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Happy Halloween!

Issue 10



The Horror Issue

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The Magazine of Adventure and Pulp Entertainment

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The Baron's Address



A very special welcome!

Halloween has always been a favorite season of mine, as far back as I can remember. In my childhood, there was 'The Great Pumpkin' and 'Mad Monster Party' and those wax skulls filled with kool-aid. There were local haunted houses filled with ghosts and vampires and werewolves and the most they did was look and sound scary and leap out at you unawares-but it was enough! At school, it was the time of year to check out the books with spooky stories and black bats between the covers, and TV was scheduled full of frights. I remember my costume would come in a box from the old White Front store, and my elementary school would always have a Halloween festival -- not this 'harvest fair' crap of the spiritually paranoid we see today. I've always loved Halloween, but especially now because of all the religious fanaticism (east AND west) so opposed to it. I still celebrate the season as a harmless, superficially spooky time and refuse to let dimwits who see demons and infidels around every corner take yet one more thing away from me. Don't get me wrong, but I come from a culture where my spiritual beliefs stop dead where what other people do begins, unless they're doing physical harm in adherence to theirs.

Thus -- our Halloween issue!

Because we are primarily an adventure publication, I tried to keep the horror in theme, either through content or authors. You'll find the fiction in abundance this issue and most of it takes place in exotic locales with all the trappings of our beloved genre. The exceptions to that are only because I also like to present stuff you may not see in other similar magazines. I am especially excited to present a Solomon Kane story as he is the very definition of adventure-horror. This is our first Halloween issue and I think we did a decent job.

So, wipe away the cobwebs and push open the old crypt door. Adventures await in the shadows...

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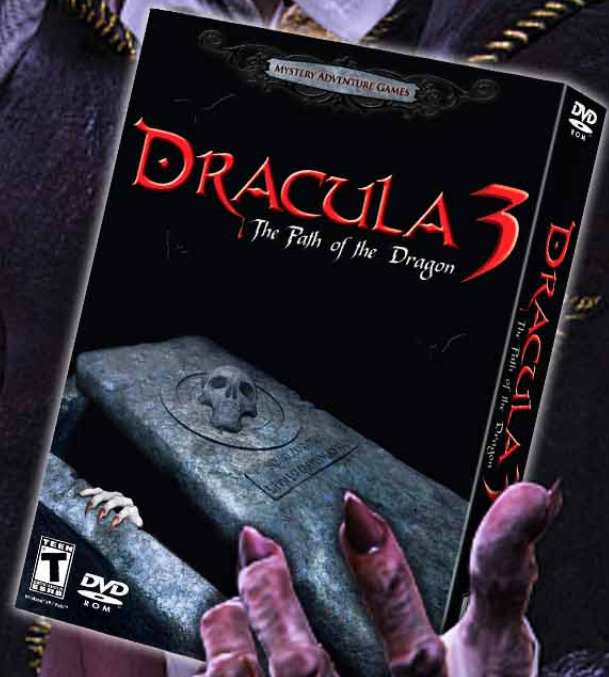
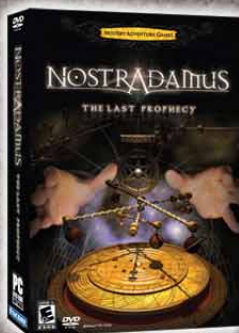
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FIELD CABLES

DR. 'FRENCHY' MOREAU, VETERINARIAN, WRITES:

"YOUR MAGAZINE IS WILD! I READ EVERY ISSUE TO MY PATIENTS AND THEY JUST HOWL WITH DELIGHT!"

RODDY USHER OF GLOOMY OLD ENGLAND WRITES:

"I THINK YOU SHOULD RUN A PICTORIAL OF MY SISTER. SHE'S SO HOT!"

RODDY, WE THINK YOU SHOULD GET OUT OF THE HOUSE MORE, BUT YOU'VE GIVEN US A GOOD IDEA. LOOK FOR AN ANNOUNCEMENT ABOUT FUTURE PICTORIALS FEATURING ADVENTURE GIRL PHOTOS SENT IN BY READERS! - EDITOR

D.GRAY WRITES:

"LCL MAG REALLY TAKES ME BACK. I FEEL YOUNGER WITH EACH ISSUE!"

