the gears. "That it wasn't. Even your Dad didn't know that when he and your Mum were courting. We hid it. I guess now we're all to blame, I suppose . . . apart from you kids of course. Your Mum couldn't part with the baby, and I don't think anyone else would have had him anyway. The poor little thing wasn't — isn't — right in the head. He can't change shapes like the rest of us. For a while, we didn't think he could change at all. He was always just asleep, not really growing or living. Then one day, I put him down in the corner of my study, by this old football. When I looked ..."

We'd reached the hospital. Grandad parked the car at the far end, but we didn't get out. I asked, "Did Dad know about this?"

Slowly, still gripping the wheel tight, Grandad nodded. "Just before they got married, yes. But he always found it hard to take. He couldn't stand to have Tom around, reminding him. That was why he ended up in the garage. There for years. As a football."

"And he's called Tom," I said eventually.

Grandad nodded. He reached and took both of our hands to help us out of the car.

"Come on," he said, "let's see how your Mum is. She's got Tom with her now."

We went and saw Mum. She was still a sloth, but she'd changed her face enough to smile, and it was obvious that she was a little better. She had Tom, our old family football, cradled in her arms. Dad was Dad. I could tell he was fidgeting to change into a snake or something, but tonight he stayed himself.

We all stood around with the head-doctor, smiling and talking in big shaky voices. Eventually, Anne started to cry. I was glad when she blurted out the thing that had been worrying me too. I mean, we'd been kicking Tom around the night before. I could still hear that leathery slap he made when he hit the back wall of the garages. But the head-doctor was reassuring. Tom wasn't really like us. He was a football. He even probably liked being played. It was better, after all, than the years he'd spent hidden behind the paint tins in our garage.

Anne stopped crying, and I took hold of her hand. Now that everything was out in the open, I felt relieved. But Dad was just standing there, gazing down at the concrete. Apart from Mum herself, I suppose this whole thing was most difficult for him out of all of us. It took a week of visits to the hospital before he could bring himself to reach through the bars and take Tom from Mum's incredibly long arms. A few moments later, he had to give him back, but next day, he kept hold. Gran and Grandad were there too, and I suppose we were wondering what Dad was going to do next. But he surprised us all by lobbing Tom gently into the air, then kicking him on the volley towards me. He came over at head height, and I nodded him down towards Anne, and she caught him. It was perfect, one of those miraculous moments that hardly ever happen. And we all started to laugh and pat each other's back and in the excitement Grandad forgot he was human and started to bark.

That was the real beginning of Mum getting better. Next day, her head had changed back into the person we knew. And the day after that — after we'd borrowed Tom for a big game down at the park against the lot from the next estate — we came late with Gran back to the hospital to tell Mum about it, and found her sitting up on a log in her old house coat. She was complaining about the noise and the smell in her ward, but she was smiling.

They soon moved her to a proper ward. And not long after that, she came home for good. Even her right hand was back to normal. The head-doctor said it had all been a kind of hysterical paralysis. The hand had been a warning sign, but what probably tipped the balance was seeing me and Anne playing football with Tom out on the grass in front of our houses.

When Gran and Grandad came around for tea on the Sunday after Mum got out, Grandad had gone back to being a dog again. We all felt a little sad to lose him that way — he had been such a nice old man. But at least he'd changed from a mongrel into a red setter, and although he was still old — and he still had the black patch — he was more fun to be with from then on. We used to go around to Gran's to bring him along with us when we took Tom to play in the park.

Tom stayed a football. I supposed he always will, never changing, never getting old. Sometimes I talk to him, but I don't think he hears, or understands if he does. One evening that summer when we were playing with him on the green, the inevitable happened and he flew over the fence into the dreaded Hall's back garden. Knowing we couldn't just leave him there the way we had with all the other footballs, me and Anne went up and rang their front door. Mrs Hall answered. She was shaped as an octopus actually, not

a bird at all. And she simply let us in to collect up all the balls and everything else that had landed in their garden over the years.

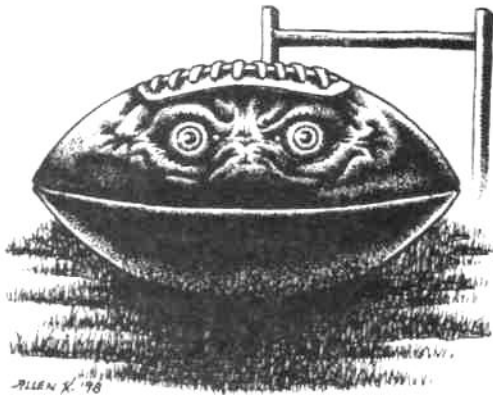
With all the other balls back, we still always played with Tom. Of course, the other kids knew about him, and were a little edgy at first, passing gently, using side-foots towards goal. But I realised that Tom was finally accepted when John Williams missed a penalty and ran over to the fence to yell down at him as though it was his fault. We all fell about laughing at that, and when I happened to look up at the top windows of our house, I saw that Mum was standing in the bedroom with the net curtains pulled back. She was smiling.

We were well into the summer holidays by then. Dad had had a couple of good pay cheques, and we agreed that all of us would go on holiday together, and abroad for a change. Dad, Mum, me, Anne, Gran, and Tom. Even Grandad agreed to change back into a human for the fortnight to save any problems with quarantine.

I can still remember packing my case for that holiday on the night before we took the plane. Filling up with books and shorts and tee shirts and cream for mosquito bites and clean pairs of pants. I could already picture that white beach, the white hotels, the cool old-fashioned streets at the back, the warm sea beckoning in the sunshine. First day, we'd all run out straight after breakfast and kick Tom across the smooth hot sand towards the breakers, changing into porpoises as we did so. Diving down into the stream of the ocean, bobbing Tom on our noses, dancing in the dappled light.

Which, as things turned out, is exactly what we did.

Q



SYMPATHY FOR ZOMBIES

by John Gregory Betancourt

Heat rose off the glistening white sand in shimmering waves. In the sparkling blue "Pirate's Lagoon," as the Cte D'Argent Hotel proclaimed it, swimmers frolicked; farther out, jetskis and sailboards cut white-frothed paths across the water.

"Take another drink, Miss."

Julie Novelle turned her head. A cabana boy, maybe eleven or twelve, dressed in the hotel uniform of khaki shorts and shirt, offered her a fresh strawberry daiquiri. She accepted the glass.

"Drink it, Miss," the boy said.

Julie sipped the cool, soothing daiquiri.

Heat shimmered across the beautiful white sand.

Far off, happy couples laughed and frolicked in the low surf.

She hadn't been wild about a vacation in the Caribbean at first. But she'd just come through a rather messy divorce — thank God there weren't any kids — and after the judge had awarded her custody of their house in the Hamptons, both Jaguars, and most of the money in their accounts, Tom had walked up with a pasty smile on his face and handed her a white envelope.

"Just to show there aren't any hard feelings," he said. "I need a vacation, and I want to make sure we don't bump into each other. Let's get on with our lives, okay?" Then he'd walked away.

Julie looked inside the envelope. It held a plane ticket to a Caribbean singles resort, plus other receipts. Everything had been paid for in advance, she realized.

He'd always been like that. Generous at the wrong times. She felt her heart soften, as it often had during their separation, but then she remembered his moodiness, his childlike tantrums, and everything else that had driven a wedge between them. Then she'd steeled herself. But she'd tucked the ticket into her purse. She could always cash it in, she told herself.

But somehow, she'd decided to go. They had always talked about a vacation in the Caribbean, after all. It had been a personal fantasy. And with the trip paid for . . . why not?

Julie sipped her drink and stared across the ocean. The water here was so blue, you could lose yourself in its depths. She'd gone swimming the first few days, and dancing, and partying. She'd joined other singles for the Recreational Director's planned jaunts. It had been fun. Everything here had been fun.

The best part had been the trip out to see Queen Jamorah, the Voodoo Priestess. They had gone late at night in a tour bus. Queen Jamorah lived in a shack in the middle of dense jungle.

One by one the other tourists pushed aside a bead curtain and ventured in. A few minutes later they emerged with knowing smirks or nervous grins.

Julie went last. When her eyes grew accustomed to the near darkness, she saw an old, wrinkled woman holding a rooster's claw and wearing a feathered headdress.

"You are called Julie," the old woman intoned.

"That's right," Julie said.

"I have a message," she said, "from one who is dead to you."

This was getting interesting, Julie thought. She leaned forward. "Yes?" she whispered, intrigued.

With a quick motion of her hand, the old woman threw something dry and dusty in Julie's face. It burned Julie's eyes and stung her throat; coughing and wheezing, she reeled back.

"Revenge," said the old woman, "has been paid for."

The floor turned beneath her. Julie felt herself falling and was unable to stop. Darkness came.

Julie awakened in her hotel room. For the longest time she lay in bed staring at the ceiling.

Finally the Recreation Director showed up. She took Julie's arm and helped her out to the beach. As the day went on, cabana boys brought her food and strawberry daiquiris, instructing her to "Eat this, Miss," or "Drink this, Miss."

The days passed, the crowds changed, and Julie drifted. Usually the cabana boys remembered to bring her inside for the night, and when they didn't she lost herself in the slowly changing constellations overhead.

"Look at me," a man's voice said.

Julie tilted her head back and saw her ex-husband. Tom wore blue Bermuda shorts, a white polo shirt, and designer sunglasses.

Queen Jamorah stood next to him, looking respectable in a bright floral muumuu. She peered at Julie and gave a nod.

"As you can see," she said in her thick accent, "she is a zombie, not a living person. She will obey your every command. She is your slave. Only remember one thing: she must finish every task she begins before she starts the next. She has no mind or will of her own."

"Check," Tom said, smiling. "Got it." He passed her a thick white envelope. "The final payment."

"I wish you luck," Queen Jamorah said. She hurried away.

Tom knelt. "I wanted to make up," he said, taking Julie's hand. "Say you've changed your mind about us."

"I've changed my mind about us," Julie felt herself saying. A tiny spark of rage flared inside her.

Tom grinned. "Good. Tell me you love me."

"I love you," she echoed.

"That's all I ever wanted," he said. "Follow me. I have a plane waiting. We'll get married tonight in Las Vegas."

Julie found herself rising to follow. The sea — the sand — the sky and the stars — she was going to lose them. For a second she hesitated.

"Follow me, Julie," Tom said again.

She walked after him. Inside, she felt something tighten around her heart. She tried to speak, to protest, but all that emerged was a soft, sad sigh.

"A whirlwind re-courtship," he murmured. "A break was all we needed, dear Julie. Our love is forever. Tell me that, Julie. Tell me you'll love me forever."

Julie's screams echoed in her mind. She opened her mouth.

"I'll love you," she said. "I'll love you ... I'll love you . . . I'll love you . . ."

On and on she droned, like a broken record, repeating that phrase even when he told her to stop, because she hadn't finished carrying out his command. Forever, some distant part of herself noted, was a very long time indeed.

And she would go on telling him she would love him — forever.

"I'll love you," she said. "I'll love you. I'll love you."

After five minutes, when nothing he could say or do would shut her up, Tom's nervous twitchy smile turned frightened. And when he began to run, Julie followed.

"I'll love you," she called. "I'll love you — I'll love you — I'll love you — "

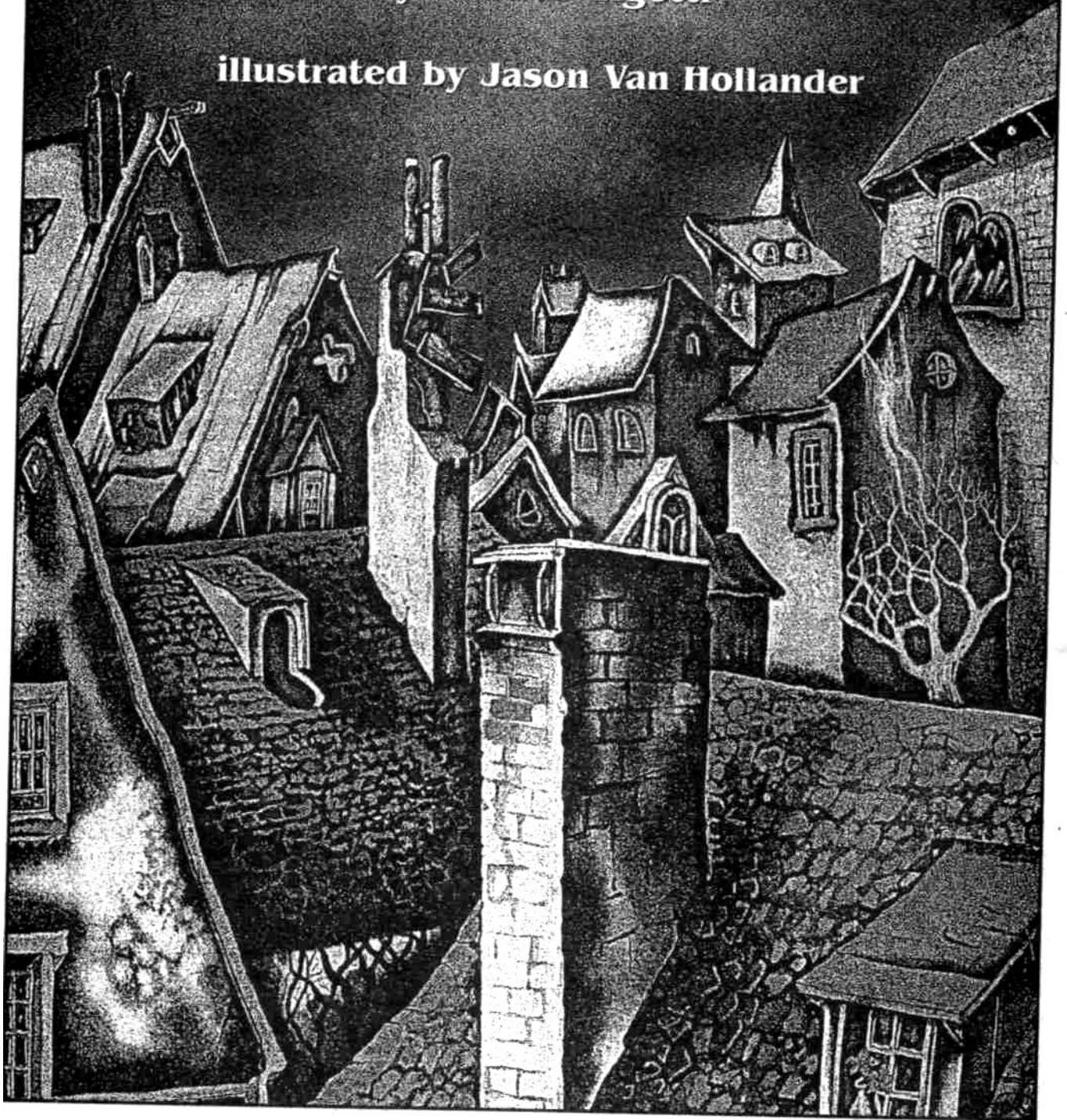
And she kept right on saying it, even when he began to scream.

Q

HIS SHADOW SHALL RISE TO A HIGHER HOUSE

by Thomas Ligotti

illustrated by Jason Van Hollander



In the middle of the night I lay wide awake in bed, listening to the dull black drone of the wind outside my window and the sound of bare branches scraping against the shingles of the roof just above me. Soon my thoughts became fixed upon a town, picturing its various angles and aspects, a remote town near the northern border. Then I remembered that there was a hilltop graveyard that hovered not far beyond the edge of town. I never mentioned to anyone this graveyard which for a time was a source of great anguish for those who had retreated to the barren landscape of the northern border.

It was within the hilltop graveyard, a place that was far more populated than the town over which it hovered, that the body of Ascrobius had been buried. Known throughout the town as a recluse who possessed an intensely contemplative nature, Ascrobius had suffered from a disease that left much of his body in a grossly deformed condition. Nevertheless, despite the distinguishing qualities of his severe deformity and his intensely contemplative nature, the death of Ascrobius was an event that passed almost entirely unnoticed. All of the notoriety gained by the recluse, all of the comment attached to his name, occurred sometime after his disease-mangled body had been housed among the others in the hilltop graveyard.

At first there was no specific mention of Ascrobius, but only a kind of twilight talk — dim and pervasive murmurs that persistently revolved around the graveyard outside of town, often touching upon more general topics of a morbid character, including some abstract discourse, as I interpreted it, on *the phenomenon of the grave*. More and more, whether one moved about the town or remained in some secluded quarter of it, this twilight talk became familiar and even invasive. It emerged from shadowed doorways along narrow streets, from half-opened windows of the highest rooms of the town's old houses, and from the distant corners of labyrinthine and resonant hallways. Everywhere, it seemed, there were voices that had become obsessed to the point of hysteria with a single subject: the "missing grave." No one mistook these words to mean a grave that somehow had been violated, its ground dug up and its contents removed, or even a grave whose headstone had been absconded, leaving the resident of some particular plot in a state of anonymity. Even I, who was less intimate than many others with the peculiar nuances of the northern border town, understood what was meant by the words "a missing grave" or "an absent grave." The hilltop graveyard was so dense with headstones and its ground so riddled with interments that such a thing would be astonishingly apparent: where there once had been a grave like any other, there was now, in the same precious space, only a patch of virgin earth.

For a certain period of time, speculation arose concerning the identity of the occupant of the missing grave. Because there existed no systematic recordkeeping for any particular instance of burial in the hilltop graveyard — when or where or for whom an interment took place — the discussions over the occupant of the missing grave, or the *former* occupant, always degenerated into outbursts of the wildest nonsense or simply faded into a vaporous and sullen confusion. Such a scene was running its course in the cellar of an abandoned building where several of us had gathered one evening. It was on this occasion that a gentleman calling himself Dr. Klatt first suggested "Ascrobius" as the name upon the headstone of the missing grave. He was almost offensively positive in this assertion, as if there were not an abundance of headstones on the hilltop graveyard with erroneous or unreadable names, or none at all.

For some time Klatt had been advertising himself around town as an individual who possessed a distinguished background in some discipline of a vaguely scientific nature. This persona or imposture, if it was one, would not have been unique in the history of the northern border town. However, when Klatt began to speak of the recent anomaly not as a *missing* grave, or even an absent grave, but as an *uncreated* grave, the others began to listen. Soon enough it was the name of Ascrobius that was mentioned most frequently as the occupant of the missing — now *uncreated* — grave. At the same time the reputation of Dr. Klatt became closely linked to that of the deceased individual who was well known for both his grossly deformed body and for his intensely contemplative nature.

During this period it seemed that anywhere in town that one happened to find oneself, Klatt was there holding forth on the subject of his relationship to Ascrobius, whom he now called his "patient." In the cramped back rooms of shops long gone out of business or on some out-of-the-way street corner, Klatt spoke of the visits he had made to the high back-street house of Ascrobius and of the attempts he had made to treat the disease from which the recluse had long suffered. In addition, Klatt boasted of the insights he had gained into the deeply contemplative personality whom most of us had never met, let alone conversed with at any great length. While Klatt appeared to enjoy the attention he received from those who had previously dismissed him as just another impostor in the northern border town, and perhaps still considered him as such, I believe he was unaware of the profound suspicion, and even dread, that he inspired due to what certain persons called his "meddling" in the affairs of Ascrobius. "Thou shalt not meddle" was an unspoken, though seldom observed, commandment of the town, or so it seemed to me. And Klatt's exposure of the formerly obscure existence of Ascrobius, even if the doctor's anecdotes were largely misleading or totally fabricated, would be regarded as a highly perilous form of meddling by many

longtime residents of the town.. Nonetheless, nobody turned away whenever Klatt began talking about the diseased, contemplative recluse; nobody tried to silence or even question what-ever claims he made concerning Ascrobis. "He was a monster," said the doctor to some of us who were gathered one night in a ruined factory on the outskirts of town. Klatt frequently stigmatized Ascrobis as either a "monster" or a "freak," though these epithets were not intended simply as a reaction to the grotesque physical appearance of the notorious recluse. It was in a strictly metaphysical sense, according to Klatt, that Ascrobis should be viewed as most monstrous and freakish, qualities that emerged as a consequence of his intensely contemplative nature. "He had incredible powers available to him," said the doctor. "He might even have cured himself of his diseased physical condition, who can say? But all of his powers of contemplation, all of those incessant *meditations* that took place in his high back-street house, were directed toward another purpose altogether." Saying this much, Dr. Klatt fell silent in the flickering, makeshift illumination of the ruined factory. It was almost as if he were waiting for one of us to prompt his next words, so that we might serve as accomplices in this extraordinary gossip over his deceased patient Ascrobis.

Eventually someone did inquire about the contemplative powers and meditations of the recluse, and toward what end they might have been directed. "What Ascrobis sought," the doctor explained, "was not a remedy for his physical disease, not a cure in any usual sense of the word. What he sought was an absolute *annulment*, not only of his disease but of his entire existence. On rare occasions he even spoke to me," the doctor said, "about the *uncreation* of his whole life." After Dr. Klatt had spoken these words there seemed to occur a moment of the most profound stillness in the ruined factory where we were gathered. No doubt everyone had suddenly become possessed, as was I, by a single object of contemplation — the absent grave, which Dr. Klatt described as an uncreated grave, within the hilltop graveyard outside of town. "You see what has happened," Dr. Klatt said to us. "*He* has annulled his diseased and nightmarish existence, leaving *us* with an uncreated grave on our hands." Nobody who was at the ruined factory that night, nor anyone else in the northern border town, did not believe there would be a price to pay for what had been revealed to us by Dr. Klatt. Now all of us had become meddling accomplices in those events which came to be euphemistically depicted as the "Ascrobis escapade."

Admittedly the town had always been populated by hysterics of one sort or another. Following the Ascrobis escapade, however, there was a remarkable plague of twilight talk about "unnatural repercussions" that were either in the making or were already taking place throughout the town. *Someone would have to atone for that uncreated existence*, or such was the general feeling as it was expressed in various obscure settings and situations. In the dead of night one could hear the most reverberant screams arising at frequent intervals from every section of town, particularly the back-street areas, far more than the



usual nocturnal outbursts. And upon subsequent overcast days the streets were all but deserted. Any talk confronting the specifics of the town's night terrors was either precious or entirely absent; perhaps, I might even say, it was as uncreated as Ascrobis himself, at least for a time.

It was inevitably the figure of Dr. Klatt who, late one afternoon, stepped forward from the shadows of an old warehouse to address a small group of persons assembled there. His shape barely visible in the gauzy light that pushed its way through dusty windowpanes, Klatt announced that he might possess the formula for solving the new-found troubles of the northern border town. While the warehouse gathering was as wary as the rest of us of any further meddling in the matter of Ascrobis, they gave Klatt a hearing in spite their reservations. Included among this group was a woman known as Mrs. Glimm, who operated a lodging house — actually a kind of brothel — that was patronized for the most part by out-of-towners, especially business travellers stopping on their way to some destination across the border. Even though Klatt did not directly address Mrs. Glimm, he made it quite clear that he would require an assistant of a very particular type in order to carry out the measures he had in mind for delivering us all from those intangible traumas that had lately afflicted everyone in some manner. "Such an assistant," the doctor emphasized, "should not be anyone who is exceptionally sensitive or intelligent. At the same time," he continued, "this person must have a definite handsomeness of appearance, even a fragile beauty." Further instructions from Dr. Klatt indicated that the requisite assistant should be sent up to the hilltop graveyard that same night, for the doctor fully expected that the clouds which had choked the sky throughout the day would linger long into the evening, thus cutting off the moonlight that often shone so harshly on the closely huddled graves. This desire for optimum darkness seemed to be a conspicuous giveaway on the doctor's part. Everyone present at the old warehouse was of course aware that such "measures" as Klatt proposed were only another instance of meddling by someone who was almost certainly an impostor of the worst sort. But we were already so deeply implicated in the Ascrobis escapade, and so lacking in any solutions of our own, that no one attempted to discourage Mrs. Glimm from doing what she could to assist the doctor with his proposed scheme.

So the moonless night came and went, and the assistant sent by Mrs. Glimm never returned from the hilltop graveyard. Yet nothing in the northern border town seemed to have changed. The chorus of midnight outcries continued and the twilight talk now began to focus on both the "terrors of Ascrobis" and the "charlatan Dr. Klatt," who was nowhere to be found when a search was conducted throughout every street and structure of the town, excepting of course the high back-street house of the dreadful recluse. Finally a small party of the town's least hysterical persons made their way up the hill which led to the graveyard. When they approached the area of the absent grave, it was immediately apparent what "measures" Dr. Klatt had employed and the fashion in which the assistant sent by Mrs. Glimm had been used in order to bring an end to the Ascrobis escapade.

The message which those who had gone up to the graveyard carried back to town was that Klatt was nothing but a common butcher. "Well, perhaps not a *common* butcher," said Mrs. Glimm, who was among the small graveyard party. Then she explained in detail how the body of the doctor's assistant, its skin finely shredded by countless incisions and its parts numerously dismembered, had been arranged with some calculation on the spot of the absent grave: the raw head and torso were propped up in the ground as if to serve as the headstone for a grave, while the arms and legs were disposed in a way that might be seen to demarcate the rectangular space of a graveyard plot. Someone suggested giving the violated body a proper burial in its own grave site, but Mrs. Glimm, for some reason unknown even to herself, or so she said, persuaded the others that things should be left as they were. And perhaps her intuition in this matter was a fortuitous one, for not many days later there was a complete cessation of all terrors associated with the Ascrobis escapade, however indefinite or possibly nonexistent such occurrences might have been from the start. Only later, by means of the endless murmurs of twilight talk, did it become apparent why Dr. Klatt might have abandoned the town, even though his severe measures seemed to have worked the exact cure which he had promised.

Although I cannot say that I witnessed anything myself, others reported signs of a "new occupation," not at the site of the grave of Ascrobis, but at the high back-street house where the recluse once spent his intensely contemplative days and nights. There were sometimes lights behind the curtained windows, these observers said, and the passing figure outlined upon those curtains was more outlandishly grotesque than anything they had ever seen while the resident of that house had lived. But no one ever approached the house. Afterward all speculation about what had come to be known as the "resurrection of the uncreated" remained in the realm of twilight talk. Yet as I now lay in my bed, listening to the wind and the scraping of bare branches on the roof just above me, I cannot help remaining wide awake with visions of that deformed specter of Ascrobis and upon what unimaginable planes of contemplation it dreams of another act of uncreation, a new and far-reaching effort of great power and more certain permanence. Nor do I welcome the thought that one day someone may notice that a particular house appears to be missing, or absent, from the place it once occupied along the back streets of a town near the northern border. Q

FUTILITY

Echoes between
this sunlit & a stranger land. . .
echoes between
remind listening bones of green,
yet blight that green with gravelost hand
too far from flesh to understand
echoes between.

— Ann K. Schwader

THE GIANT VORVIADES

by Darrell Schweitzer

illustrated by Stephen E. Fabian

He found the giant crouching amid the frozen peaks of the highest mountains in the world. At that precise moment, he could remember little of his adventures coming here, of the hardships endured, and, perhaps, beloved comrades lost along the way. Even his own name seemed to shimmer just beyond his grasp.

But the voice out of his dreams told him clearly, as he led his emaciated horse onto the ledge, that what he saw across the adjacent chasm, huddled beneath the roof of the sky, was no mere pile of stones and ice. Here was Vorviades, cousin to the Shadow Titans and nemesis of the gods, devourer of light, enemy of mankind.

He made the sign of the dead for himself, crossing his arms briefly on his chest, tossing his head back to silently invoke the Righteous Nine Gods, performing, as best he could under the circumstances, his own funeral rites.

For his dreams told him that he had come to kill Vorviades, and he did not expect to survive the attempt.

Slowly the blizzard abated. The snowy curtain parted, and he beheld Vorviades, grown encrusted with centuries of waiting.

An avalanche roared into the gorge below. The monster turned its head toward him and opened its eyes. The giant's face looked like a thing of ice and stone, now torn free from the flesh of the mountains.

Calmly, the nameless man took his bags down from his pitiable horse, spread them out on the snow, and began to unpack, carefully unwrapping each piece of armor and strapping it on. Last came the ornately-inlaid, silver sword and gleaming sun-shield of the Knights Inquisitor, and his helmet, which was shaped like the face of an eagle.

Without hesitation, trembling only from weariness and the cold, he armed and bedecked himself as a champion of the Righteous Gods. He closed his visor, snapping the eagle's mouth shut. The clang echoed upward, toward Vorviades.

At the very last he removed his horse's saddle and bridle, and sent the beast down into the world wearing only a blanket.

Had the animal speech, he knew, it would be able to tell much, but the ending of the story would remain unknown, unless revealed by the Nine Gods in visions to the most holy.

For a confusing instant, he wasn't sure he even was a knight. He had some memory of another life, of a boatman who left his work by a river's bank when a dream summoned him; of crows picking at an armored corpse by a roadside, shrieking the words of dream; of the voice in his dream commanding him to take up another man's life, and another: the boatman, a slain knight, other wanderers. Souls processed into the darkness, but each time the hero rose again and continued his centuries quest.

Perhaps it really had been that way and he was an impostor, a madman, last of a series of madmen, who had stolen armor off a corpse. He didn't know. It hardly mattered now. He drew his sword.

The snow in the air swirled away, revealing blue sky. The sun gleamed on silver blade, golden shield, and on the icy face of Vorviades.

"Do you not fear me, little man?" The giant spoke with the voice of wind howling among skybound crags.

The knight's waking dream told him not to fear, and he did not.

Vorviades slid down into the chasm in an even greater avalanche, the whole mountain seeming to split apart as his thundering limbs stretched themselves for the first time in countless years. Snow, ice, and powdered stone filled the air like spray, concealing the giant entirely.

When the knight saw Vorviades once more, the monster had donned a mask of battered, mottled silver. It rose out of the tumultuous snow-clouds like an ominous moon.

"Do you not fear me ? "

For an instant the man was afraid, for he felt the voice within him quaver, as if the unseen and unknown sender of the dreams actually feared Vorviades.

Then the fear was gone, like sound cut off by a door suddenly shut.

The silver mask hovered before him, rising out of the abyss. He struck at it with his sword. Sparks flew. The mountains echoed the sound, and with the giant's laughter. Vorviades stood up to his full height, swelling like smoke, filling the entire sky, blotting out the sun.

"Do you not fear me ? "

"No," the man gasped, unprompted by any dream. "I do not." Indeed, it was entirely too late for fear.

The giant crouched down again, but the sky remained dark. Somehow hours had fled away. Stars gleamed. The knight could barely make out the rough, hunched shape of Vorviades, diminished considerably but still huge, climbing up out of the chasm onto the ledge. Chivalry bade him wait until the giant was on the ledge before him.

Vorviades loomed perhaps forty feet above him.

"You have reason to fear me," he said. "Fear me when the cities are crushed beneath my tread. Fear me when the plains tremble, when the seas rise up and wash over the lands because I am wading."

"Not if you die here, on this ledge," said the knight.

"Not then, I freely admit."

The knight struck the giant again, but was brushed aside with the flourish of an enormous hand. He sprawled in the snow, perilously close to the rim of the ledge, rolling over on his back, his shield upraised to protect himself. He paused as he saw that the giant had diminished once more, and now was no more than fifteen feet tall.

"I have seen your death in my dreams, Vorviades. Many times. It must be true."

"Aye, true. But is it true *now*?" The giant rushed at him. The knight leapt to his feet and struck again. He felt the blow connect, but found himself hurled through the air. Once more he rolled, at the edge of the abyss.



When he beheld Vorviades again, the giant was no more than ten feet tall, and seemed to be bleeding. "I think it is true now."

"I myself have awakened *into* the dreams of many men," said Vorviades, "to bring them terror. I don't think it is over yet."

They fought on, the giant's fists crashing into the knight's shield, the silver sword flickering like a serpent's tongue, finding blood until the snow was splattered with it.

Now Vorviades was only a head taller than the knight, broad of girth and shoulder, but human-sized. "I think it is over," said the knight.

"For you it is."

The giant had disappeared. The knight turned this way and that in the darkness, but could not find him. Then came the piercing, crushing pain from below and behind and he was hurled through the air once more, clear of the ledge this time, into the gorge below. His mind couldn't sort it out: the mountains and sky whirling, the clanging, crashing impact, pain spreading like the blood spurting inside his armor. In one dream he seemed to imagine the giant shrunken down to the size of a dwarf, calmly snatching a dagger from the knight's belt and ramming up into his groin before shoving him off a cliff.

He lay broken on the rocks far below the ledge. No, he could not accept such an ending. The dream had to be torn and rewoven.

He dreamed of Vorviades, grown huge once more, his mottled mask like the rising silver moon, reaching down tenderly, lifting up the dying knight, peeling away armor and flesh with surprisingly delicate fingers.

The knight wept, but for joy, for this was a hero's proper death.

Vorviades wept too, but only for an instant. Then he spoke as if he were addressing to someone else entirely, the dead man in his hand already forgotten.

"Dream of me, and fear me. I am coming for you, no matter how many such you send against me."

Vorviades sighed, and blew the knight's soul away as one might puff on a dandelion; and the man who still could not remember his own name sailed off into the darkness, to be judged and to dwell far to the south among the crocodiles, in the belly of Surat-Kemad, the Dreaming God, Lord of Death, whose mouth is the night sky, whose teeth are the numberless stars.

The Dream-Sender, dreaming, sat up with a shout, but did not wake. His voice echoed in the stillness of his tomb, and his dreams were filled with fear. He felt the earth tremble as Vorviades strode down from the mountains and began to cross the plains.

Therefore the Dream-Sender searched his dreams once more, frantically, to find another champion.

After King Angharad the Great had conquered all the lands between the northern forests and the Crescent Sea, fathered many sons, and brought peace to his wide domains, he was still a vigorous man, and it was assumed that he would reign for years to come.

But one night in his banqueting hall, before all his warriors and the ladies of his court, the king slowly poured out his winecup in libation to the gods and said, "I am summoned to conquer Vorviades, for I fear him."

At once, all were filled with consternation, that King Angharad could be afraid.

His queen, seated beside him, said, "Surely this was only some idle fancy of sleep, and you need not heed it."

But the king said, "I have dreamed truly."

That very evening, messengers came with the news that a city in a distant province had been overthrown-

"It was an earthquake," they said.

"It was Vorviades. The earth trembles when he walks."

Who knew of Vorviades? The historians searched the name out of books, but, but such books were old and filled with obscurities. The poets knew of him, but only stories. Hadrondius the philosopher, chief of the royal counselors and reputedly a wise man, merely said, "Lord King, you must defeat whatever it is you fear."

Therefore the king summoned his armies, and in the days that followed the earth indeed trembled, with the tread of King Angharad and ten thousand soldiers, off to battle Vorviades. They covered the hills like dark locusts. They looked down on the broken columns of the fallen city, and the king said, "Indeed, this is the work of Vorviades."

No one dared say otherwise.

The king summoned Vorviades with the blasts of a thousand trumpets. But the giant did not come.

The moon rose over the ruins, and the king declared the moon to be a silver mask, dented and tarnished, with burning eyes. He commanded his archers to shoot, and no one could say that they shot only at the moon.

In the midst of a forest, the king peered into the shadows between the great trees, and cried, "There! There is Vorviades!"

He sent his lancers charging for hours, until many were lost in the forest. Yet no one reported that they were chasing only shadows.

When a fire burned a whole district, Angharad said, "Vorviades has breathed."

When crops withered, he said, "Vorviades was hungry." Not even Hadrondius could make the king see otherwise.

Only when the army attacked a river with their swords and the soldiers began joking about baths and rust did anyone mutter anything, or look to the king and shake their heads sadly.

In time, though, everyone concluded that King Angharad the Great was mad. His courtiers slipped away, and his soldiers went over to his too-numerous sons, who fought over the pieces of his kingdom. Angharad watched the final battle from a hilltop, weeping, a ragged beggar now, alone and forgotten by the contending armies. In the end, two of his sons were beheaded. Two more died on one another's swords. The old queen perished before his eyes when her chariot overturned as she escaped one faction and was about to be captured by another.

The king raged on his hilltop, shaking his fists at the sky, while the smoke of battle rose. In the evening, in the bloody sunset amid the dust, he saw the giant Vorviades, clearly outlined against the sky.

"You!" he shouted with the last of his strength. "Why did you never fight me?"

The giant turned his masked face, which now gleamed like a second sun. He spread his hands.

"I have fought you all this time, and behold, I am victorious. Have I not destroyed everything you arrayed against me?"

"You never fought against *me*!" the king shouted. He reached for his sword, then fell to his knees sobbing when he found that he had no sword.

"Yes I did," said Vorviades, hurling his spear, which was the thunderbolt, to transfix the king.

The Dream-Sender cried out in agony as if he himself had been pierced, but still he did not wake. His tomb resounded like a great, echoing bell. Once more he whispered into the minds of men, commanding that Vorviades be opposed. But, in his own dream, he saw his champions like wooden statues, fierce enough, impressive enough in the darkness; but when the moon rose — and the moon was the mask of Vorviades — they were revealed to be only carven wood, useless as Vorviades knocked them down one by one and drew ever nearer.

Dreaming, the Dream-Sender cried out in his dream —

In a parched land, to the south and east, the boy Anzaxos lay down to sleep in an olive grove on a mountainside overlooking the crescent sea. On that bright, quiet day, when the air was still, the birds fell silent, and the sea gleamed like a warrior's shield, Anzaxos dreamed of Vorviades standing astride the mountains, reaching up to seize the sun in his hands.

Vorviades seemed to notice the boy as he lay there. He turned toward him, and his hands poured out blood and fire, until Anzaxos drifted in crimson depths, remembering lives which were not his own: a knight who died by the side of the road; another, pieced from below on an icy ledge; a king who went mad and saw his sons perish.

He feared the giant then, but some other voice spoke to him of glory, and of the path of the hero.

Anzaxos awoke and ran to his village to tell his parents, scattering sheep.

When he had told his story, his mother took him in her arms, rocking him side to side, saying only, "Small boys have big dreams sometimes, but they are only dreams."

He asked his father, "What *are* dreams?"

"Vapors in the head. You're better off ignoring them."

But Anzaxos could not ignore his dream, or forget it, and he spoke of it often, boasting that he would be a hero one day and kill Vorviades. At first people laughed or turned away, but when a traveller knelt before him and said, "You who dream true dreams, prophesy for me," he began to do so, repeating things the giant had told him in his dreams.

His mother cried out in fright. His father commanded him to be silent, but it was too late. The high priest's servants seized him and carried him off to the temple, and, while he sat trembling and afraid in a dark vault beneath the temple, his mother wept, his father pleaded, and a great deal of money changed hands.

Then the high priest announced that a little boy had been telling lies, no oracle had been discovered, and the gods had not spoken.

But before he was allowed to go home, Anzaxos fell asleep in the dark vault and dreamed that Vorviades leaned over him and whispered through

his silver mask, "If not you, another shall come after you to fight me." Then the giant departed, laughing.

Anzaxos's father took him out to a shed behind their house and beat him with a rod until he swore that he was only telling stories and would tell no more. Then his family had to leave, because their farm had been sold. They begged by the roadside for a time, until a rich man hired them and to work his land as tenants.

The boy grew up alone and silent, toiling in the rich man's fields, never telling stories, nor pausing to hear when others repeated old legends of the battles of Vorviades or the madness of King Angharad. His father and mother both died, exhausted and sorrowful, but never angry, as if somehow they knew that it wasn't their son's fault, that he had dreamed truly of Vorviades and now all their misfortunes were the giant's revenge. The giant wanted to fight, so the stories went. Combat was his only pleasure, the object of his lust, and when he was denied it, he grew very angry indeed.