MARY S.WRITES TO US FROM LAKE GENEVA, SWITZERLAND:

"SINCE SHARING YOUR MAGAZINE, MY HUSBAND AND HIS FRIENDS LET ME PARTY WITH THEM ALL THE TIME. THANK YOU LCL!!!"

O.WILDE WRITES:

"WHAT AN INFLUENCE. LCL MAGAZINE HAS PUT ME ON TOP!"

SERIOUSLY, ALL READERS ARE INVITED TO SEND US A CABLE
TO: lostcontinentlib2@yahoo.com.

GROG 'n BREW



Oh hell yes. This is some good brew. Liked it from the first ice cold swigs out of a frosted mug.

This month's brew honors the theme and what a good choice I made of it. Manifested by the Wychwood Brewery in England, this is just the sort of Brit ale I like. I enjoyed it with a cold plate of sliced London Broil wrapped around feta and Muenster, respectively. It works real well with salt 'n vinegar potato chips, Triscuits and even apple slices. I wished I'd bought more bottles of the stuff because it worked its magic on me.

Or maybe that was the lady in the bookstore tonight, perusing the witchcraft books. She was a very dark and deliciously curvy black girl with a sexy fro, red painted lips and black nails. I wish that I could do justice to the fragrance she wore, but trust me that it was enchanting to say the least. Let's say that she made voodoo less scary. Naturally, this sensual creature who knew damned well that I was nibbling at the bait reminded me of the witchy women in my life.

There was my first wife. Our initial foray into premarital sin remains one of the most haunting experiences of my life. It was a grey, overcast afternoon and she invited me to her apartment for the very purpose of fleshy conjugation. Being the young buck, I was game (heh heh) and did not pass up the opportunity to tryst with the 'experienced girl'. It was the first time I was simply invited into a bedroom without the previous fumbling makeout session on a couch. Of course, I noticed the candles burning about the room in unexpected places was odd. There were perfectly good nightstands, as I recall, but she had candles there, on another dresser, on the floor and I believe on the window sill. After that oh so titillating ritual of the showering-with-a-girl, what I thought was the business of the day commenced with satisfaction, as I recall. But, lo, was I surprised to discover there was another agenda to be served. As we lay there basking in the glow, I noticed a sudden wind outside the window. Not just any passing breeze, but a whirling dervish of a blow. It got stronger, too, and that's when the fun really started, for that wind started hitting the window, banging against the glass again and again. Just as I thought to myself how odd it was, my body began to tremble head to toe, legs and arms, and my skin felt jumpy. This was involuntary, kiddies. The more I shook, the harder that wind outside slammed against the window.

And that darling sweetie of mine lay beside me, watching, not saying a word.

As if she knew.

It stopped as suddenly as it had started, and my trembling quickly ceased.

Some very strange things went on during that relationship, which ultimately ended, of course. My second wife has accused me of sleeping around the world's religions, which is, admittedly, somewhat true and a fascinating theme which I highly recommend to you scalawags out there. I must say that after Catholics, Mormons, Sunnis, Buddhists, and what have you, the spookiest have been the witchcraft chicks. I never experienced poltergeist activity associated with a relationship again until a few years ago when I lived with my Wiccan girlfriend. At least I was aware of it going in this time, no pun intended.

It's pretty damned cool what memories a simply good ale will conjure up.

Go out and get some Wychcraft. It's available at your local BevMo and it's worth the journey to the other side.

Horror Cinema



'Heroes of Horror'

This is a must-have for any fan of classic horror films. A two-disc set containing full-length bios on Karloff, Lugosi, Lon Chaney Jr, Peter Lorre, and my favorite, Vincent Price. These five actors contributed to the genre lasting portrayals of some of the most vivid and unforgettable characters in film history. It is a fascinating set of documentaries that show you the lives of these men and how they came to achieve immortality on the screen. You learn more about their personal lives than you ever thought you knew and it makes their work all the more enjoyable. I first watched these while spending time in Pakistan a few years back, but I find myself watching them every year, especially during October. You'll find yourself wanting to watch their movies the minute the documentary ends. Well presented and full of archival images and footage, this set is a treasure trove for true fans of the horror masters. I do wish they had expanded it another disc to include Chaney Sr and Peter Cushing, but only because these five are so well done and enjoyable.

'White Zombie' (1932)

The first film Lugosi did after Dracula, this movie really surprised me the first time I saw it. In many ways, I like this film better.