When Anzaxos finally married Dera, the third daughter of a poor family, and begat three sons of his own, he did not tell his boys any of those stories, nor did he mention his dream of Vorviades. He raised them to work the fields, hoping that between the efforts of the four of them, they might one day get out of debt and buy their own farm back from their master.

But Velatin, the eldest, preferred to run. He ran along the dusty roads and over the hills without ever tiring or suffering thirst. When his father demanded of him why he ran rather than worked, he called back, "I am chasing Vorviades."

Anzaxos fell to his knees and beat his fists in the dust, remembering what the giant had said, that it would be either he or one who came after who would go off to fight.

And in those days there was war in all the lands. Velatin, the Swift, ran in the service of his king, bearing spear and shield and wearing a crested helmet, as messenger, as soldier, sometimes finding time to write home to his father that he spied Vorviades beyond the horizon, in the sunset or the moon's rising, and ran to meet him.

Dera said sadly, "Vorviades has claimed our firstborn."

Tired, gray, Anzaxos could only shake his head and remember his dreams.

Still the wars continued. Velatin, boldest of all the youths of his country, saw the giant Vorviades above the enemy hosts, or looming in the smoke above a burning city, and raced to battle him.

Then, one night the silver moon-mask of Vorviades appeared to Anzaxos, hovering beyond the bedroom window as he sat up in bed, and his wife slept beside him.

"Velatin is impaled on a post. Crows peck out his eyes," the giant said.

"This is just vapor in the head," Anzaxos said. "Go away."

The giant went, but Anzaxos wept until dawn.

His second son, Kalo, likewise left for the wars. He worked a huge device called a scorpion, which hurled a flaming spear.

"I'll use it to shoot Vorviades," he said. "I'll avenge my brother's death."

Anzaxos only wept more, and when word came that Kalo, too, had perished, he could not weep any longer, and accepted the news in silence.

His wife sickened. His third son, Naius, tended her lovingly, but one day he too came to his father and told how he had dreamed of Vorviades, and understood that he must be the champion of mankind against this monster. Naius was twelve years old. In those hard years, he had gone hungry a great deal, and was small and thin. From an accident in the fields, one of his legs was crooked. In his piping voice, holding back tears, he said, "I have to go, Papa."

At last Anzaxos was truly angry. His shame and his hatred of Vorviades overcame any fear. Trembling, afraid he would strike out in his rage and injure his sole surviving son, he said merely, "No, I shall go in your place, as I should have gone long ago."

Then he put on the plumed helmet Velatin had once worn, and took up his spear and shield. Around his waist he strapped Kalo's sword. He bade farewell to Dera, who, in her delirium, did not know him and babbled of Vorviades.

"I dreamed truly," Anzaxos said to all he met as he took to the road. "The only lie was the deny that I had seen Vorviades. Look. The signs of his passage are all around us."

Old as he was, tired as he was, he ran, as Velatin had, not as far, not as fast, but he crossed old battlefields and saw the bones of the slain, noting the mark of Vorviades. He slept nights in ruined cities, listening to the giant's laughter on the wind. When he reached the shore of the sea, the sun

was setting into the water, and there, amid the red and orange clouds, far over the sea, stood Vorviades, surveying all he had wrought.

Anzaxos caught the fading sunlight flashing on his shield. He shook his spear over his head. Vorviades gazed upon him.

"You!" Anzaxos shouted. "If you do not fight me, men will say you are afraid."

When the giant replied, storm clouds darkened the sky. The raging sea crashed upon the shore.

"At the Tarasian Gates, then, I shall meet with you in mortal combat, in one day's time."

Anzaxos was outraged. He was being mocked. "Coward! Your legs might be long enough, but you know I can't run that far in a single day. You're trying to escape me!"

"When the sun rises one more time," said the giant.

Anzaxos began to run, bearing his shield and spear, his helmet's plumed crest waving in the storm winds; ever eastward he ran, with the sea on his right. The greatest miracle was not his strength, his tirelessness, or how fast he ran. The storm ended, and the night continued. The stars turned in their courses, once, twice, five times and more, and the sun did not rise. Still Anzaxos ran, his endurance beyond anything human, beyond exhaustion or pain, in a kind of dream where he dreamt that he lay in a dark vault, far beneath the earth. At times he was not sure which he was, the dreamer or the runner, or the dreamer dreaming he was running.

The Dream-Sender said to him, many times, "You are my last, my best hope. You must prevail."

Anzaxos gasped, "Tell me of Vorviades. What are his strengths? What are his weaknesses?"

"His strengths are numberless and indescribable. He is the fury of mankind, which even the gods fear. His weaknesses, I have never been able to discover."

"That's not much help."

"I cannot help you. You must help *me*. My dread of Vorviades is unendurable, for I know that if you do not win he will find my hiding place and tear me out of it, and rend me to pieces in the light on the sun."

In darkness, what should have been ten days and nights passed, and by starlight Anzaxos came to that place where the Tarasian mountains part like gates swung wide, revealing the southern lands beyond. There he paused. He drank from a stream and waited.

In time he noticed that the stars were being blotted out, as if ink had been spilled over the sky, spreading relentlessly toward him. A dark shape rose up. Its silver mask gleamed so faintly he could barely make it out.

"Ah, Vorviades. I have waited all my life for you."

"Now let us finish this."

"Yes, now."

There was no combat. The giant reached down and snatched him up, as a child might a particularly curious and cumbersome beetle, then hurled him far out to sea.

The Dream-Sender screamed one last time, a wailing, despairing cry. The tomb resonated like a gong. Dust trickled down. Surely, he realized in sudden, hideous terror, Vorviades had heard and would be coming soon.

Yet he did not wake. He commanded the dream to continue, and reached out in it, cupping Anzaxos in his hands, forbidding him to die, summoning a great whale to bear him on its back.

Vorviades *did* find him, in the dream. The silver moon-mask rose out of the sea. The terrible, burning eyes opened. The storm wind spoke.

"Enough. Every time you try to repel me, you draw me ever closer. Surrender to me at last."

Now the Dream-Sender tried to end the dream. He dismissed the whale and summoned a storm to drown Anzaxos, lest Vorviades follow him and be led, inevitably, to the crypt of the Dream-Sender.

Now it was time to hide, to be silent, to become invisible, that not even the Shadow Titans, or Vorviades who was their cousin, could find him in the darkness.

But Vorviades breathed on the sea and calmed it, and blew again so that the wind carried Anzaxos all the way to the southern shore, where he was cast up in Riverland, near the City of the Delta.

Anzaxos awoke from a dream of his own death. He sat up, coughing, his throat fantastically parched, his limbs weary beyond imagining. "There's some wine in the jug," someone said.

He blinked in the bright sunlight and groped for the wine. As he drank, he slowly took in his surroundings.

A tent-flap swayed gently in a sea breeze. Beyond it, he could make out swaying grasses and a sandy beach. The whole front of the tent was open to the sea, to let the cool breeze in.

The speaker, who had offered him the wine, was a child. A pang of remembrance came: his own sons, little Naius, who was paler, but not much smaller than this boy. His host could have been no more than fourteen or fifteen, with a soft, round face, large eyes, and unkempt hair. He wore what must have once been a plain white robe and sat cross-legged on the ground, writing in a book in his lap, every once in a while reaching for or replacing one of the pens and brushes he held between ink-splattered toes.

Before Anzaxos could question him, the boy turned his book around, displaying with obvious pride two pages of beautifully intricate calligraphy. It was an indecipherable script, all whirls and flourishes.

"Do you like my story? It is all about the giant, Vorviades."

Anzaxos tried to draw away from him, but was too weak.

"Don't be afraid of me," said the boy.

"I ... I don't understand. All my life ... Who *are* you?"

The boy placed a sheet of blotting paper over the page he had been working on, then closed the book. "To answer your last question first because it is the easiest, I am the sorcerer Sekenre. Whether I am the author of this story or merely one who records it, I am not at all certain. But I know that I shall profit from it, and find its meaning."

"But. . . it's not just a *story*! I have *lived* —"

"All that suffering, all that dying, did it happen because I wrote it down, or did I write it down because it happened; or is there a third explanation which only Vorviades can give us? This is a further mystery. I have pondered it for at least fifty years."

Cautiously, Anzaxos took another sip of the wine, then wiped his mouth with his hand.

"You're crazy, child. You can't be that old."

The boy began to pack his pens and brushes carefully in a case. As he worked, he spoke, and somehow seemed to change, not in physical appearance, but in manner, in voice, in presence, until Anzaxos had the impression that someone else, that a whole legion of others in turn, wore this boy's body like a garment, and now someone else entirely shared the tent with him. "Know that when one sorcerer murders another, the murderer *becomes* his victim, who lives on in the body of his murderer, but subject to him as a slave to his master — supposedly, though it doesn't always work out that way — and perhaps in the company of many more. Thus the power of the sorcerer grows. Sekenre, when he was truly young, started by murdering his own father."

The voice and manner changed again. "But his father wanted him to, and contrived it."

And another. "We are many."

Yet another. "The body does not age, but the culmination of our selves is very ancient indeed."

Anzaxos asked, "Do any of you . . . remember ... or dream about Vorviades, or of some *other* who is his foe?"

Now the boy wrapped his book carefully in an oilcloth and put it in a shoulder bag. He seemed himself again, as if nothing had happened and he did not remember what he had just said. He got to his feet and stepped out of the tent, leaning over backward to stretch. He turned around to look at Anzaxos.

"Yes, I have dreamed of both of them, but only recently. I think I know how the story ends. Come."

Anzaxos tried to rise. "I'm so tired."

"You were always tireless before."

"Yes. And I think I can manage to be one last time."

Sekenre helped him to his feet.

The Dream-Sender came to them every time they slept, screaming in terror of the giant, warning that Vorviades was *right* behind *them*, *pointing*

into every shadow, into the palm trees where moonlight flickered and exclaiming, "There! There is Vorviades! I beg you, go away and do not lead him to me!"

But Anzaxos and Sekenre journeyed ever southward, along the left bank of the Great River, to a place of pillars, where the tombs of ancient kings lay half buried in the sand. They camped there, seeking the final solution to the puzzle, the way into a maze which could be found only in dreams, despite the Dream-Sender's every effort to conceal it.

The Dream-Sender appeared to Anzaxos, walking across the moonlit river, ripples spreading from his path. He pointed a bony finger. His bird-faced mask gleamed. His iridescent blue robe wavered like water flowing over him.

"You! You *are* Vorviades! You've changed your form once again, but I know you!"

He raised his staff as if to strike, but at that moment Anzaxos awoke, and beheld only the river, the dawn sky, and herons wading by the shore.

Each night, as they slept, Anzaxos and Sekenre both dreamed of an ancient city of high, white, marble walls and golden rooftops, and of a time so near the beginning of the world that the gods themselves walked the streets of the place; for the world was new then, and the very gods had only just awakened from their birthing-places in the Great River's mud. The first of mankind lived there, and had the gods as their house guests. A certain sorcerer dwelt among them, but apart. When the gods stood up and saw their likenesses in shadow, and these shadows sprang to life to become the Shadow Titans, making the very gods afraid, it was with the shadows that the sorcerer conversed. He invited them into his secret chamber and conferred for long hours. From them he gained certain powers and many, many secrets. He was the first and greatest of his kind.

Each night Sekenre and Anzaxos dreamed too of corridors and doorways, of passages turning, of hidden stairs. Sometimes they found such things, and moved their camp accordingly. Sometimes they understood what they had seen to be only symbols.

This went on for twenty years, during which Anzaxos grew older. Sekenre did not. Anzaxos, dreaming at night, began to prophesy by day, and travellers from the river stopped to hear him. Sekenre served as his attendant, gathering the offerings the travellers left. When the spirit left Anzaxos, and he no longer prophesied, flocks of birds swarmed over the ruins every day at sundown, leaving fish and fruits and grain scattered about. Thus the two of them were sustained. Perhaps Vorviades sent the birds.

The sun and wind darkened and gnarled Anzaxos, until, when he went to drink from the river, he beheld the reflection of what looked like animate driftwood with a wisp of white hair at one end. Sekenre merely darkened. The two of them were almost naked now, their clothing having fallen to tatters. Anzaxos saw that the boy's body, youthful as it was, was covered with intricate scars, like the elaborate calligraphy of a manuscript page, or the inlay on a warrior's sword. He understood that Sekenre was not young.

Sometimes, by day, he would dream — or remember; he wasn't sure which — another life, which was filled with glory and battles; and also of working fields and raising sons, who went away and died, first the eldest, then the second. He didn't know what happened to the third. He couldn't remember his wife's name. He was certain this was one more trick of Vorviades.

Sometimes he awoke cursing Vorviades.

Sometimes he seemed to be the Dream-Sender, peering fearfully into the world, certain that Vorviades was near.

Every day, Sekenre wrote in his book, and questioned Anzaxos about what he had dreamed.

Anzaxos felt that he was at sea again, drifting on the waves, carried along by the wind as if he were a feather, dissolving into nothingness. He forgot his anger. He felt only a fading regret and longed for release.

Then Sekenre found the way into the maze.

By torchlight, the two of them descended into the tombs. Sekenre touched a stone or spoke a word and some panel swung aside or a lion-headed god receded into the floor, and they climbed down further. Into the carven darkness they went, between huge pillars, through vast stone chambers, like insects crawling among the bones of a corpse.

In a low, narrow vault they found a sarcophagus; on its lid carven the image of a man with the face of a bird. Sekenre, for all his sorcery, wasn't very strong and needed Anzaxos to help him slide the lid off. The two of them grunted and heaved and the lid crashed to the floor.

The vault reverberated like a gong.

Within lay a man in an iridescent robe, wearing a bird mask, like the one depicted on the stone lid. Around his neck was a tarnished silver medallion of the moon.

"Behold the most ancient of sorcerers, Vorviades," said Sekenre.

"I don't understand."

"Nor do I, entirely. Come. Help me lift him up."

The two of them carried the stranger — sleeping or dead, cold to the touch, no heavier or lighter than a man should be — all the way back to the surface. All the while Anzaxos felt his mind overbrimming with terrors, with dreams hurled at him like the waves of a storm-tossed ocean. But the dreams were formless things and had no power over him. Instead he concentrated on memories of his past life, of his home, and tried to imagine what sort of man he might have become if he had never heard the name Vorviades. This left him angry, sad, and resigned all at once. He merely did what Sekenre told him to.

By the river's edge, in the bright moonlight, they laid the stranger out on the sand. Sekenre removed the mask, his hands trembling with excitement, his whole body tense with expectation.

But then the sorcerer merely sat quietly while the ancient face revealed crumbled away into bones and dust.

"I think I understand," Anzaxos said.

"Do you?"

"You wanted to murder this sorcerer, so all his secrets would be yours."

Sekenre paused, as if deep in thought, then handed the mask to Anzaxos. "The bird is called Hennes-Na. It seeks immortality by flying ever eastward, into the sunrise. But it never catches up with it. Eventually it flies all the way around the world and is burnt to death in the sunset. But that takes a long time. The mask of Hennes-Na may delay death for centuries, even as sorcery does, but neither is truly eternal. In the very end, Vorviades knew he was dying as even sorcerers must. He had mastered dreams, truly mastered them, so that what he dreamed became real. He was almost a god when he was young. He could create worlds. The giant which shared his name was merely his own implacable death, given shape by his dread of it. Now that his dreaming has ceased, the giant is no more."

"When you took the mask off —"

"I did not murder him. He merely *ended*."

"And what of those who fought for him, against his own dream?"

"Merely implements, like brushes to write the story with."

"To be discarded when you're done with them?"

"Brought into existence for that sole purpose."

Anzaxos thought of his wife and his sons. So many wasted lives. He wept and laughed at the absurdity that a discarded, worn-out implement should be able to do either.

"Come and assist me one more time," said Sekenre.

Together they cut reeds and to make a funeral boat. As they worked, it seemed to Anzaxos that a third person crouched with them, stirring impatiently in the shadows of the tombs. When they finished, and the bones of the dead sorcerer were placed in the boat, this additional presence was gone.

They waded out into the river, Sekenre shoulder-deep, until the boat caught the black current which flows upstream and they both felt the cold wind that blows out of the land of the dead. The boat drifted out of their grasp.

"I cannot accept this," Anzaxos said. "I am more than an old brush you throw away."

"What then?"

Anzaxos wept and raged. "I don't *know*! What life can I return to? I beg of you, please, help me."

Sekenre reached under the water and took the old man's hand. He squeezed hard. "I cannot help you. But you can help yourself."

"How?"

"You need Vorviades. Go after him. You'll beat him yet."

"But he is gone. You said so yourself—?"

"Believe in him again. Dream him back. Remember."

"|--"

"Find the dream. Look!" Sekenre pointed to the sky. "There! Do you see him?"

Anzaxos saw only the darkness, but he remembered knights and kings and a boy who had had a dream once, lied about it, and spent much of his life denying it until it would not be denied. Awake and yet dreaming, he was Velatin, who ran, and Kalos, who hurled spears with a device called a scorpion. He rose up and ran on the surface of the river as on smooth stone. He overtook the funeral boat, snatched the moon-medallion from among the piled bones, and put it on.

And he saw the giant Vorviades towering above the world, gazing down from behind the stars.

He shouted and he cursed and he ran, calling on the giant to come down and fight.

Later, Sekenre climbed up onto the shore, dried himself, and began writing in his book. He left several pages blank because he did not know how the story was going to end.

Q



The Classic Horror

ALLEN K '98

At that instant the monster
turned from Chivers, and the terrible
cups, dripping with blood and fetor,
descended in Maspio's own eyes.

Clark Ashton Smith
"The Dweller in the Gulf"

THE PIMP

by Lawrence Watt-Evans

Skin like white silk, pale as the sheets on which she lies, is marred by two deep-red scabs; beneath the skin blood is pulsing, hot and rich. For long minutes she stares down at that pulsing, caught between hunger and repulsion, between lust and fascination.

"She could die," she says, not looking up. She doesn't see whether the observer shrugs; she doesn't really care. At any rate, he says nothing in reply.

The white silk skin draws nearer, hunger overcoming repulsion, and she opens her jaws so far the dead muscles strain. She can feel her venom flowing, knows it's running down her fangs like water down stalactites, slow and thick.

Her vision is forced away from the girl's neck as her teeth set, sight lost in clouds of fine, tangled golden hair, and she closes her eyes.

Slowly, slowly, she presses her fangs against the white throat, the razor edges tearing through the scabs, cutting through the hard-clotted blood in a brief dry teasing before the new, fresh fluid wells up, blood and her own venom blending, hot and rich and bearing the flood of memories.

Eight years old, Momma's drunk again, and she's holding Amy by the blond braids they had plaited three days before, the morning before Momma's boyfriend had left; she's holding the braids so tight Amy can't move her head, can't turn to watch, but Amy can see from the corner of her eye as Momma pulls the steak knife from the drawer, the steak knife with the shining, serrated edge, and Momma holds it loosely in one hand for a moment while the other hand is clamped tight on the braids. Amy wishes she could pull free, maybe if her hair weren't braided she could, she could pull the hairs away, let them tear out of her scalp, and it would hurt but it would be over, she could run and hide.

But she can't pull out entire braids, and the knife is coming closer, Momma runs it across Amy's throat, very lightly, then a little harder, hard enough to snag and scratch ever so slightly.

"Amy," she says, "I don't know what I'm gonna do with you," and Amy knows that she doesn't mean that like the mothers on TV, she really means that she herself doesn't know what she's going to do, how far she'll go this time.

And the knife blade slides across again, stinging this time, and Amy feels something flowing down her neck and she knows it must be blood, she whimpers, she doesn't mean to but she whimpers, and Momma tells her, "Kneel down, Amy..."

And that's all; the blood has stopped flowing. The vampire opens her eyes, pulls her fangs free of the wounds, glances down at Amanda's chest. It's not moving.

She peers closely at the silk-white throat, at the small smear of blood she's just left, looking for the old scars, but even her eyes can't find them, not for certain; a faint line, so faint she might be imagining it, so faint it might be just a crease in the skin from normal movement of the head, might be there.