Set in Haiti, we are treated to a gothic-horror jungle picture enhanced by the limitations of the era. John and Madeline are engaged to be married when they meet Beaumont, a wealthy fellow traveler who invites them to his plantation. Unfortunately for both, Beaumont covets the lovely Madeline and enlists the aid of Murder Legendre, the local voodoo master. As you might guess, Legendre uses voodoo witchcraft to fake Madeline's death and then turn her into a zombie love slave for Beaumont. Of course, an unenthusiastic bedmate is never any fun and Beaumont ultimately begs Legendre to change her back to normal. The problem is, now the voodoo master wants Madeline and he's fine with her compliant state. Meanwhile, the very distraught John has teamed up with the film's version of Van Helsing (imagine the good doctor played by Barry Fitzgerald) and they have embarked on horseback into the island's deep jungle to find Madeline. As the heroes near the estate, Beaumont tries to resist Legendre and his loyal zombie pack. You'll have to watch this little gem to learn what happens.

This is one of those in which the journey is more important than the destination. For the fan of adventure horror, you can't beat the settings. Haiti's voodoo reputation instantly lends to the gothic atmosphere, and the gothic touch is laid upon the tropical backdrop in just the right measure. Visually, this film is possibly more interesting than Dracula, with camera motion and set-ups that make for compelling viewing. The interiors are striking, as are the images of the zombies themselves -- true zombies, not this flesh-eating undead bullshit of today. The cemetery tomb is elegantly yet rustically creepy, and the mill scene quite impressive. Most of all, I found Lugosi's performance of Legendre much more enjoyable than his iconic turn as Dracula. As the zombie master, Lugosi is more playful and more human, thus more menacing. I think I like him more in this film than in Dracula.

A true example of adventure-horror, this movie is worthy of multiple viewings -- and a remake!

The **MONSTER** Classics



by **Johnny Assellberger**

Why have the classic horror films of the 1930s and 40s endured for so many decades? If you've read the excellent treatise by Stephen King in his not-to-be-missed study of the horror genre in literature and on the screens (big and small), titled so eloquently *Danse Macabre*, you'll see how the characters featured in these great movies are presented in a perfect distillation that few attempts since then have even come near to capture. According to King, the classic monsters represent a tarot of icons that our psyches, collective and personal, seem to respond to in a particular way other creatures of the imagination just don't inspire.



Frankenstein, Dracula, The Mummy and The Wolf Man have all continued to be present every Halloween, in spite of whatever trendy character may be around in any particular year. For every year we've seen kids dressed as the homicidal maniac in the hockey

mask, we have seen decades of kids dressed as Frankenstein knocking on doors for candy. And when the creepy guy in the fedora with knives for fingers becomes irrelevant, we will still see little boys running around in capes and wearing plastic fangs. Why is it that a psycho chopping people to bits does not quite measure up to the classic monsters?

The classic horror monsters are associated with a literary tradition rich in texture. These are more than mere automatons stood up to deliver one fright after another, they are actual characters with a human element that makes us understand if not sympathize with them. Essentially, the best depictions of these characters are in the tradition of tragedy dating back to the ancient Greeks. That underlying theme when blended with the particular era these classic films are set in is the recipe that has kept them at the top of the pantheon of modern pop culture mythology. Audiences were generally more literate and savvy with these dramatic concepts than those of today, thus they responded on a much deeper level to the gothic presentations of these characters.

Gothic literature was a movement that started in the 18th Century and gained speed into the 1800's. By the end of the 19th Century, it was running smoothly at top speed and was a style anyone who could read had certainly grown up with, and was practically a genre in itself whether a romance, suspense or horror story. By the time movies came on the scene, literature and theater had served up enough popular portions of gothic horror in particular that people went to the cinema in droves to see what was, in those days, the ultimate expression of the monster tale. The difference between those audiences and today's crowds (who actually consider dreck like *Saw* and *Hostel* and stalk-n-

slash crap as great horror films) is that even the nine-year-old kid who sat in a movie house in 1931 to watch James Whale's *Frankenstein* had more experience with complex literary thought than today's average child.