But she remembers the feel of the blade across her throat, and shudders with inexplicable pleasure at the stolen memory.

"Sweet," she says, "But not enough."

"Take more, then," he says quietly, his voice a distant whisper.

"There is no more," she tells him.

He gets to his feet and crosses to the bed, stares down at Amanda's body. "She's dead?" he asks. She nods.

"Damn," he says.

She smiles to herself. "I do," she whispers, but he doesn't hear.

"I don't know how many more I can explain away," he says.

"I said she might die," the vampire reminds him.

"I know," he says, "I know."

"I want more," she tells him. "There wasn't enough left."

He glances nervously at her. "I'll see," he says.

She waits calmly in the room, beside Amanda's cooling corpse, as he leaves; she hears the latch click, hears his footsteps retreating down the hallway.

To pass the time until his return, she remembers — not her own life, but the memories she's drunk from others.

She remembers the raw sexual passion that she felt when she drank the blood of a serial killer, the hideously erotic memories of his crimes, the power and glory of his hands on unwilling flesh, of his knife digging, of reaching into the wound . . .

And that blends into the memories of a boy trapped in a tornado-shattered home, the weight of a fallen

ceiling joist driving his head onto the torn, bloody flesh of his mother, his hands flailing as he struggles to free himself, as he tries to fight free of his mother's body ...

She recalls the sensation of giving birth to a monstrosity, the strain, the tearing, the gasp of relief and then horror as she sees what she's borne, as she sees, before the doctor can snatch it away, what's lived for nine months in her belly, sees it still twitching as it dies ...

Reviewing them this way is not as good, not as involving, not as *rich* as drinking them in the blood, but it amuses her.

For the moment.

She remembers the jumbled unbearable love and hatred of a molested child, the feel of a father's flesh jammed down her throat, the hot sharp pain of torn and abraded tissue, blood spilling, trickling, spurting from a thousand wounds in a hundred different bodies, young and old.

All that wealth of experience, of sensation, lost to her own dead flesh forever, she can only taste through others; she hungers for the memories more than she hungers for the blood itself.

She places a hand gently on Amanda's still breast, sees cold white fingers on cold white flesh, and she reminds herself that though she still moves, she is as dead as the woman she has just slain, the woman whose life she has sucked away.

The thought sends a thrill through her.

She is dead, yet she endures.

As Amanda endured her mother's madness, as the boy endured his ordeal in the wreckage, as so many of her victims endured so much, she endures this sensationless imitation of life, taking what she can from those who yet live.

And perversely, she enjoys that, the thought that she's stealing what she cannot have for herself.

She finds a peculiar sort of hope in the awareness that she can still enjoy anything. She has been dead a very long time, yet she still finds this pleasure possible in her existence.

For a moment, her own memories stir, of a time when she still breathed — a vague blur of green fields and blue skies and a dark man who visited her at night.

And then there were the early days after her death, when drawing blood carried fear and shame and terror, when the taste of blood was a new and horrifying ecstasy.

She hadn't known, at first, that the blood would carry the victim's memories — but the blood is the life, and what is a human's life but memory?

At first, the blood itself was enough; she ignored the memories, tried to forget them. The blood brought warmth and a semblance of life; the memories brought only shame, and a sort of dull embarrassment that she so intruded on the lives of her victims.

But then, as the taste of blood began to pall, she came to appreciate the memories, the homely little moments — a father's story at bedtime, a lover's caress, a child's wild embrace.

With time, though, the novelty faded — one lover was much like another, the children's hands were all the same, she had heard every father's stories before. She began to seek the rawer, fiercer emotions for memories that could still stir her — the screaming hatred of a divorce, the wrenching grief of a friend's death, the slow agony of a parent's decline into senility.

Even that became dulled with repetition in time, for most of the lives she stole were so very similar, and her existence had become listless, boring, a weight to be borne — until the boy with the bandaged arm.

The dog's teeth closing on his arm, the desperate jabbing at the yellow-brown eyes, the incredible searing pain from wrist to elbow and the grim satisfaction as the animal's blood spurted up around his thumb...

She smiles, and runs her fingers lightly down Amanda's corpse.

The boy led her to Paul.

The boy's parents, worried about their son, took him to Paul for therapy, to get over the horror he had lived through. He was visiting regularly, though she didn't know that when she first tasted that young, sweet blood, blood that carried intense memory of just exactly how it felt to drive one's thumbnail through a dog's eye into the brain.

She heard the parents talking. She heard the mother explaining that the doctor thought the boy was suppressing memories that had been clear before, and the vampire worried that this doctor might suspect, might notice the scars on the boy's neck.

And to be safe, she found the doctor.

She found Paul.

She looks up at the door. Far away, she hears hesitant footsteps returning, echoing in the hospital corridor.

She found her pimp, found the man who brings her all the strange, the violent, the extreme memories

for her to taste, to savor: The woman who had been held captive and gang-raped, the man who had been tortured in a South American prison, the couple whose little games had gotten so far out of hand that when the wife brought her mutilated husband to the emergency room he was given only a fifty-fifty chance of survival.

A slow smile spreads across her face.

The man might have made it, if not for the "inexplicable" blood loss.

That was the first death among Paul's patients. That was the point at which he could no longer turn back, could no longer pretend that his only motive was alleviating unbearable memories.

That was what he said at first — that it was an experiment, an attempt at treatment. The boy's nightmares were relieved when she drank away his memories of the attack, and Paul thought this could be a breakthrough for many of his patients. Even a temporary respite — and the effect *was* only temporary — could help.

She doesn't care about that. She is no psychologist. Paul's work, his theories, his degree, mean nothing to her except that he finds the most interesting treats for her.

And in a mental hospital, where no one believes if a victim tries to accuse her.

It's so beautifully simple — Paul asks an interesting patient to stay overnight for observation, all strictly voluntary, of course, nothing threatening, he says it all so well. The patient stays, and that night she drinks from a new well.

A symbiotic relationship, Paul calls it — blood and pain give her sustenance and pleasure, and in exchange her feasts lessen the mental suffering of her victims.

That was his excuse, until the first man died.

She doesn't need any excuses.

And then the door is opening, hard white light spills in, and Paul is there with his little cart, with the alarm device and the cold pitcher of orange juice.

"It's all right," he tells her, "No one will be coming by here for at least an hour."

She rises to her feet, eyes on Dr. Paul Burchard, on the trembling hands and the pale face, the white coat and the carefully-scrubbed neck.

He closes the door and steps closer.

"My turn," he says softly, as he lies down on the bed beside dead Amanda and tugs his collar out of the way.

Smiling, she stoops to drink of the nervous guilt, the perverse excitement, the nagging self-hatred of being a vampire's procurer; to drink also of the relief he feels in knowing that his torturing memories of dead patients will soon be as faded and dim as a photo left too long in the sun; to drink of the dread and anticipation that this time, this time, perhaps he'll die; to drink of the unreasoning lust he feels for her, for the vampire.

This is how she pays for what he brings her — and it costs her nothing.

Her mouth opens, her eyes close, and her fangs glisten in the lamplight as she descends.

Q

TRIBAL SINGER

By firelight, our favorite tales
were woven in "... Once Upon A Time ..."
All seemed set in a place like Wales,
long after the church bells chime.

The woods loomed deep with claws & wings,
strange creatures found too soon;
Wolves & bears & flying things
would grace the hunter's moon.

Hanzel & Gretel, who managed to hide
behind the witch's well,
could see the oven open wide
and watch her cast a spell.

Music of trolls might kiss the dark
from bone flutes carved by hand,
cold as moonlight's dust-dry mark,
below the bridges' span.

One tower's window, bedecked with fronds,
sent out from its stoney lair
a trailing, braided rope of bronze:
The flax of Rapunzel's hair.

Across the moors, the swamps & sties,
beyond the river's flow,
our Knight beheld the Dragon's eyes
in red "reluctant" glow.

When "... Out Of The Long Ago ..." was done,
we said our evening prayers.
And — albeit slow — were sent along
to our bedrooms up the stairs.

Beneath warm blankets, thoughts roamed free,
our smiles & shivers earned;
Imagination stretched to see —
We listened, long . . . and learned.

— Charles D. Eckert

MOVIN' ON

by Nicholas A. DiChario

illustrated by George Barr

Dad slow-dances across the living room, just the way those people dance in the black-and-white movies we sometimes watch on TV, except Dad only pretends to have a partner. He dances in front his favorite soap opera, making like he's romancing the new nurse on *Days of Our Lives*. He is very graceful, I think. That's how the women describe him.

"We have to go, my boy," Dad says.

"Today?" I say.

"Today," says Dad.

That's how it happens, mostly. One day Dad will decide it's time to up and leave, and off we'll go.

"Why, Dad?"

He stops dancing and looks at me. I don't like that look. It's the kind of look people get when somebody wakes them up out of a dream.

It was a stupid question. I go to my room. I don't have a lot of stuff to pack. Just enough to carry around in my duffel. We weren't here for very long. I empty out my dresser drawers. I hop on my bed and bounce on the mattress a few last times. The springs squeak. Dad comes in my room. He looks kind of dreamy again. I sit on the bed and look out the window. The sun is on its way down. The trees are going to hide the sun pretty soon, then the sun is going underground and it won't come up again till morning.

"What about Mom?" I ask Dad. "What are we gonna do? Just leave her again?"

Another stupid question. I think about telling Dad that this time I ain't going with him, that he can just go by himself, but I don't really want Dad to get lonely. Besides, this ain't all that great a place — kind of crowded, smells like cat poop from Mr. Bower's tabbies downstairs he can't get to use the litter box, and the mom doesn't like pizza, if you can believe that one.

Later, on the bus, Dad says, "You know, Junior, moms don't last forever. They come and they go."

I feel cold, even though it's pretty hot outside. The man on the Charleston radio station said ninety-four degrees. The bus has air conditioning, the kind that comes up the inside of the windows. You can stick your fingertips over the edge and make your fingers frozen numb. It's not a city bus; it's a Trailways.

I give Dad kind of a frown. "You and me come and go a lot, too, Dad."

"But you and me ain't real," he says like Groucho Marx, twitching his eyebrows, pretending he's holding a cigar. He knows Groucho always gets a smile out of me.

"Horse Feathers!" I say.

"Duck Soup!" says Dad. "Slap me five, my boy!"

I slap him five and we both of us laugh. I look out the window at the gray highway and the cars. "Where we going, Dad?" I ask him, even though I already know the answer.

"We'll know when we get there." He sits back in his seat and closes his eyes.

Dad's got short black hair and a squared chin, kind of like Clark Kent, and lots of muscles, too. Dad is beautiful. I know this because all the moms say so. "My God," they'll say, "your daddy is *so* beautiful." They say it because they can't help themselves. They say it almost like they can't believe it, as if I ain't even in the room. "So *unbelievably* beautiful."

Dad will just smile and blush, mostly. Depends what mom wants.

I stare at him for a while. He peeks at me through one eye. "Don't worry, boy," he says.

"Whataya mean?"

"You'll look the same way to women someday."

"Why?"

"Because you're my son," he says.

"But I don't look anything like you." The truth is, I got no idea what he looks like for real. Dad never looks the same for long.

Dad gives me a wink. "Someday soon you'll look exactly the way some little girl wants you to look. And then, when you're a teenager, you'll be every teen-age girl's fantasy. And then the women — the women who are lonely and hurting — they'll love you because they can't help themselves, because something will be missing from their lives and only you will be able to fill the void in their achy-breaky hearts."

"Why, Dad?"

He smiles and reaches over and pets my hair. "Because we ain't real."

I think Dad likes to confuse me. "But I'm here. You're here. That's pretty real, the way I see it."

"We will always be here, Junior, as long as there are women who dream, but being here ain't the same as being real."

"I don't get it. Are we here, or ain't we?"

Dad sits up straight. "It's not that simple. This is the way it is, and I want you to listen real good." Now he's doing Cagney — or Bogart — I get the two mixed up. "Sometimes a dream is so strong it makes something real. But no dream can last forever, and then what was made real becomes unreal unless it moves on, unless it keeps getting re-dreamed. Get me?"

Course I don't. I never do when Dad explains stuff.

I don't know why I bother asking. "I'm tired of movin' around, Dad." I give him my best pout. I remember this one place where we stayed for a while. There was a bunch of snow. I had a dog named Scooter. Actually he was the mom's dog. He wasn't much of a dog. A poodle. He didn't like getting petted a lot, but he'd flip over or play dead or do just about anything for a lousy dog biscuit. Sometimes I would sit at the window of my room with Scooter, and if the sunlight hit just right on the glass and the wind was blowing hard outside I could see snowflakes coming in through the edges of the window pane, right into my bedroom. I remember that place because we had a Christmas tree and a mom . at the same time, and we all went to cut down the Christmas tree, and the pine needles stuck to my boots, and I remember how I tracked the pine needles across the rug in big green splotches and the mom — I can't think of her name right off—but I remember the mom laughing her head off about it, and me and Dad rolling around on the floor just having fun, and Scooter yapping like a maniac.

Anyway, I give Dad my best pout, but he pouts right back. I pull out my *X-Men* comic and pretend Dad's not sitting next to me at all, but it doesn't do much good. I know he's there, and he knows he's there, even if we ain't real.

When we get to the new place the first thing we do is turn on the TV. No cable. Dad hates that. He can watch his soaps all right but we can't get the good old movies at night on the American Movie Channel.

"Tomorrow I'll get a new job," he tells me. He will. He always does. He never works for very long, though, only until he finds a mom. "And we'll call the cable company."

"How long we gonna stay here?"

"You mean here in this place, or here in this town?"

I shrug. "Town, I guess."

"We might stay here a good long time, Junior." He always says that. "Rochester is a real nice place. They got a baseball team. Plus, the landlord says we're not too far from Hamlin Beach."

"A real major league team like in Atlanta?"

"Nope," says Dad. "Minor league club. The Red Wings, they call them. Nice new ball park, though, Frontier Field."

"Ain't the same," I tell him.

"New place never is the same, so quit the gee-whiz aw-shucks routine and unpack your bag."

"When we gonna get a mom?" I ask him.

"Pretty soon, my boy, pretty soon."

Her name is Lisa and we move into her place only a couple weeks after Dad meets her. She's got a big townhouse in this ritzy park called Garden Estates, with a guard at the gate. She's got air conditioning and cable TV and a microwave. She's got real pretty long brown hair that smells like strawberries.

She's older than Dad was last time we had a mom, but Dad has already adjusted. He's got some "stately wrinkles," Lisa calls them, at the corners of his eyes, and his hair has a touch of gray in it. She's a big shot lady egghead at some medical lab at the University of Rochester. Dad met her while he was emptying trash barrels in some restricted area. She came out of her lab to lambaste him, and that was the end of that.

Dad lets me stay up late our first night at Lisa's and we watch some old black-and-white movie on AMC starring Bob Hope and Bing Crosby. Lisa makes popcorn and we all of us laugh a lot. Lisa tells Dad it's OK for him to quit his job so he can find himself some more respectable profession. Sometimes Dad will really do that, if that's what the mom wants. But mostly she doesn't. Mostly she just wants Dad to herself. Lisa will be like that. I can tell by the way she can't stop touching him. "He's a perfect male specimen." That's her favorite thing to say about Dad. "Tall, dark, lean, with gorgeous greens." She calls his eyes greens, as if they're vegetables.

They talk about sending me to school in September, which I ain't too thrilled about, and Dad knows it. I hate going to school and having to deal with new teachers and new kids and everybody's dumb questions.

Like, Where are you from? Who's your mom and dad? Do you want to come over and play after school?

I'll never forget how this dumb science teacher tried to tell me the sun doesn't really come up out of the ground in the morning, and then at night it doesn't go back underground again. He tried to tell me the sun is billions of miles away, and the Earth circles around it, or something crazy like that. "That's a lie," I told him. I told him I could see with my own two eyes where the sun goes down and where it comes up. I told Dad about it and Dad agreed with me. Dad said you believe what you want to believe, Junior. But the teacher said, no, "the eyes can deceive," and "we must learn to pierce through the dark veil of ignorance to what is scientific fact."

"What an egghead you are," I told him, just like that. He made me go to the principal's office, and I missed the bus, and Dad had to pick me up late. I've hated school ever since.

The next morning after the mom goes off to work and I'm eating Captain Crunch and watching the *X-Men* on TV, there's a loud knock at the door. Dad goes to answer it.

Some guy shoves his way in and pushes Dad over on the floor. Two guys rush in behind him. Dad tries to get up but the first guy kicks him smack in the face. I run for my bedroom.

"Get him!" one of them yells.

The two guys chase after me. I hop over the couch and beat them to the door but I can't slam it shut — this big guy sticks his foot in the way — so I run for the window but they grab me. I punch and kick and bite.

"Shit, the little bastard!" the guy says.

They stuff a rag in my mouth, get my arms tied tight behind my back, and throw this sack over my head, over my whole body. Dad! I can't even shout. Dad! I hear a lot of footsteps and running around.

"Where's the professor?" somebody says.

"Out in the van," says somebody else.

"Does he know we got them both?" another guy says.

"Filthy bastard kid nearly bit off my finger."

"Is the professor coming in or what?"

"Should we drag them out?"

"He's coming, hold on a minute."

I hope Dad's OK. That guy kicked him pretty hard. I hope he ain't hurt or scared or nothing. I hear some other guy walk in the front door.

"We got them both, professor. Do we move them now or what?"

"All right, hold on a minute," says the new voice.

Everybody stops moving except for this one guy who walks over to me and grabs at my wrists through the sack. Then he walks over to Dad.

"Good, good," he says. "Back the van into the garage and throw them in."

"Professor," one of them says, "not that it's any of my business, but now that we've gone this far don't you think it would be best just to kill them? I'd hate to see them come back and start causing you trouble."

"Yeah," says somebody else. "If we're going to do a job, I like to do it right the first time."

"There's no reason to kill them," says the professor. "I'm not a killer. They won't be back. There's nothing left for them here."

"Are you sure about that? If we have to come back again, it's gonna cost you a lot more."

"I know what I'm doing. I've written two books on demonology that are standard text in most universities. Believe me, now that somebody knows what they are, they'll look for a safer place to operate."

"So you want your wife back, that we can understand. But you really don't expect us to believe this jerk and his kid are demons —"

"I didn't hire you to believe me. I hired you to perform a job."

"You're the boss," says the guy.

After that they toss me and Dad in the back of the van, and off we go.

It's real quiet for a long time except for the sound of the engine and the hum of the tires and every once in a while a horn or a siren. All I can smell is this crummy laundry sack, and this gas-and-oil kind of smell. The road is smooth forever but then it gets bumpy and me and Dad clunk around in the back. Finally I work the ragout of my mouth. "Dad? Dad? You OK?" He doesn't answer.

The van stops. The back doors screech open. The guys pull us out and toss us on the ground, but don't say anything. I hear the van pull away. And then there's just the sound of birds and flies. "Dad, we're in real big trouble. How we gonna get out of these sacks?"

"Don't you worry, Junior."

"Dad! You're OK! Jesus, Dad, why didn't you say nothing before?"

"Take it easy. Maybe I was testing you, to see what kind of stuff you're made of." I hear Dad squirm

around on the ground. Then I hear this ripping sound.

"Dad, did you do it? Did you get out?"

"Maybe I did and maybe I didn't," says Dad in his Groucho voice.

"You did it! I know you did!"

Then I feel him tugging at my sack and all of a sudden the sack rips open and I can breathe, and I can move my legs again. It's a bright sunny day and we're out in the woods in the middle of nowhere. Dad unties my wrists and I hug him and he pats my back and I just start crying like a little kid. I hate when I do that but I can't help it. "I'm sorry, Dad, geez, I guess I'm not made of very good stuff. I'm sorry."

"It's OK, my boy, everything's all right now. Settle down."

My wrists are all bloody so Dad and me find this stream and we wash out our cuts, and clean 'em off with some leaves and stuff. I only got a few scratches, but Dad's face looks like hell. Anyway, we walk down this grassy hill, then we go through a field where the weeds come all the way up to my shoulders, and I can hear things I can't see rustling through the underbrush.

"Field mice, probably," says Dad.

"Where are we?"

"Don't know for sure."

We keep walking. At the edge of this field there's a dirt road. We follow that for a while, and finally come to a trailer house where there's a big black German Shepherd barking his head off. The dog is chained to a clothes pole. As we get closer to the house this old lady opens her front door and pokes her head out.

"I'm not looking to buy anything!" she hollers. She's wearing an apron, if you can believe that.

"I'm sorry to bother you, ma'am," says Dad, "but me and my boy been robbed and beat up out on the main road, and I was wondering if we might come in and get cleaned up a bit, and maybe use your telephone."

"Oh," she says, like she's heard all the stories about innocent old ladies getting robbed and killed by drifters pretending to be in trouble, but still can't believe people like that live in the real world. It's too late for her anyway. She got a good look at Dad and usually that's all it takes. She practically drags us in her house.

She's a plump old lady, with chubby arms and legs and everything. She's got a lot of hair, which I think is pretty weird for old folks. She's all apologies. "I'm so sorry I didn't realize you were hurt let me fetch a wash cloth and clean out that cut — it's a gash, a horrible gash — can I get you something to drink? Oh my God it must have been those Jefferson boys who live up on County Road 44 they're such trouble-makers — look at that swelling around your eye — did you get a good look at them?"

And Dad is playing her like a violin. "You're so kind, think nothing of it, we'll be all right, no sense in calling the police we didn't have anything of value — actually we didn't have anything at all. Me and my boy have fallen on hard times what with the missus passing away."

That professor should a had me killed for all the attention I'm getting. I wander into the old lady's living room. The place is filled with a lot of old-lady stuff, big surprise. On the wall there's a boring old painting of a wagon wheel leaning up against a red barn. There's a lot of knickknacks on shelves: wood salt-and-pepper shakers, little dogs and cats made out of glass, a shelf with just spools of thread and a bunch of sewing stuff on it, and another shelf with a big huge fat Bible. She's got all these old-lady afghans and fluffy pillows on the furniture, the kind that make you afraid to sit down. She's got a real ancient TV set, no cable. It's probably time for Dad's soap opera, but why should I give him the time of day?

I walk outside and the dog starts barking like a maniac again. I ain't scared of no dog. Never once met a dog that didn't take to me, except for that crummy poodle at what's-her-name's place, but that runt was nicer to me than to anybody else in his miserable little dog's life. I walk over to the dog and he stops barking and cocks his head at me and gives me this pitiful whine. Flies are buzzing all around his wet nose, and he smells dirty.

"I know how you feel, dog." I plop down next to him and hug the hell out of him and pet him for a while. Next to his dish he's got a bunch of big old rocks he must have dug out of the dirt. There's a chewed up rubber bone, and a deflated basketball with teeth marks in it. No dog house. Maybe the old lady lets him in at night.

I think about what it must be like when rocks and a bone and a chewed up basketball and an old hag are your whole life. Shoot, at least you can count on them day after day.

"Do you think I'm a demon, Shep?" I've always wanted a German Shepherd named Shep, ever since I seen *Hogan's Heroes*. "Maybe I should ask Dad, but I don't want him to get mad at me." Shep curls up with me and licks my hand, and the two of us stretch out together on the dirt. The sun is low in the sky.

"Pretty soon the sun will go underground for the night," I tell Shep. "Don't let no stupid science teacher tell you no different."

"Junior!" I hear Dad call. I must have fallen asleep. It's almost dark outside. "C'mon in the house. Mrs. Lewis made us a nice big supper."

I haven't had a bite to eat since the Captain Crunch this morning. I get up and run for the house, and Shep barks after me. "I'll bring you some scraps later!" I run inside the house and sit down at the table. The kitchen smells like fresh bread, meat and potatoes, coffee, and something sweet like pie.

Dad and this nice old Mrs. Lewis are still talking up a storm.

"Children just don't have any respect these days," says Mrs. Lewis, wiping her hands on her apron.

Dad is already looking pretty old himself. A lot of his hair is gone. He's shorter, rounder, heavier. He's got a double chin. "That's because kids these days don't know where they came from," says Dad, "don't know how hard their grandparents and great-grandparents worked and struggled to make life better for them. Kids don't even care to know about that sort of thing these days."



"Ain't that the God's honest truth," says Mrs. L. She sits down at the table with me and Dad.

"Of course my grandson Junior here is different. Before my daughter up and died she taught him proper respect."

I listen to them chat for a while. Dad's story has changed some. Now I'm the poor, sorry grandson whose mama died of tuberculosis, whose drunken daddy abandoned him, and now here's Dad trying to care for another young 'n and hoping his heart won't fail him before the boy is old enough to care for himself. I catch Mrs. L staring at me with this sad look on her face.

All during dinner, Dad feeds her this line about how his ancestors helped blaze the Oregon trail, all the way west from Missouri, he says. He talks about how they had to fight the Pawnee and the Sioux Indians, trade off all their mules for ox because the Indians kept raiding their camp for the mules, and the ox held no value for them. He talks about all these dangerous river crossings and how they lost near a dozen wagons in the horrible rushing waters of Bear River, out past Fort Laramie, middle of God's country. I don't know where he gets this stuff. Sometimes I think maybe it's the truth, but I've heard so many different stories they can't all be true. Somehow Dad always comes up with just what a woman wants to hear.

Mrs. L says, "You are such a charming man, Mr. — oh, I can't believe I've forgotten to ask your name."

"None of this mister stuff," says Dad. "Just call me Jake."

"Jake? What a remarkable coincidence," says the old lady. My late husband was named Jake."

"Is that a fact, Mrs. Lewis?"

"Call me Mavis," she says, taking hold of Dad's hand and squeezing. "You remind me so much of my late husband."

I can't take much more of this. I figure it's a good time for me to sneak some scraps out to Shep, even

though we ain't had dessert yet. I grab a few bones, some potatoes, a hunk of bread, and out I go. Mrs. L must have got so wrapped up in Dad she forgot to feed the old boy. He wolfs down all I got in a few seconds. We play around for a while, me tossing the rubber bone into his rock pile, Shep fetching it and making me yank the bone out from between his teeth. I could stay out all night with Shep if it weren't for the lousy mosquitoes. After a while I can't stand slapping the bugs off me so I decide to go back in the house.

I walk inside, but nobody's around. I hear some sounds coming from a room back of the kitchen. I walk down the hall and find the bedroom door closed. I know it's the bedroom door. I sometimes hear women making lots of noise when Dad gets them in the bedroom. I sometimes want to look, but I'm afraid Dad will get mad.

I don't know what makes me do it this time. Maybe I'm just sick and tired of being ignored. I turn the doorknob real slow and quiet. I listen to Mrs. L groan for a spell. My heart thumps crazy in my chest. There's a smell, an awful smell coming from the bedroom, not dirty like Shep, but more like there's something dead or dying in there. I wipe my palms on my jeans, and open the door a crack more. I can't see nothing except some candlelight flickering across the room. I can hear, though. Mrs. L is groaning like mad. The bed springs are screeching. I open the door a little more and sneak halfway through the crack.

There's Dad and Mrs. L buck naked on the bed. Dad is on top of the old lady. All I can see is their wrinkled white skin. Mrs. L groans. She's really hurting bad. Hurting like she's dying. I feel something hard knot up inside me. Dad, stop! I want to yell at him, but I don't want him to know I'm watching. And then she turns her head and I see her face — oh, God, she looks almost like a skeleton face — there's hardly nothing left of it. Old plump Mrs. L is almost all skin and bones all over her body. Dad is killing her! And then I hear her wail like somebody's twisting a knife inside her gut, and then she stops, stops cold and flops over like a rag doll. No more moaning or groaning. Her skeleton head rolls back on her slack neck, and she's got this sick, dead grin on her lips.

Then all of a sudden Dad glances over at me. "Hi, Junior," he says in his Groucho voice. "What's a nice guy like you doing in a place like this?"

Oh, God. I run out of the bedroom, out of the house. It's pitch black outside. Shep is howling like a maniac. I run up the dirt road, into the tall grass, trip and fall onto my knees, and I just start crying like a baby again. I don't know what it is with me. I don't know why I have to cry about everything. I'm just not made of good stuff.

I look up and see Dad standing over me. He's got his pants on, but no shirt. He's wearing that dreamy look again.

"Why, Dad? Why did you have to kill Mrs. Lewis?"

"Just wasn't much left in her for me to take, Junior. I didn't want to use her up, but that's what happens sometimes when somebody's old like that. The old are kind of defenseless. They've pretty much given away most of what they got."

I wipe the tears from my eyes. The crickets are carrying on, the owls hooting, the bull frogs croaking up a storm. "I hate mosquitoes," I say, swatting at my arms.

"We do what we have to do to survive," says Dad. "You have to learn that. We take what we need to live. We're not cruel about it. We give the women what they want. It's a give and take. It's a trade. You're old enough to understand that, aren't you, Junior?"

"Jesus, what the heck are we? Are we what that professor guy said we was? Demons?"

Dad kneels down beside me. "We're spirits, my boy," he says in his Groucho voice, pretending like he's flicking a cigar. "*Incubiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii . . .*"

"I wish for once you'd quit clownin' around, Dad." I slap my neck where a bug landed. "I don't want to be like you. I'm not gonna be anything at all like you. Not ever."

Dad stands up. He butts out his imaginary cigar in the palm of his hand. "Nothing you can do about it. That's just the way we are. It's our nature. When you get a little older, you'll understand what I'm talking about. You'll see."

No, I won't see. All I can see is Dad on top of poor old Mrs. L, all wrinkles the two of them, and there she is staring at me with her skeleton face. I don't ever want to see anything like that again. Of course I know what's coming next, so I figure I might as well bring it up. "I suppose we got to be movin' on now."

"Nothing left for us here," Dad says in his normal voice. I guess he figures I need time to stew. He's still got that queer dreamy look plastered on his face. He always looks happiest when I feel the rottenest, when we're about to hit the road. He holds his hand out to me and grins.

I get up on my own. "Ain't got no duffel to pack."

"We'll take some stuff from the widow's place. She's probably got a suitcase or two. Maybe she's got some old clothes packed away, coats or boots or shoes. Maybe a little bit of food. We'll see what we can use."

I turn around and start walking toward the trailer house. Dad sidles up next to me. Shep is still barking like a wild animal. "I better go calm him down, Dad."

"OK. I'll be in the house. You come on in when you're ready."

I walk over to Shep. He sees me coming but he just keeps barking. "Take it easy, Shep, calm down, boy."

He doesn't pay me no mind. He growls at me and shows me his fangs and his ears fall back, then all of a sudden he takes a leap at me. His chain snaps tight and yanks him off his feet, otherwise he would've bit me clean in half.

"What the heck's wrong with you? I didn't kill old Mrs. L. Dad did that. And he wasn't being cruel or anything. He gave her what she wanted. It was a trade."

Shep doesn't want to listen. Now he's snarling at me, and whipping his head back and forth, trying to bust his chain.

"Cut it out! Cut it out, Shep!"

Now he's drooling like an idiot, running around in circles, clawing at the dirt. He charges at me again. The chain snaps him back but he doesn't care about that, or maybe he thinks he can break it off or something. Stupid dog. Stupid idiot dog.

"Stop!" I pick up a rock from his pile and pitch it at him. It flies over his head. He keeps barking. "I said shut up!" I pick up another rock, a big one this time, and I step closer and he goes wild and rushes at me, and I take that big old rock in both hands and smash it down as hard as I can on top of Shep's skull, and he yelps and *crashes to the ground*.

His head is crushed in. I know it is. I felt it give. There's blood and fur all over the rock. I felt something else give, too. Something inside me. I drop the rock real quick. I'm all of a sudden scared of it. But I don't feel bad. I really don't. I did what I had to do.

A little while later Dad comes out of the house. He's carrying a couple of bags that look like the kind of bags sailors carry in those old movies about the Navy. By then I got Shep mostly buried under a stack of rocks and stones and some loose branches. "Had to do it, Dad. The dog didn't give me no choice. Had to shut him up before maybe somebody heard him and come to the house to check things out."

Dad says, "I understand." He takes out a cigarette and lights it up. Every now and then he'll have a smoke. Must be Mrs. L had some cigarettes in her trailer house. He's already looking younger and thinner. "Almost sunrise, Junior. Pretty soon the sun'll come up out of the ground like always, and it'll be another day, and we can put all this behind us. Whataya say?"

I take my bag from him and sling it over my shoulder. "Everybody knows the sun don't come up out of the ground," I tell him. "It's billions of miles away, and all the planets circle around it. I learned me that in school."

He puts his hand on my shoulder, and we both of us walk together down the dirt road, waiting for the light of day.

TWILIGHT

By the ash-tree's root,
Faces of ice weep crystal tears
For forgotten gods.

— Catherine Mintz

ODE TO MY SCREEN SAVER

How you dance, how you dance.
You touch all the points
In your universe, you two,
Changing hue. Which of you
Was which mere moments ago?

You probe at your limits.
Boundaries rebuff you,
Reshape you, otherwise
You would fly away to infinity
Becoming too huge to see,

Leaving only a void of darkness.
Your cosmos consists of two beings
Waxing and waning. Does ours?
Maybe each of you is a universe
And our very own universe

Is accompanied forever by its twin
Unknown to us except when live fish
Fall from a cloudless sky
Upon city streets, flopping,
Gasping on dusty pavements

As if sea and land danced together
So quickly then flew apart
Before anyone could pay heed.
Unknown except when ghosts
Walk through walls into locked rooms,

Or when strange blips on radar screens
Dart away vertically from pursuit,
Disappearing into the unknowable.
Or when the fakir hoists the rope
Into mid-air, but that is a trick,

So we think — quick, quick,
Catch the blink when one world
Passes through the other
With barely a stirring of dust.
After staring at you for an hour

The book which lay shut now lies open,
And rain has become sunshine.
Mark the changes outside: that rosebud
Come into full bloom, the cat
Whose paw was surely white before,

Signs written in clouds and leaves.
I have the map of the world
Unfolded, and what do I find?
Somewhere between Spain and Poland
A new country has slipped

Into existence, opening new avenues
Along which its joyful citizens
Are cooking the fish which fell
From the sky. They're licking
Their fingers and laughing.

On my passport to that new land
You swirl together then apart,
Casting your spell in letters
Not of our own alphabet.
No wonder so many books appear

Nowadays, such floods of words
Created upon machines, each
Eager to decode your dance
In a thousand different ways:
Tales of Tahiti or Tokyo or Titan,

Ostensibly, yet I know otherwise.
Consequently I shall wash my books
To soak those proxy words away.
I shall paint their pages with milk
Then gently heat them to expose

The true text which you dance —
That single word far longer than
The human genome, word of creation
Of which we can only read such
A short sequence of syllables

Supposing we spend our whole life
Deciphering and writing them down.
You moving shapes, how you dance.
At least and at last, thanks to you,
The truth is within my grasp.

— Ian Watson

THE DANCE AT WEIRDMOOR CASTLE

by Lord Dunsany

illustrated by Fredrik King

It was at an inn by a big road through the flat land of East Anglia. Before a fireplace by which a dozen men could have warmed themselves in comfort seven or eight sat — men upon various businesses who had come in there from journeys in many directions, most to stop for the night, one or two to go on again in the cold after dinner, which all that were gathered before that fire had had. For some while all of them gazed at the orange light of the fire, and watched the slow change of the landscape that seemed to glow there, as though there were significance in it or things to be studied. And whatever calculations they made concerning the scenes in the fire they made in silence, but for the faint sounds that murmured from the pipes of those that were smoking. In the warmth of the room in which that fire was glowing the silence had lasted so long that any remark would have rung in it, and would have held anyone back who was, perhaps, about to slip through the quiet gateway of dreams.

"Why, I wonder," said one of those before the fire, "do we associate ghosts with Christmas?"

For a moment the silence fell back again after his words. And then from the depths of a chair there came a voice saying, "Everything has its season; butterflies, moths, swallows, cuckoos and lots of other things. I suppose ghosts have too."

"But why at Christmas?" the first man asked.

"I don't know," said the other and sank back again in his chair.

I was afraid that the conversation was going to be dull. For I was one of those seven or eight before the fire. And I could do nothing to brighten it. And then the man in the deep armchair began to speak again. "At any rate," he said, "I never saw one at any other time."

"Never at any other time?" echoed one of us weakly.

"Never," said the man in the armchair.

"Then you have seen a ghost?" said the one who had spoken first.

"Only once," said the other.

"Would you tell us about it?" I asked.

"Well, if the rest don't object, I don't mind," he said.

Everyone of us leaned forward, and a murmur of syllables arose, all encouraging him to tell his story of ghosts. One or two pipes were tapped out and refilled, and we settled down in our chairs before that warm fire to listen.

It was some years ago now [he said]. Some years. I was a foxhunter in those days. Still am in a way; always will be; though it isn't often I go out now. There was less wire in those days. Well, about the ghosts. We had had a great hunt, and I was riding home alone. A great hunt, and I was out of country I knew. I had heard of the country through which I was riding, but had not been that way before. It was a part of the country called Weirdmoor.

It was one Christmas Eve, just as it is now, which is what reminded me of it. Not that I should forget it, in any case. It was bitterly cold, colder than what it is to-night. There had been some snow too, and there was a north wind blowing. I had heard of it because of an old castle that was there; a ruin called Weirdmoor Castle. And I had never been there, because none of us ever did go. There were stories about its being haunted. It wasn't that I was afraid of ghosts, but if there were none there, there was nothing to go for, and, if there were, they are chilly and clammy things and I saw no reason for not keeping away from them.

Well, there it was, a ruined castle standing by a bleak moor, with bats and owls in it and, there seemed, ghosts. No particular reason for going there, and nobody went.

But on this particular night, as I came over the moor, the north wind was going by me like a long knife, and I was wet from the snow that had melted on me, and my horse was tired and, ghosts or no ghosts, I wanted shelter, and there was no dwelling anywhere along that bleak road. I might have kept warm if my horse could have trotted, but I couldn't keep him at that without hitting him, and he had carried me well; always did; and I wasn't going to do that. And then an intenser blackness rose beside me out of the dark moor. It was Weirdmoor Castle.

My first impulse was to ride past it, as the members of our Hunt always did, if ever they saw it. It was

merely the custom of our Hunt. And that is what I should have done, if there had not come at the same moment a blast from the north that was so especially biting that, cold as I was already and thoroughly wet, I felt that shelter of any sort was now a sheer necessity. My horse shook me with one great shiver, and suddenly I saw that the windows of the castle were all shining with what I took to be lamplight. Later I realised that the glimmer, whatever it was, had not arisen from lamps, and that, for that matter, there were no windows, but only black gaps in the masonry; but that was afterwards. At the time I thought that where there was light there must be warmth.

So I rode up to the doorway and hitched my horse to a rusted iron staple that must once have been a hinge of the door. It was on the south side, so that my horse was sheltered from the appalling wind. And I walked in. The moment I had gone through the hanging curtains with which ivy half-covered the door, I saw that it was true what had always been said and that the place was haunted, and badly haunted.

One has read of bevvies of ladies, and, for all I know, they should be so described; but here it rather seemed that there were gusts of them, that floated, slightly luminous, through the castle's dark interior, while the north wind sighed outside and stirred the air of the cavities in which there had once been windows, and set dancing the tendrils of ivy that hung loose from the walls. There was no roof on the castle, and looking upwards I saw only racing clouds that rushed over strips of dim light; but whether such light as there was came from any remnant of day, or from the stars of the moon, I could not tell. The ladies that floated through the dark of the castle drifted together then, and seemed all to look at me, for all of them sharply turned their luminous faces towards me, then turned away and clustered closer together and were obviously talking of me. I could have no doubt of that. And what is more, I could feel that they found something wrong about me. For a while I wondered what it could be. Could it be my wet hunting-coat, or the mud on my stock, or the water from melted snow that squelched in my boots? And one by one I became sure it was none of these. And then the idea came to me what it was, a clear feeling, which I corroborated later, that I knew what it was they found wrong. It was simply that I was alive. And life was something that these ladies who floated in that dark castle found common and vulgar and coarse.