Another great aspect these classic horror films had on their side was that people *were allowed to be scared* back then. Relatively speaking, filmmakers in the era of smarter audiences were not hindered as much as today's filmmakers seem to be when it comes to producing something truly unnerving in its fright factor. Take another look at Lon Chaney Sr. being unmasked in *The Phantom of the Opera*. Study the still photographs of him in that makeup. If you'll notice, it's a death's head, essentially. That Chaney is alive and staring at you with those unsettling eyes is what taps into your subconscious. Without his eyes burning at you in those shots, his head is just another skull and any dead body has a skull. Chaney's Phantom represents something that should not be; living people just do not look like that. His face is demonic in the sense that it knows you are frightened and takes great delight in it. Such creatures are unpredictable and this is disturbing to us.

That is genuine horror and Lon Chaney Sr.'s Phantom is one of the first to have tapped into what stimulates visual horror. Two other great examples of this from the classic era of cinema are Chaney's still-iconic vampire character in *London After Midnight*, and John Barrymore's Mr Hyde from the 1920 silent version of the well-known Robert Louis Stevenson tale. The sight of these faces startled audiences back then and remain startling to this day, made all the more so by the effect aging black and white film lends to the creepiness. Few modern movies have offered such disturbing

visages, like a dream sequence in *An American Werewolf in London* and in the last truly great horror film made by an American filmmaker, *The Exorcist*. Audiences went to these movies to be frightened out of their minds and they were not disappointed.



These great horror films of early Hollywood were unhindered by the misguided and overprotective sensitivities of mothers and the politically correct meddlers of today. Of course there were those in the 1930's and 40's who felt horror films were inappropriate for youngsters, but their position and grumblings did not keep the filmmakers from putting their visions on the screen. If it bothered you, the more intellectually mature society back then would tell you to stop squawking about it and go see a different movie. In our time, parents too often use movies as a babysitter and expect filmmakers to do their parenting for them. This lack of intellectual accountability has contributed to the general lack of true cinematic accomplishment we've seen for over thirty years, especially where horror films are concerned. All because someone's mommy doesn't want Little Junior scared at night.

Fans of true horror know why they love it and what it's all

about: *to be frightened* – not merely startled nor shocked, but *frightened* on a deep level. The classic monsters work on us in more sophisticated ways than psychos-with-knives. We are first transported into another world, in our case a world gone by depicted with a dark shadowy elegance that both appeals to us yet gives us pause for concern. The Victorian mansion is so beautifully



appointed, yet that dark alcove seems foreboding. The electrical laboratory in the old castle is so fascinating, yet what horrors are practiced here after midnight? We are immediately placed in an attractive but mostly alien setting and then lured deeper into it when colorful characters are introduced to us; people we can relate to. It isn't long before these people's strange proclivities are incrementally revealed and we find ourselves unable not to look when the dark side is manifested in all its disturbing glory. The fright is being

nurtured from the opening credits so that, by the time the scary face pops up, the viewer is so primed his psyche kicks in and makes that scary face the representation of what unsettles him most – rendering it more than the sum of its parts, more than just what is shown on screen. This state of unnerved horror generated by what is on the screen is *exactly* why the horror fan or even the average moviegoer watches these movies.

The reason the classic horror films continue to be enjoyed going into a new century is precisely because they are so profoundly different from the offerings of the past several years. These great films were engineered completely differently and were certainly produced a profit motive in mind, yet they ended up with more than a commodity. How did this era of filmmakers create products that are also works of art? They were a more literate generation of filmmakers creating for a more literate general audience. It just so happens that the first great wave of visually stylish movies came hand in hand with the horror classics. Today's audiences starving for cinematic quality appreciate the combination of the style and literary substance of the classics that is rarely encountered in our time.

First and above all, what makes the classics great are the characters standing out against the masterful backdrop. The old horror films did not subject us to that most annoying member of any cast, the American teenager or twenty-something. When I was a kid, I didn't like movies with kids. Kids in movies were always the hallmark of some lower budget toothless project that I invariably found not interesting. It wasn't until the late 50's with *The Blob* and such sci-fi terrors that we were beginning to be subjected to the now-standard 'young people in peril' plot that is so

beyond stale and stereotypical that I'll not even waste energy with a well-deserved diatribe. The classics offer us stories with adults and all their complexities and this plays so much more interesting into the drama, the angst of the creature in an often supernatural element being infinitely more fascinating than the angst of some goddamned prom queen upset over her boyfriend's hands caught in the panties of her best friend. The heroes in the classics are no more two-dimensional than the floppy-haired, girl-jeans-wearing, ironically self-satisfied brooding punks or muscle-obsessed tattooed poser jocks of today's schlock. This is the generation that calls Cary Grant and Clark Gable 'metrosexuals' because they were as confident in a proper suit as they were in pith helmets, on horseback, or in combat uniforms, so we should not be surprised that they find Lon Chaney Jr or Vincent Price irrelevant to their narrow point of view. The characters in the classics, good and evil, are all adults and this serves the stories, not the post-hippie generation philosophies of producers desperately clinging to a hilariously misguided perception that youth is king.