Then they seemed agreed about something. "One of us," they seemed to have said, "must receive him." And at once from the face of one of them, as far as I could see in the darkness, disappeared the amused criticism, to be replaced by a welcoming smile as she drifted towards me.

What she said as she smiled at me with her faintly luminous smile was said in so tiny a voice that you might have thought I could not have heard it above the howl of the wind through cracks in the walls, and the roar of it in the chasms that once had been windows, but it had a clearness like that of the shrill cries of the bats which were also piercing the darkness, and I heard every word.

"You are from Earth transitory, are you not?" she said.

And I said, "Yes," though I had no idea what she meant.

"Won't you join us?" she said.

So I said that I should be delighted. And she drifted back to the faintly luminous others, and I followed her, walking in my wet boots over the weeds of the floor. I bowed and said, "Good evening," to that dim cluster of figures, but saw from their vacant expression that evenings and mornings meant nothing to them, and I could not say anything apt about eternity and did not know what to say. But one of them, a graceful figure that swayed with her swirling silk skirts in the draughts that were waving the ivy, asked me if I did not come from the transitory ways; and, guessing what she meant, I said that I did. And she turned to the others and they all nodded and smiled, and I heard them muttering again, "the transitory ways," and their smiles put me at my ease.

I could not trace by their fashions the dates when they had been here, and the graceful lines of their dresses were too mixed up with the tendrils of ivy which hung and swung from the walls. I should have liked to have asked them something about their story, but coming suddenly thus among an assembly of ghosts, I was not so composed as they, who had before them only one stranger, and who were in their own home.

So it was they that questioned me. And in answer to their questions I told them that I had been hunting and that I had been taken far from home by a great run, and after a splendid fox. "Is it dead?" they asked eagerly then. And I guessed from the excited eagerness in their faces, and from all that they said later, that they cared only for what was dead; and again and again as they spoke I got the impression that, although they tried to hide it, all living things to them were vulgar.

They closed round me eagerly, asking for news. Had I seen any ghosts by the road? they asked.

"No," I replied.

Any spectres? Any phantoms?

And I saw from that that there were different kinds of ghosts and that all these were different things.

Then the north wind outside appeared to increase in violence, so that all the cracks in the castle and weeds in the windows were singing. And the lady that seemed to be the chief of the ghosts asked if I would dance with her. Well, of course, I could not refuse. And we danced, and the wind sang. A graceful figure and a lovely face, so far as I could see by the dim glow of it in the moonless and starless darkness. But no warmth came from her, and no warmth came to me from my dancing, but only an increasing cold that pressed in on me from the darkness and clamminess of the castle, and even from every one of those girls themselves whenever we danced near them.

Chillier and chillier I grew as I danced, and the waist and the hand of my beautiful partner were as cold as the leaves of the ivy covered with ice. And as I grew chillier still, I knew it was life that was ebbing. And as the music of the north wind in the crannies sank for a moment, I ceased to dance, and my chilly and lovely partner urged me to go on.

When I said that I feared that it was time for me to go, she clung to me still, like damp ivy. And something about her then drew the bare truth out of me, and I said, "The cold is beating me, and my life is ebbing."

And she said "Life!" full of amused scorn. But, if I was to live, I knew that I must get quickly out of the cold of that castle, even into the wind outside. For somehow I knew that even the north wind would be wanner, if I could only pull clear of the dead. But it wasn't so easy.

They were not able to move me. They couldn't drive me to dance. But there was an influence about them that, cold as I was now, was growing too strong for me, and they were all around me, and I no longer had the strength that I needed for pulling away. And my partner was fixing me with her glow-worm's eyes. I was growing colder and colder. How could I pull clear?

I grew colder and even colder, and my partner smiled at me, a welcoming smile as though I were coming over even then to the dead. And so I was. And at that moment my horse snorted, trying perhaps, poor brute, to drive some cold gust away from him. Life, I thought! Something alive!

"I must look after my horse," I said.

They all of them turned on me the faint gleams of their eyes. And then I heard them exclaiming with all their scorn, "A horse!" "A horse!" "A live horse." And more than that they had no need to say in order to show me the indignation with which they knew that I preferred something alive to them. And then the one that had danced with me said, "A live horse! Had you wanted a horse the Valkyries would have given you one, or sold it for fairy gold." Her indignation was rising, and the indignation of all of them, while my

strength was ebbing away with my vitality.

I was moving towards the door and feared that I never would get there, for they were all round me now, like ivy, and their chill was gripping my heart. And now the door was only four or five yards away, but I felt I could no more reach it than one can run to safety in a nightmare. Their cold and their scorn were all round me, hemming me in. One moment I felt that their bitter cold had got me, and then there was warmth all round me and I suddenly felt I was saved.

It was the breath of my horse. In the warmth of that I was able once more to move, able once more to put my weight and my reason against imponderable and ghastly things. I patted my horse, unhitched him from the old staple and climbed up. As I got to the saddle the dance, or whatever it was, seemed all to die away. One faint wail of indignation or disappointment remained, hanging in the dark air. And the light, whatever it was, had gone from the windows.

That was Christmas Eve. I rode on with the north wind, which as I think I told you, was warmer than that dank castle.

When I got home it was Christmas. I don't suppose they haunt that place at any other time, or more people would have seen them than have; but I never went back to see.

That is the tale I heard one Christmas Eve at an inn, and I remember it yet. It was late when the man who told it ceased to speak and leaned back again in his chair, and it was warm and comfortable before that good fire, and I noticed that all but he were by then asleep. *Q*

BELLE

by Tina and Tony Rath

Once upon a time there was a girl called Belle. She was as pretty as a picture, a natural blonde and a perfect size ten, but she had trouble with computers. She was taking a secretarial course, and she would have been perfectly happy with it, if it had not been for the computer section. She was very good at photocopying, and she had a certificate for the safe use of the stapler, she made excellent coffee, and her typing was not all that bad, but show her a computer and her head seemed to fill with cotton-wool. One afternoon she was sitting at her keyboard in the classroom while the other girls were having a tea-break. She was desperately trying to make sense of the lesson she had just sat through, when the Principal walked in, followed by a very handsome young man.

"This young lady seems to be a very keen student," he said, smiling.

"Oh, my goodness, yes," said the Principal, who knew all about Belle, but who was not going to admit that any student of hers was a complete computer illiterate, after eighteen weeks of training. "We just can't keep Belle away from the keyboard. Run along now dear, and get yourself some tea," she added quickly, before Belle, who was a very truthful girl, could give the game away.

"Just a moment," said the young man. "She sounds just the sort of young lady we're looking for. When do you finish your course?"

"Next week," she said.

"Splendid," he replied and he gave her a card emblazoned with a golden crown and the words *King and Son* which was the name of his company. He told Belle to come for an interview as soon as she could because they could never get enough good, keen computer staff. And he smiled so nicely that Belle took the card and smiled back.

Belle decided to go for the interview because she thought she could explain that she was really best at things like photocopying and use of the stapler and perhaps there might be a vacancy for someone to do that kind of thing, and to make coffee for all the other people who were working on the computers. But when she got to the offices of King and Son she found they were in a huge building that seemed to be made of gold and white marble. There were crowns everywhere, even crowns woven into the carpets, and the entrance hall was so full of trees and fountains that it was more like a park than an office. She was so overcome and bewildered by it all that she found herself rushed through her interview and signing a contract of employment before she had caught her breath, far less explained about her problem with computers.

But then the handsome young man appeared and took her out to lunch. He turned out to be the Son part of King and Son and Belle discovered that he was not only handsome but clever and kind as well. They said very little at lunch, and ate less, but they sipped Perrier and gazed into each other's eyes and any chance that Belle might have had to explain slipped away. The rest of the week slid past in a delicious whirl. Belle met a lot of nice people, and had some very pleasant lunches, and she had really begun to enjoy herself — until Friday afternoon when Mr King's son led her into a little office on the top floor of the huge building, which had nothing in it but a desk, a chair, a computer and a huge pile of paperwork.

"There you are my dear," he said. "Just get this lot sorted out and I'll take you out to dinner." And he gave her a lovely smile and went out, shutting the door behind him.

Belle gazed hopelessly at the computer screen which glared greenly back at her. She pressed a few buttons but this made the screen flash so alarmingly that she burst into tears. And then, through her tears, she saw a button at the side of the keyboard which said, in tiny letters help and in desperation she pressed it. The screen went blank and for a heart-stopping moment she thought she had wiped all the data. But then it flashed into life again, and at the same moment the door opened and a strange little creature came in. She was no taller than a child of ten and her hunched shoulders made her look even smaller. Her eyes were tiny and quite red and her face looked as old as the century. But her hair was silvery blonde and hung down below her waist as fine and thick and beautiful as Belle's own.

"Have you finished in here, duck?" she said.

"No," said Belle, who thought she was the office cleaner. "I don't even know where to start." And she began to cry again.

The little creature peered up into her face and said: "What will you give me if I help you?"

"What!" Belle exclaimed

"You pressed the help button, so you must need help. But it's the same with computers as with most other things in life. You only get out what you put in. So, if I help you, will you promise to do something for me?"

Now, Belle had never read any fairy tales. She had been to a modern school where they only read socially relevant stories about children who lived in deprived inner-city areas, or pre-teens who worried about the size of their chests. So she said: "Oh, yes, anything, only please help me!"

The little old woman began to whirl round, so that her hair tossed and glittered in a mist all round her, and as she whirled she said: "Mr King's son has fallen in love with you. When he marries you, you must ask me to your wedding. You must tell him that I am your aunt, and welcome me as your most honoured guest. You must give me a seat between your bridegroom and your father in law, and give me the first glass of champagne that's poured and the first piece of the wedding-cake that's cut."

And she stopped whirling and stared at Belle with her tiny red eyes. Belle was not at all vain, although she was so pretty, and she did not really believe that Mr King's son would ask her to marry him. So she promised to do everything her strange visitor asked.

"Good girl," said the weird little creature. "Now go and fetch me a cup of coffee and I'll get started."

Belle ran to the little kitchen at the end of the corridor and made the best cup of coffee she had ever produced. It took her very little time, but when she carried the cup carefully back to the office the work had all been done. "But — that's just like magic," said Belle.

"Isn't it just," said the little creature, grinning and showing some rather sharp little teeth. "Now my dear," she added, taking the coffee and drinking it down, boiling hot as it was, "don't forget my wedding invitation. Leave it on the computer here and I'll be sure to get it." And once more she began to spin round faster and faster until, before Belle's startled eyes, she vanished.

That evening Mr King's son flew Belle across to Paris in his private plane and during a most romantic dinner he asked her to marry him.

Now when Belle met Mr King's family and his rich friends she began to feel very uneasy about her promise to the weird little woman, and very unhappy about claiming her as her own auntie. But she had made a promise, after all, and perhaps the old woman was looking forward to her outing. And then again, she might not really turn up. So Belle propped one of her white and silver invitation cards on the computer keyboard in the little office, and hoped for the best.

The old woman did not appear at the wedding itself, and she was not in the long line of guests queuing to congratulate the happy couple, and Belle was beginning to feel safe. But when everyone was sitting down and the wedding breakfast was just about to begin there was a disturbance at the door and the little old woman came in. She was wearing a good black suit and her beautiful hair was piled up on her head and held in place with jeweled combs, but somehow this made her look weirder than ever. For a moment Belle was tempted to pretend that she did not know her, but she was good girl at heart, and pity for the wizened little creature made her stand up and walk down the room in all her bridal finery to greet her.

"I'm so glad you could make it after all, Auntie," she said loudly, though some of the guests, she thought, sniggered behind their hands, "you must come and sit with us."

So she sat down at the top table, between Belle's new husband and his father, and, true to her promise, Belle filled her a glass of champagne from the first bottle that was opened and gave it to her.

"Your niece seems very fond of you," said old Mr King, trying not to sound surprised.

"Oh, she is, sir, that she is," said the little creature. "And she's my favourite of all my nieces and looks just like I did when I was her age. I had lovely blue eyes, just like Belle's."

"But — what became of them?" cried Mr King, staring at her tiny red orbs.

"I was so fond of the computers sir, my eyes grew red and bleared with staring at the VDU," wailed the little old woman.

Belle stood up with her bridegroom to cut the wedding-cake.

"Ah, look at her pretty figure," said the little old woman. "I had a figure like Belle's, and not so long ago as all that, either."

"But — what happened to it?" said Mr King, staring at her hollow chest and her hunched shoulders.

"I was so fond of the computers sir, I couldn't be kept away from them, and I lost my fine shape stooping over the keyboard, night and morning, morning and night," keened the little creature.

Belle brought the first slice of her wedding-cake to the little old woman, as she had promised. Her skin had such a glow on it that it gleamed smoother and finer than the fine silk of her wedding-dress.

"I had a fine skin like that," said the old woman, "though you wouldn't think so now."

"But what became of it?" whispered old Mr King, staring at her yellow parchment neck and the dry folds under her chin.

"I was so fond of the computers sir, and the dust from the screens dried out my pretty complexion," she said. "And all they left of my beauty is my hair."

And she shook her head, until her long blonde hair fell down her back as rich and fine as Belle's antique lace wedding veil and for a moment they saw the pretty girl she might once have been.

And Mr King's son could keep quiet no longer and he said: "Never, never shall my lovely bride touch a keyboard again!"

And Belle winked at the little old woman and said, demurely: "Not if you don't want me to, dear."

And they all lived happily ever after.

Q



UNLOCKING THE GOLDEN CAGE

by Tanith Lee

illustrated by George Barr

To be poor, not young, unlovely — and alone — is a composite fate inflicted on many by the Angel of Misery. And so it was upon Agnes Drale, who, thirty-three years of age, and in a faded gown and unfashionable bonnet, walked up the two miles of the drive, to her late Uncle's manor, carrying her bag, one evening in the early autumn of 18-- .

Another might have had high hopes, but not Agnes. Although it seemed, by the terms of the curious will, she was now supposedly to want for nothing, she understood quite well that the house and grounds, the title, and the coffers of the fortune had passed to her eighteen-year-old cousin, Genevieve, who was already wealthy and notoriously fair. Agnes was to be this woman's supplicant. And although, as the will stated, Agnes was to live in the great house, and have everything she required, it was to come to her by means of asking.

Throughout her life Agnes had learned, utterly, that asking was ruinous, and mostly unwise. In church, at the age of ten, and on her knees by her narrow bed for three years more, she had asked God daily, nightly, to improve her looks. But God preferred to keep her as she was, thin and sallow; indeed He liked this so well, He added artistically to her appearance by bending her back and blearing her eyes, in the service of ungrateful and sometimes vicious children, so that now she had a sort of hump, and wore spectacles.

Other than God, the human race provided evidence of the inadvisability of asking: Those who did not wish to employ her or, having done so, pay her; those who did not care to take a cup of tea with her in her room, preferring other friends more galvanic; those, like her father who, when she was twelve, refused her desperate plea not to die and leave her.

Agnes had never met her Uncle; but he seemed to her, rather than a benefactor, a cruel and perverse man, wishing to play some game even from the grave — for things were said of him, of his journeys in the East, and his private pleasures, which included alcohol and perhaps other stimulants more foreign.

Genevieve, of course, he had once visited, when she was a glimmering, ormolu child of fourteen. Agnes he had never bothered with. The tone of his testament, conveyed to her by the lawyer, was of impatient remorse. As she did most others, Agnes had apparently annoyed him with her lack of means, and must be tidied up, like spilt milk, before he could depart the world.

Having just been ousted from her work as governess in a drab, unclean, and misogynist household, Agnes had already packed her bag. She next came across the length of England, through the first flame of September, in a cheap, close, and bouncing public carriage. And so now walked up this drive, through this glorious park which, presently, was faintly tinged itself with the shades of butter, copper kettles, honey, rust, amber, and ruby wine.

When she reached the house portico, arranged with the Greek columns that showed one of the flighty turns of the building, Agnes activated the bell and stood in its clanging, to wait. Governess, servant, dependent, drooping under her hump at the great front door, she expected insults, and having to explain herself. But despite her droop, she was ready. For suffering and ill-treatment had done to Agnes Drale that which they usually do — soured and twisted her, made her bitter as the aloe, and hard, under the layers of her physical weakness, as a cold and ancient stone.

The cousins, Genevieve and Agnes, did not meet until the evening, the hour of dining, in the Old Hall of the manor.

The Old Hall was not, in actuality, very ancient, but had been arranged in the Gothic way, with a vast fireplace, black beams, and shields and swords to mingle with the portraits on the walls. An angled passage led from the Hall directly to the chapel, done in the same mode, that had, so the lawyer had informed Agnes, a royal crimson ceiling, with hammered silver stars. No one had worshipped in this chapel since its erection. The lawyer opined that Agnes might care to, holding, it seemed, to the common belief that the higher-class female destitute soon learned a rigid habit of prayer.

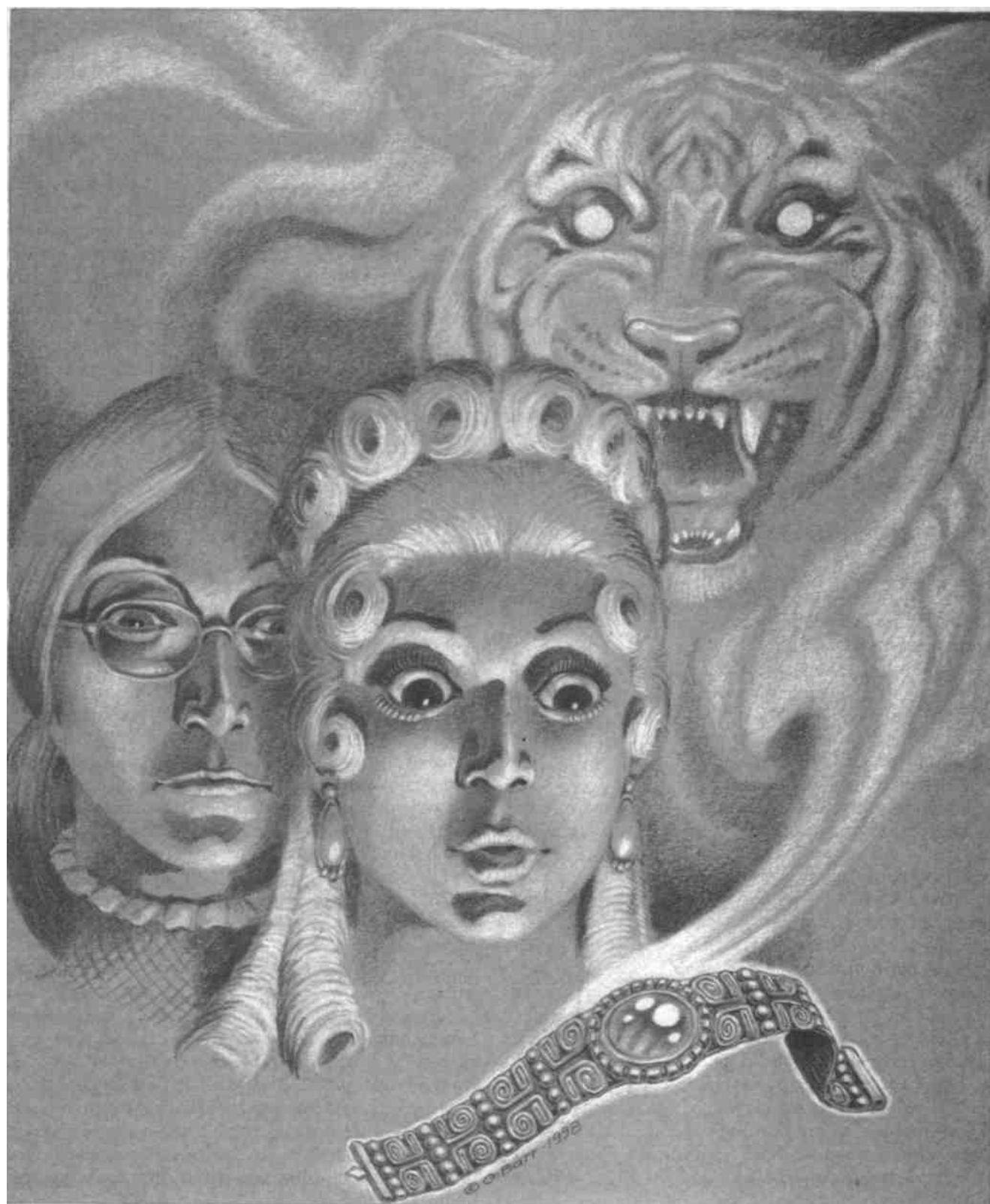
Now, amid the candlelight before the fire, Agnes observed, in her cousin, a pure example of the redundancy of praying.

Genevieve was a being of gold. She might have stepped from the heart of the sun. From her head poured loops and coils of golden hair, shining like the flames of the hearth. Her eyes, the colour of chestnuts, had each a golden sequin, that could have been caused by the candles, or by some inner, ever-present combustion. Her flawless skin was softly flushed as if gilded. She glowed, she gleamed. While her dress of gold-leaf satin had been fashioned to match all.

Agnes, sitting in her one shabby, dark, 'dinner gown,' her hair pulled tight, could only smile her twisted, little, invisible smile.

"This must be amusing for you, Agnes," said Genevieve. "Do you like Italian wine? I expect the French vintage was too dry for you. Or do you like dry things?"

Agnes, used to the quips and cuts of numerous employers, answered only when needful. Genevieve was patently furious that her cousin had dared to come. Genevieve had already made quite clear the fact that Agnes was normally to dine in her own sitting-room upstairs. Genevieve had explained that, while hairdressers and dressmakers and other slaves might arrive regularly at the house, and Agnes must feel at liberty to engage them as and when she wished, Genevieve did not predict Agnes to wish for very much. Agnes would have simple tastes. Agnes, unused to opulence, would intend, circumspectly, to avoid it. And so, to the frequent dinner parties, to the evenings of dancing, she must naturally consider herself, under the post-mortem avuncular law, invited — but Genevieve would not be offended by her absence.



"I made quite sure, Agnes," said Genevieve, as she ate the chocolate fruits, "a Bible was put beside your bed." Raising her dessert wine, golden as she, Genevieve declared, "I've no doubt you have several favorite passages in the Godly Book. Do tell me one. I'm sure it would admonish me to be virtuous, and I'm sure I need reminding."

"I seldom read the Bible," said Agnes.

"Oh, your weak eyes. How thoughtless of me. But then, doubtless you have large portions of the holy work by heart."

Agnes sipped the wine. It was sweet as the pain of toothache she had so often experienced. She said quietly, "*Curse God, and die.*"

Genevieve started. She seemed shocked, or perhaps only behaved as if she were so. "What ever is that?"

"The Bible. You will find it in *Job*."

Genevieve smiled. "What a serpent you are, in your dark dress. You must have something brighter. We must see your true colours."

Upstairs, in the large bedchamber which was now hers, Agnes looked from her window and beheld night upon the park, the huge, blazing autumnal oaks and beeches put out, and crowned solely with midnight. Stars shone, dull as hammered silver. Below, to her left, she made out the chapel, stretching away from the side of the house. It had seven long windows, each caught in a spiderweb of iron, and through these nothing was visible. The chapel seemed to Agnes more like an orangery than anything else, the skittish styles of the house here mixed to an extreme of unlikeliness.

On impulse, before blowing out her candle, Agnes opened the Bible at random. Running her finger down the page, she read this: *All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman.*

A week passed. Agnes Drale became re-acquainted with familiar, anticipated things. Firstly, her despisement by the servants, and their carelessness with her, manifested in their short replies, the cold and muddled food brought to her rooms, the way in which her furniture, of all the building, was left undusted. Secondly, her exclusion from the life of the mistress of the house, Lady Genevieve.

There were, however, new, and quite unknown, comforts — the softness of the bed, even undusted and not well-made, the tastiness and variety of breakfasts, luncheons, teas, and dinners, even tardily and untidily presented. To have her own private place at last, and somewhere to put her books, allied to the chance that she might purchase more. Soon enough she barred the sneering or glowering maids from her sanctum, and herself, not reluctantly, made up her own bed, her fire, and dusted the fine old chests and chairs. The park, too, with its massing of fiery dying colours, afforded her long and fascinating opportunities for exercise. Agnes did not know any more, it is true, how to be happy, but she had never had before a life such as this.

She met, during that week, only once with Genevieve. This was in a lower hall, near dusk. Genevieve was returning aflame, in a riding habit of Prussian Burgundy, with two or three gallant young men.

"Oh, Agnes, if you wish to join us for dinner . . . but I don't suppose you do. She is most retiring," Genevieve added to her court, and they laughed, a laugh that such women as Agnes have had from such women and men as these, since humankind was evicted from Eden.

Needless to relate, Agnes did not attend the dinner. Nor did she have plans to intrude upon the other, more lavish, dinner Genevieve proposed to give, to dignify her eighteenth birthday. This celebration had been carried from its correct date in August, due to the business of her having come just then into the inheritance of the manor. She was a child, unsurprisingly, of Leo. Agnes, whose Virgoean birthdate fell curiously on the very day of Genevieve's extravaganza, imagined only that the onset of her thirty-fourth year would pass without notice among Genevieve's birthday flambeaux and fireworks.

This was not, however, exactly the case. Five days before the event, one of the maids rapped harshly on Agnes' door.

"Lady Genevieve says you are to go down. Lawyer's come."

Agnes felt a clutch at her heart. From her past history, she knew at once a trepidation that some successful act had been made to exile her, after all, from her anchorage, despite all self-effacement.

Grey and rigid, she entered the drawing-room, and there posed Genevieve, herself like a ray of the sunshine which burst in at the casements, the lawyer fawning and sunning himself in her contemptuous light.

"It seems there's some box Uncle left for us, to mark our birthdays. Apparently he believed they lay closer together than they do." She expressed a glitter of distaste at such a notion. "This gentleman," the word spoke volumes of disdain, "has said that we must be present when the box is unlocked."

The lawyer uttered, trying — in vain — to impress by privy knowledge. "As I have said, my lady, the receptacle has never been opened, not since it was brought to his estate by your Uncle. But the documents assert that it contains a most valuable, indeed unique piece of jewelry, as I believe, of Eastern origin."

All this was rather lost upon Agnes, who, flooded by relief, had blushed a sudden, unbecoming red.

Nevertheless she went, as instructed by the lawyer, and stood nearby, while the container was produced

and a key set in its lock.

The box was of some black wood, and intensely carved with coiled and embracing designs. The lock was horrible, although well-oiled, and gave out such a screech that Agnes' hair rose on her neck. Inside the box, alone on a nest of papers, shone out the roar of gold.

Agnes did not, immediately, determine what this golden article might be. But strangely it came to her; how different this was, this deep, hot, heavy, and mysterious alchemical metal, how unlike the golden gildedness of Genevieve, which even she, Agnes Drale, had confused with it.

"A bracelet," said Genevieve. She seemed amused, idle, neither impressed nor curious.

But as the lawyer lifted it out, and held it for her, ready, the rich lushness of its gold drained the sunlight, drained even, for a moment, Genevieve.

Genevieve said, maliciously sweetly, "Come and see, Agnes. Which of us can he have meant it for?"

"Evidently, for you," said Agnes, in a leaden voice.

It was only her now-ingrained servitude that spoke, her resignation. And yet, her voice sounded ominous, and cold as a bell.

Genevieve took the jewelry, an intricately-worked band, having in the midst of its circle a sunburst. With no scruple or hesitation, Genevieve undid the clasp and fitted and secured it to her wrist, the right one, brushing aside the lawyer's offers of assistance.

Slinking back, he said, "The papers relating to the ornament are here."

"Yes, no doubt. Reading of any sort bores me terribly. It harms the eyes, you know, and makes them dull, and blind."

She drifted to the window once more, holding her trophy — who could think of it as other than hers? — before her, outstretched the length of her creamy, rounded, lower arm.

The lawyer took from the box a paper, and put it on the table. Agnes leaned, almost involuntarily, to see. The writing was highly decorative, and did not look like the rather slovenly script of her late Uncle.

*This wrist-ring, or bracelet, is known as the **Fraanghi** or **Frengeh**. Although very beautiful, in the land from which it was taken, it was thought to convey a curse.*

The lawyer sucked his lower lip. "Dear me."

At the window, seethed in light, Genevieve, the lion's daughter, did not seem to hear.

Agnes read on, with her dull and blinded and bespectacled eyes.

*A wise king, having this jewel, lived a full, long, and sanguine life. But, once the adornment passed to his son, this son, boastful and proud, made many enemies. It happened that he was found, then, the arrogant one, with the gem upon his wrist, but he was torn asunder. Then arose another king, a braggart, a cruel man, and he, wearing the jewel, was also found, **stripped to his bones** in the forest. Beware then, for not randomly does the object keep its name.*

Agnes turned to the lawyer. "What language is it, what does it mean? *Frengeh* — *Fraanghi* —?"

The lawyer glanced at her. He said, "Your Uncle was a great traveller in India, Persia, and the East."

Agnes said, "There is another paper."

This time, he took it out and handed it to her.

She read aloud, *"The gemstone is purported to be that Fata Morgana, a **yellow ruby**, of which there are few or no examples. Those who have conversely suspected the jewel to be a topaz, of the red variety, amend that such stones are not often found in that region."*

There was nothing else in the box, but for a deep shadow. Agnes said, "There is no jewel. The gold is plain."

"It seems so," replied the lawyer.

Genevieve spoke in the incandescence of her window. "A jewel? Is there a jewel in it?"

"No, my lady. It must be that it has lost the jewel —"

Agnes looked, and the flash from the bracelet blinded her for sure. The light had sprung from its central part, the sunburst. Before the darkness cleared from her eyes, she heard herself speak distinctly. "Perhaps the boss opens."

"Let me *see*."

For an instant, Agnes beheld her glorious cousin clawing at her own wrist, the way a cat will at something it does not like, or likes too well.

There was a loud click. It was a noise a clock might make, in the moment before it stops.

"Oh! Agnes, come and see —"

No malice was apparent now. Genevieve cried out, as had the precocious, lovely, repellent, and greedy child she had been at fourteen years of age, the day her Uncle had visited her and brought her such wonderful presents, and she had danced for him the 'Dance of the Pretty Fairy,' and recited some sentimental ode, and everyone had sighed and clapped, but he had only gazed, with his thin, brown face and narrow, evil eyes — that she, the fool, had been too young and too self-enamoured to interpret.

Agnes moved to Genevieve across the room. She entered the flaming crystal of the light. And in the light, Genevieve became the palest ghost, but on her wrist, freed now from its cover, there scorched, amid the curve of gold, a gem, the red topaz or yellow ruby, just as the paper had specified.

Agnes, once more, heard from her throat the voice arise, as if another uttered within her. "It might have been made with you in mind, Genevieve."

On the evening of Genevieve's deferred birthday party, which was really her own, Agnes Drale descended the main stairway in good time.

Most of the upper house had been decked with gilt ribbons and swags of velvet roses. Tall, ivory candles burned at every turn, as if gas had never been invented.

A few heads were rotated as Agnes came into the reception room. Not at her beauty, nor in mockery, in mere perplexity. In the past slender number of days she had called upon the harassed dressmakers and coiffeurs, and had so changed her appearance that Genevieve, in the midst of admirers, did not for some time recognize her. Agnes had not aimed for the impossibility of charm or the veneer of sweetness. She wore an expensive gown of jet black silk, whose tailored shawling collar quite concealed the upper curve of her spine. On this was pinned a watch of finest silver, with seed pearls, tiny and of impeccable design. Her hair had been re-invented in a style more classic and less severely placatory, and had given her face, now mildly powdered, the stern and implacable look of the Roman dignitaries found on antique coins. Agnes, who had been, seemingly, bowed and apologetic, now looked more what she secretly was, formidable and unforgiving. As her eyes passed over the assembly, assisted by her improved and gold-rimmed spectacles, no one was moved to laugh at her. Best be wary, was the instinctive if hidden thought. They took her not for a governess, or poor relation, but some steely aunt, ready to despoil their pleasure if they were not careful, to cast them down. If one cannot ever be loved, it may be better, in the interests of self-preservation, to be feared.

In some way, Agnes perfectly understood this. Her glance, fortified also by a glass of malt-coloured sherry, was unwavering. Although she could not have said exactly how she had come by her abrupt assurance.

It was only Genevieve who, recognizing her cousin suddenly, burst into a peal of mirth. Genevieve, herself in a dress of saffron, her hair raised like golden fruits in a basket of combs, half spilling on her enamel shoulders, was even then extending her fair arm, for everyone wished to study her bracelet — the single ornament she had put on. Agnes, despite seeing the jewel on its emergence, was also drawn to do so once again.

"Why, Agnes, how magnificent you are!" But Genevieve's sparkling voice passed over Agnes' bending head.

There in its socket of gold, the huge, polished gem, substance of the wristlet called the *Frengeh*: Yellow ruby or not, one could not mistake what it was like. The clear reddish upper water that melted through the tinge of nasturtiums, to a base the shade, perhaps, of a Harvest Moon. And over its face, a flaw, which must, being so remarkable, have made it even more valuable and curious, more esoteric, bizarre, and even sinister. This flaw showed itself as three soft bars of shadow, that were, unmistakably, like three stripes upon the pelt of a tiger.

"A tigerish stone," said the plump young lord who stood at Genevieve's elbow. "A tiger for a lioness, since her birthday, you know, falls more properly in Leo."

"The tiger abhors the lion," said someone.

"Does it not suit me, then?" asked Genevieve, playfully.

Her gallants laughed loudly. They laughed with countenances angled aside — they did not wish to dispute with the grim and elegant aunt who had spoken such ill-omened words.

As Genevieve glided away, they passed with her, like a cloud clinging to a sunrise. And Agnes remained alone, wondering what she had said. It was strange, was it not, that the golden bracelet, which had closely fitted the strong arms of kings, would be small enough to cling to the slim wrist of Genevieve. But men in the East were often small of bone.

Agnes turned her head, and saw, as if her reverie had conjured it, an apparition. Against one wall, was positioned a small and slender man, clad in garments that, to Agnes, suggested the East, his head bound in a scarlet cloth. His skin was smoky, his eyes as black as her dress. Seeing that she looked at him, he bowed, his hands beneath his chin.

But then the crowd of Genevieve's guests washed between them, he was gone, and all that was left, for a moment, was the impression of a woman's amber-coloured gown, moving away, as it almost appeared, with no one inside it.

The dinner was held in the Old Hall. As decreed, torches burned. Gilded candles pointed from garlands of autumn leaves and forced red flowers. An artifice, a palm tree with gilt fronds, dominated the table's centre.

Through the many courses, the soups and meats and side dishes, the desserts and savouries, the selections of wines, Genevieve was Queen. Her radiance beamed the table's length. As Agnes sat, eating her sparing, precise mouthfuls, she felt swell within her her own murderous hate, that which never before had she been able truly to acknowledge. As the gaiety and high spirits emblazoned the hot, fragrant, and over-

powering air, Agnes mused inwardly on all the mean cruelties inflicted upon, and the careless wrongs done to her. A host of horrors marched across her mind, and in their wake swept Genevieve, a sun in splendour, putting all other light, all other slight, to shame.

After the feast, out they went, on to the terraces above the descending lawns, and watched as, garnet and diamond, fireworks were let off against the backdrop of black trees and night.

Agnes Drale noted the little slender man in his turban, hurrying about the pitch, ordering the incendiary shows. While, as the fireworks soared, bursting with sharp bangs like artillery into their kalidescopes of flame, Agnes beheld how they reflected in the lines of the windows of her Uncle's unused chapel, unsanctified by prayer, throwing up crimson flares on its ceiling, where the still stars hung, as if it too were burning.

It was later yet, after midnight, when the cold champagne was served in the Old Hall, back into which they had mobbed to get warm, that the Eastern man approached Genevieve, and bowing low, hands joined, produced from thin air a yellow rose, unlike all the other madder roses, and put it at her feet.

"Oh, bravo!" exclaimed her lovers, who had arranged presumably for his participation. "Shall he read your future, Jenny?"

"Do say 'yes,' " cried the ladies, who wanted to have read their own.

Then Genevieve sat in a chair, the pivot of all things, a golden lamp; and Agnes waited in the distance, like a shadow. The Eastern man crouched by Genevieve's knee. He stared into her palm. He said, in a rhythm fluctuating like an autumn wind, "You are walking your true path, lady. Before you is your Fate."

A woman shrilled, tipsy and excited, "What is it to be?"

"It is shining," said the man, "like the morning. It turns towards you its golden eyes. Your Destiny is beautiful, lady, and you will not fail to meet with it. It purrs, like a cat."

Genevieve clapped her hands. The *Frengeh* flashed, another firework, its gold, the astonishing stone that ran from ruby to topaz, and was striped like a tiger.

"What about that, eh?" asked the lordling. "Cursed, ain't it?" He grinned.

The man from the East smiled, his eyes lowered to the floor where, applauded but untended, the yellow rose had been trampled.

"The jewel will have caused the death of mighty kings," he said. "But what need this lady fear? She is in England."

At that they howled with proud laughter. And Agnes Drale stood watching, smiling a little, just as he did. Yet through the smirch and haze of sinking lights, she saw now, deep inside the crowd, a woman in an amber dress. Her hair was dark, springing and trailing all around her face and throat. Her skin was tawny, and the lights ran on it like water. Her eyes seemed to come and go, now pale and flame-like, and now dark as the sky beyond the house, as if fireworks went on in them still. And as she turned a little, her gown might be seen to be striped, barred, an unusual pattern, just before she was gone.

Agnes shivered in the scalding room. And raising her sour and flat champagne, she drank it down. She was in the grip of that most primal and appalling and triumphant fright, which the ancients knew to call Terror. She was aware that all things were altered now, and that the drab world held more than she had thought, and that God, in some form, some fierce and unimaginable and awful form, existed.

"There is a wretch of a gypsy in my park," said Genevieve, peevishly, shedding her riding gloves. "She wore a dress of dull orange, and her dark hair all loose. I shall have men scour the grounds. She must be evicted."

Agnes did not argue with this statement. She ate her breakfast, there in the dining-room with its marble and velvet, where now she took her early meals. But as she bit into her kedgerie, Agnes recollected how, even prior to Genevieve's ride, she, Agnes Drale, had walked in the manor woods, and sensed that something was slinking behind her, hot in the frosty morning, something that smouldered on and off between the trees. And on the lake, the ducks kept to their island, while now and then, above, the song of the over-wintering finches fell mysteriously quiet.

Two grooms and three footmen were sent out from the house; they left jesting, and returned silent. Seeking for the gypsy, they had found nothing at all, save the burnt leaves down from the trees, the berries like blood, and feathers of some bird a fox had taken.

The servants were different now, in their attentions to Agnes Drale. In a matter of a month, they had come to respect her. As the last leaves scattered from the trees, so were discarded the prejudices and the glee of certain ill-used things for another ill-used creature supposed more vulnerable. Agnes was not as she had seemed.

When she brought back the surly young women to clean and tidy her suite of rooms, they took one fresh look at her, this Agnes seeming taller in her faultless black, straight and hard as the winter trees were coming to be, strong and impervious. And when their first efforts were not good enough, then she brought them back again by a couple of clipped words, to re-make her bed, to replace her higgledy-piggled ornaments in a reasonable order. They said, presently, she was obdurate, but just. After all, she knew

what was right.

They did not say they had formerly sought to jibe at and prey on her weakness. They said they had mistaken her, been misled by a temporary loss of character on her part, and so not initially discerned that she was a lady, and so she expected — and deserved — their best.