If Vincent Price were a teenager when he played Roderick Usher, you'd slap his face then tell him to find a girlfriend and stop sneaking peeks at his sister in the shower. But because Roderick Usher is a deeply troubled grown man portrayed by a mature and sophisticated actor, it makes his obsession with his adult sister all the more gloriously creepy. Victor Frankenstein had to have a few scientist years under his belt before he could even begin to understand how to create his monster, and you know damned well Bela Lugosi's portrayal of the centuries old Dracula was made all the more better because the actor was a grown man with experience, not just some

broody pretty boy model. The point here is that the classic horror filmmakers understood that a boy barely out of puberty turning into a werewolf is about what you'd expect from a young male, but that Larry Talbot being a confident and experienced man in his thirties, suddenly faced with this supernatural affliction, brings with it a much richer set of psychological complications that a far wider spectrum of the male viewing audience could relate to.



The second most disappointing aspect of modern horror films, in contrast to the superior classics, is the gore factor. Several years ago, a director named Tobe Hooper made a truly classic film of terror, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Unfortunately, this got confused with horror and, as such-labeled movies continued to deliver graphic offerings of psychotic murder in trade for more and more

dollars, more and more knock-offs were made several years in a row. Ultimately, an entire generation had grown up with this stuff representing the genre and they continue to produce it so that now we have audiences watching one tortuous murder after another and calling it



'great'. It is no coincidence that in the era in which literature has been replaced by reality television and mindless video games, the visceral depiction of human dismemberment is considered cinematic achievement. The classics made use of implied horrors more because the audience had much more sophisticated imaginations than audiences of today and simple gore was seen as base it is, regardless how real it could have looked. Nothing the best makeup specialist Hollywood could ever conjure is as effective as the well-founded human imagination.

The exceptional horror films of recent years, interestingly, have been made by filmmakers from

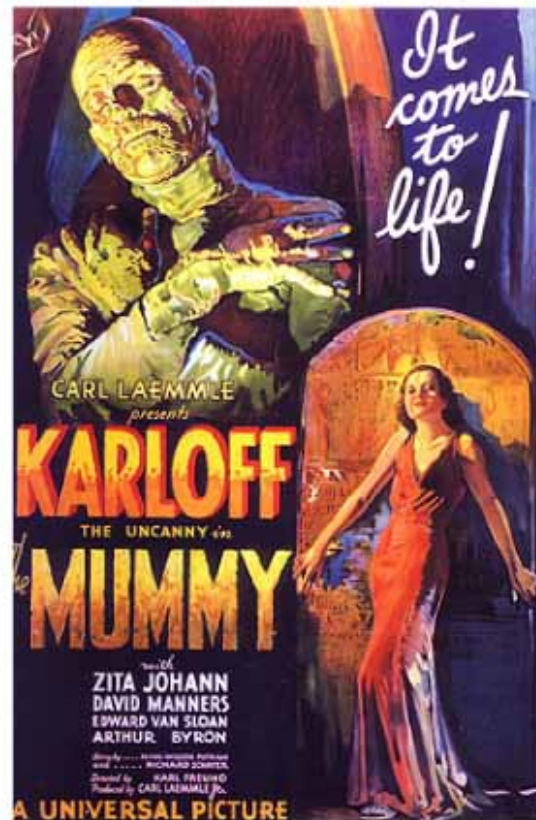
outside the genre's ranks. Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, while using touches of gore to mostly enhance the total experience, is an excellent film because the director focused more on the story and details of the setting than the inherent potential for blood-spewing. A less experienced (yes, read that 'younger') director would likely not have made that superior choice. The upcoming remake of *The Wolf Man* promises to be of this same approach.