It was Genevieve now they took to task, Genevieve who had always been capable of viciousness, throwing at them her hairbrushes, retracting their wages, her unsuitable whims and extravagances, her manner that had, they now affirmed, no dignity. She had hardly worn mourning black for her Uncle, and that was a disgrace, he had been dead only half a year. She slept most of the day, until eleven o'clock, like a pig, and then was out gadding in the town, or rode about the park until the poor horse was lathered, and carried marks on its side of her wicked little whip, so the head groom frowned and cursed under his breath. She said something had frightened her in the park, under the oak trees, something, some vagrant, a cry or call or sound — but she was profligate and drank too much for a lady, a bottle of wine now at her luncheon, and two or more at night. With these sudden unaristocratic humours and alarms, a look had come into the exquisite face of Genevieve, that puffed it out and dredged away its lovely colour. She appeared more human now, standing in her hallway, under the chandelier which tinkled and faintly glinted in the cold October afternoon dimness, twisting her whip in her hands, her eyes roving, screeching like a fish-wife for lights, like that guilty king in that clever play Miss Agnes had mentioned.

And now Genevieve, their *Lady*, had lashed them all with her tongue. She swore they had a criminal here — she had seen the woman, she, Genevieve, had *seen* the gypsy bitch — such a word! No lady would use it, Miss Agnes would not — seen her in an upper corridor. Not only some no doubt impecunious and thievish relation of the servants taken in secretly under her ladyship's roof, but permitted to steal about the rooms of their betters, pilfering. In vain they protested, scandalized themselves, for they laid claim, the servants, only to relatives of the purest sort, and with here and there merely the by-blow of some exalted person who had loved their grandmothers or their great aunts unwisely but extremely well.

As the girl nightly brushed Agnes' hair, found to be long and strong and wiry, with its strands of steel, and the sparks flew off it, she told Agnes of Genevieve's strange, new, and troublous ways.

"I think, Miss Agnes, if you'll excuse me —"

"And what is that, Beryl?"

"I think she may've taken her Uncle's own road."

"Which road would that be, Beryl?"

"It was — *Hump*, Miss Agnes."

"Hump . . . ? Oh, hemp. I see. Opium."

"He was haddicked, Miss. Terribly so. The drug makes you mad."

"So I've heard."

"She ups and screams at me, Miss, yesterday, as I was going through the lower hall — '*Look! Look there!*' She gives me a proper turn. I dropped all the napkins. And then she struck me. 'Can't you even smell it, you stupid —' Well, then she called me a nasty name. I said I couldn't smell nothing but for the fire burning in the little sitting-room, which was smoking. She says, 'Beryl, you —' that name again — and she hit me across the face. '*It's a dog*, she cries. '*One of the dogs is in — that filthy orange one — fetch someone to put it out!*' "

Beryl brushed, and Agnes Drale's hair crackled. The sparks flew past the lamp, and the little clock chimed eleven.

"But there *was* a smell. I *did* catch it. A whiff, like the zoological gardens in the city. It seemed—beg your pardon — to come from her ladyship. Perhaps something picked up on her skirt —"

Agnes thanked Beryl, and Beryl put down the brush, and drew open the neat and perfect bed. Inside the hour, lying on the laundered sheets, Agnes slept her now-usual sound and dreamless sleep, which as a rule continued until seven in the morning.

However, about four, something woke her. She did not know what it was, but yet she was impelled to rise at once, and seek the window.

How icy the panes of glass were behind the thickness of the curtains, and beyond this flimsy barrier, lay the great park, stripped bare now to its black bones, and holding up a canopy of stars. Her eyes, her neck, her head —turned, and Agnes looked towards the star-hung chapel that ran out from the house.

She was bemused by sleep, and yet awake. She saw calmly, clearly, the long black window-spaces in their iron webs, and next, faint and glowing, how some occult light passed up and down inside. It was the shade of a dying lamp, reddish or ochre. It reminded her of how she had seen the reflected fireworks display upon the crimson ceiling. Yet, conversely, *it* moved low down.

"What can this be? Who's there? Oh, what?" Agnes murmured. She trembled and her heart beat wildly, and yet she was removed from her own self, from the expressive emotion of her familiar body. She sat high up within the walled chamber of her skull, and watched the moving glow, now yellowish, now red, until it ceased to move and faded away like a dying, or a sleeping, fire.

Then, returning to the bed, she too regained her sleep and in the morning, perhaps, had quite forgotten.

That evening, Agnes Drale was summoned by her cousin Genevieve, to dine in the Old Hall. Here every night Genevieve had partaken of her dinner, alone or in noisy, festive company. While Agnes had kept to her modest if luxurious rooms, now her own meal was always served hot, and decorously arranged.

No one but Genevieve waited in the Hall. Of all things, a cold repast, on this frigid night that conceivably promised snow, was laid beneath the illumination of a mere ten candles. The gas was out. The fire burned sluggishly about a handful of logs.

"The heat — the smell of recently cooked food," said Genevieve, turning rapidly to Agnes, "excites — something." She added, feverishly, "Animals in the park — come to the windows."

"As the wolves do, in Russia," supplied Agnes, coolly.

"Just so. Indeed. What an isolate place this is. I may remove to town. Lord E, you recall him, I expect, has offered me the use of his Small House, only fifty rooms, but I must manage. You, of course, won't mind remaining here."

"No, I should think it very cozy," said Agnes, amenably.

They went to the table, its waste of white cloth, and helped themselves from the dishes.

"The servants ..." said Genevieve. "It's because I must speak to you very privately, Agnes. No prying ears or eyes. They gossip about me —" Genevieve was pallid, her face, on another, might have been described as engorged, swollen. Her grasp was unsteady upon the silver utensils, and three times they dropped from her fingers.

Agnes ate at a slow and even pace, and sipped from her crystal glass the apricot-coloured wine. Genevieve ate nothing, but drank eagerly. On her wrist was a dull mark; perhaps the bracelet, the *Frengeh*, had bruised her. Occasionally Genevieve would encircle this bruise with her other hand. At last she said, "Do you remember the jewel, Uncle's silly foreign bangle — it's so heavy . . . those times when I put it on. But the gemstone is spoiled. Three dark scorings across it — surely there's no such thing as a yellow ruby."

Agnes ate a tartlet. It was cold in the vast room, the fire soaking ever lower, casting a dark cinnabar glare, the candles flickering. The voluminous curtains were drawn fast at the long windows, to close out any wild beasts that might be gathering in the park.

"Agnes," said Genevieve, "I don't suppose you were ever — fanciful."

"In what way?"

"In — the way — oh, of ghosts, nightmares. Such things."

"Perhaps," said Agnes quietly.

"It is stupid of me," said Genevieve. "Never in my life — something is following me about, Agnes."

"Something is following —"

"Some *thing*."

"How exactly to you mean?"

Genevieve drained her glass, rose abruptly, and flung it from her. It smashed in stars at the edge of the hearth.

"It is preposterous and absurd. But — I know that it happens. I *hear* it. I — *smell* it. I see it pass, sometimes near and sometimes at a distance."

"But what do you see — or hear or smell?"

"I can never be sure what it *is* — the smell is hot and pungent. *Spicy*. Or — a dirty smell. Or there is a noise — soft, like — a cat, walking over the floors, but a big cat, Agnes, very big. And sometimes —" Genevieve stared at Agnes' face, not seeing her, "I hear it — *breathing*."

"You're overwrought," said Agnes.

Genevieve gave a squeal of laughter. "I am *terrified*!"

"How could there be such a thing?"

"The bracelet," said Genevieve. She wilted suddenly; she drooped. Such a stance, over thirty-three years, had brought about Agnes' stoop. To Genevieve it was a posture novel as darkness to one who had never beheld the night.

"The bracelet Uncle left for you," clarified Agnes, diligently.

"Yes, yes — that horrible, gaudy gew-gaw. Oh God! I shut it up in its box again. I *hid* it in my dressing-room. And still—still—Oh, Agnes, I can't eat or sleep. I think I'll wake to find it crouching on my breast. I *dream* of it. It —*purrs*. Such a dreadful purr, rasping — like nails tearing velvet. I shall go mad!"

Agnes drank another mouthful of wine. She said, "You're unnerved, my dear cousin. Naturally, no such thing exists. But if you're in this state of mind, there is, after all, a certain recourse."

"Tell me! Quickly! Agnes — I beg you —"

"You must," said Agnes, raising her eyes, her spectacles gleaming bright, "turn to God. No other, my dear, can help you. Pray, Genevieve."

"Pray? *Pray*? Do you think —"

"I know it, Genevieve. God is attentive to every sincere plea. And only recollect, our Uncle built here a

chapel, consecrated and ready for the most urgent use."

"The chapel," said Genevieve. And she spun about in the direction of that narrow door which led from the Old Hall, out into the angled passage, and so to the folly of the chapel with its orangery windows and ceiling of stars.

At this moment, the most curious sound stirred against the huge room. It might have come from outside the walls, or down the chimney, or out of the very air itself. It was indescribable, but as Genevieve heard it, she uttered a shriek, and Agnes rose to her feet, the skin crawling on her bones.

"Take a candle, Genevieve," said Agnes.

"Oh, Agnes — I'm too afraid — in the darkness —"

"Then I'll go before you. I'll go and see, and ignite the gas lamps that I've been told are fitted there, as here."

"But the light —" cried Genevieve "— may attract —"

"It is," said Agnes, in an iron voice, "the place of God."

"Yes. Yes, then. I will. If you — will go there first."

"Stay here, and I'll return for you," said Agnes.

And taking up one of the faltering candle-branches, she walked across the Hall, her spine erect as if fletched with the quills of lizards, her hands colder than the promised snow.

At the narrow door she paused. The sweat started icily on Agnes' brow. She said, "Take courage, Genevieve. All will be well." And passed into the corridor beyond.

Perhaps, because it had no windows, the corridor, that ran between other rooms unseen, was close and warm. It had a scent of fruits dried for cake — raisins, prunes, such items. At the turn, Agnes halted. The candles dipped and lifted up again their nervous flames. She went on.

The right-angle of the passage was only some four or five yards in length. At the end was a large door, secured only by a simple latch.

As Agnes approached it, she seemed to hear a strange, muted noise, like tiny tinsel bells. She shivered again, touched the latch, and opened the door wide.

The chapel stretched before her, long and dim, its elongated windows dark, lit sidelong in a peculiar manner, by the vague, curtained lamps of the house. It was a slender oblong in shape, this chamber, and at its extremity a carved lectern stood, and before that, to either side, three carved pews with their backs to her. On the floor lay a red runner, velvet perhaps, and above soared the red arch of the ceiling where the silver stars winked back the candlelight.

Possibly it was the apprehension of Agnes Drale that made the atmosphere seem to tremble and ring. She had had so often to be brave in the face of many humiliations, attacks, and reversals, that courage was habitual with her.

Nevertheless, she moved stiffly, and put up her hand like a stick to the gas fitment she had perceived on the wall.

The gas fluttered and popped, and slowly the flame bloomed up, spreading down the aisle of the chapel and polishing the carvings on the backs of the pews. The second fitment was set adjacent to the lectern, and Agnes gathered herself to go there and attend to it. For she was not yet quite ready.

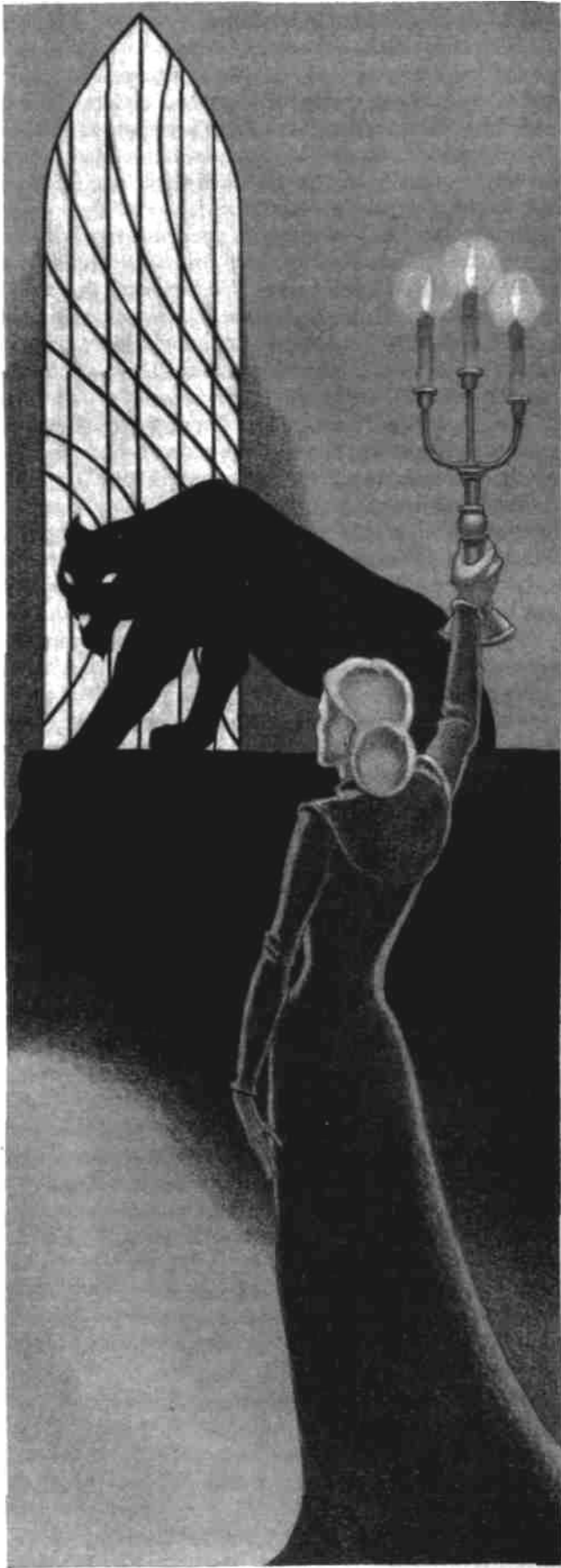
Beyond the long windows only the night finally showed, the glim of the manor put out. Around the lectern shadows clung, ascending into the crimson roof. It is now and then to be seen, this phenomenon, how a light, placed in an unexpected or unaccustomed position, may seem to throw a shadow that bears no relation to anything revealed by its rays.

Agnes stared, and then, intuitively, her glance descended and rested on the last of the right-hand pews, that which stood the nearest to the lectern. Its back was high, and nothing was to be seen, but the air was now so very hot, so intensely smothering, as if before some tropical storm. And in this choking, shimmering air, the quivering bells ran on, making dizzy Agnes Drale, so that she swayed, and her candles sank and died in her hand.

Something was rising after all, over the back of the last pew. Something was sitting up, a curve, a hump of darkness that rose into the light. Its colour slowly changed to amber, rich and royal, and over the amber scored the dark streaks and bars, and a stream of gold that ran from the lamps, on silk, or fur. It was the back — of an enormous beast, of a tiger, and yet, and yet, it was turning now, the golden sheen shifting, turning its head, to look at her.

Agnes Drale opened her mouth, but no sound came from her. She slumped against the wall, and was pinned there, unable to drop down.

It is a woman's face, but a woman's face that is the face of a beast, a face of amber, with human eyes that are the eyes of a demon, yellow as topaz, red as ruby, eyes that are not windows, for no soul is behind them,



yet *something* is behind them, and looks out. And the jaws are wide, and the long teeth, brown and stronger than steel, protrude from it. The dark hair falls that might be mistaken for a woman's hair, but not now. And a hand that is a paw rests on the edge of the holy seat, and the claws unsheathe, and they draw one thin line along the wood, delicate, soft, and never, never will be forgotten the noise they make, as this is done, nor the rasping ripple of a speechless voice, coaxing and impatient. *And the thud, the lash of the tail.*

It is hot now as the centre of a furnace, or a dying sun.

Come, Agnes Drale, leave your candles where they lie, go backwards slowly and with caution, feel for the door, slip out, and close it carefully once more, behind you.

Agnes re-entered the Hall, firm, not breathless, and Genevieve sprang up at once.

"Everything is ready," said Agnes.

"The gaslight —"

"There is light," said Agnes. "And God is there, awaiting you."

Genevieve draws herself up, haughtily. "Then I shall go alone." If it is between her and God, no other is needed.

Ten minutes after, Agnes is in her bedroom, while Beryl brushes her hair. Across the park, once, twice, three or four or five times, they have heard an odd note, a shrill, distorted, soulless scream.

"It must be an owl," says Beryl. "There it is again. It does go on so. I hope it won't disturb you, Miss."

"Not at all," says Agnes.

In the sombre month of November, when the white snow was down about the manor, the lawyer finished his work for Agnes Drale, the legal proceedings necessary now that the house, and its estate, were hers. As she sat like a queen in her black tussore, he offered her a last paper.

"You were curious, I remember, Lady Agnes," he said, making intent use, as he had throughout, of her inherited title, "about that bracelet your Uncle had brought from the East. I confess I was a little, too, myself."

"An unlucky gem, as prophesied," said Agnes. "It's locked away, and no longer in my keeping."

"I hope, my lady," said the lawyer, "that you also affixed the golden sun-shaped cap once more over the stone?" He chuckled frivolously. "You will see why, when you regard this document I have procured from the city museum."

"Oh, yes. I did do that. My servants were very uneasy. They had learned the jewel was cursed. Poor Genevieve."

The lawyer touched his heart in an affectation of feeling. "And the criminal is still at large —! A madman. Such a terrible, such an unthinkable end — eviscerated, rent, ripped, the blood splattered — the face torn off—" He displayed the purest ghoulishness of his time, or most times.

"There is a general belief," said Agnes, "that gypsies and their ferocious dogs —"

"Several had been seen, I gather," agreed the lawyer. "But to enter the chapel —"

"No one can explain," said Agnes. She nodded. The subject was closed; one did not argue with her.

She unfolded her palms and took the paper, and read it. As she did so, the lawyer, a true slave, and generously remunerated, stood respectfully smiling, to show how he was aware what nonsense he had just handed her.

Q

This piece of jewelry is mentioned in several ancient texts, and seems to date from the fourteenth century. The jewel is itself not mooted as a mineral but as a living energy, or animal. When let loose in particular conditions, it may evoke, it is thought, violent and horrible death, the ingredients for this seeming to involve the emotions of hatred and jealousy, in opposition to callous greed. In the case of one ruler said to have died through it, the matter is proposed as the actual opposition of the two elements of the stone itself — vividity and hardness.

*The bracelet, which is formed of gold, also entails an enclosetment over the stone, which, if the wrong or provoking elements are present, should in no circumstance be removed. Thus, it is the bracelet, the **setting** of the jewel, which is named **Frengeh**, or **Fraanghi**, deriving of course from the Musselman word, meaning, **A Cage**.*

SENTRY

Licked bare and black
By dragon's breath, his old bones
Watch with living eyes.

— Catherine Mintz



A DUNWICH SCHOOL PRIMER*

A is for Arkham, B for the book
a Curious fool from the library took.
D for the demon, which filled him with dread.
Eldritch, of course, it bit off his head.
Fearful the neighbors, Ghastly the traces
of Hideous Ichor, which dripped on their faces.
A Jabbering stranger they found in the rubble
said, "Seeking such Knowledge caused all the trouble."
This Lurker they shrugged off, I guess that's because
M is for Mad; he certainly was.
N's for Nyarlathotep, from dark cosmic spheres,
who Opens the gate to the world's Primal years.
Queer are the dreams, the people have then,
of Returning Old Ones, devourers of men.
S is for Sign, whether elder or not.
T is for Terror; your brain will soon rot.
U you might think I put in for the rhyme
but Useless are Victim's screams in the time
When Wrigglers and Wendigos and What the Moon Brings
and X — the Unknown, and similar Things
and Yeb, Yig, and Yog-Sothoth
reduce the Earth to primal broth.
And what about Z?
Then Zoogs, Zugs, and unspeakable Zhar
shall come to witness, from afar.

— Darrell Schweitzer

* Note: Educational standards in
Dunwich, Massachusetts, were never very high.