Set in the 1880s, instead the 1930s, this appears to be a true remake – as opposed to the god-awful raping known as 're-imagining' so disappointingly popular in Hollywood these days. Benecio Del Toro portrays Lawrence Talbot, Anthony Hopkins plays his father Sir John, and Geraldine Chaplin is that legendary icon, the old gypsy woman. The basic elements of the original Curt Siodmak story are there, yet the shift in era promises to bring a spooky elegance to the experience. The foggy woods will be that much more eerie against the traditional gothic backdrop, and my money is on Del Toro's acting chops bringing the greatest portrayal of a lycanthropic protagonist in the history of movies. As Chaney Jr's original didn't suffer from Claude Rains' presence, this new version will have some extraordinary backup in the participation of Anthony Hopkins. Short of seeing how it turns out, I am more excited about this werewolf movie than any other ever made because it is a return to the classic approach with respect for the original material.

If you haven't viewed the horror classics lately, I strongly recommend the Universal 'Legacy Collections'. They include *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *The Wolf Man*, and *The Mummy*. These are treasure troves, to say the least. Not only do you get the James Whale

original 1931 classic, you get his masterpiece *Bride of Frankenstein*, *Son of Frankenstein*, *Ghost of Frankenstein* and *House of Frankenstein* in their entirety, remastered on DVD—plus three documentaries on these films and commentaries, trailers and a short. *The Wolf Man* offers the original film, *The Werewolf of London*, *She Wolf of London* and *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man*, plus two documentaries, commentary and trailers. It's the sort of overdose I'm interested in, as a classic horror film buff.

Is it possible to ever get back to a more sophisticated cinema that saw the likes of these original horror classics? I believe so. For example, my son will turn eighteen in December. From the time he was two years old, I exposed him to classic cartoons and golden age movies. When he was three, he watched *Raiders of the Lost Ark* every time I watched it that year. When he was eight, one of his favorite movies was *The Sea Chase* with John Wayne and he'd watch Hitchcock films from beginning to end. This was the age he watched *Bram Stoker's Dracula* and enjoyed it, and though he teases me for it, he has spent much of his youth and teen years watching Vincent Price movies with me. He agrees with the sentiment that 'Han shot first!' and is pretty quick to recognize contemporary Hollywood crap. My son wants very much to be a filmmaker now and is among a growing number of young people looking back further than 1975 for a cinematic tradition they can appreciate. This is simply the result of his father exposing him to classic movies, especially the classic horror films with their distinct texture and style, and I am pleasantly surprised to find myself hopeful for the future of the horror genre and movies in general.



I think a disappointing influence where classic horror films are concerned is the example of the Universal Studios tour. When I was a kid in the 1960s and 70s, the tour offered attractions reflecting the gamut of Hollywood history. Sure, there were the lovably cheesy physical effects of the tour itself, but amid this was a quickie education of film history. I recall a section featuring the old Universal horror classics, as well as the presence of stars and films of the 30's, 40's and 50's in the general décor and sights. When I was a kid, I had a basic awareness of movie stars from the silent era and the subsequent decades that kids today lack. The tour and the subsequent park of today would lead a kid to believe that no movie was made prior to 1979, and with the exception of the Van Helsing movie a few years ago, this does not include the great characters that really made Universal Studios to begin with. The

studio has forgotten its origins are greatly founded upon these old horror movies and those iconic characters of the horror tarot deck and they do a disservice to future generations in assuming kids won't find these movies interesting.



Will kids today laugh when the village lady screams like a nut at the sight of Karloff's monster? Of course! My generation did. But we're supposed to laugh in that moment. On the other hand, no matter how many years separate us from 1931, nobody laughs when the man carries the lifeless body of his little girl after the touching scene in which the monster is picking flowers with her beside the lake she drowns in. Will most kids get squirmy during the mundane drama in the silent *Phantom of the Opera*? Absolutely, but encourage them to sit long enough to see the unmasking scene with its close-up of that creepy face and they'll experience the sublime joy of remembering it in vivid detail when they lay down to go to sleep later. Give those unfamiliar with the horror classics an opportunity to pay attention to these great old movies and I guarantee you'll see a revival of the classic horror film style from which present day cinema could only benefit.

Ultimately, to essentially paraphrase King's perfect *Danse Macabre*, the classic movie monsters

are classic because they are more human than the movie monsters of today. Because Frankenstein can be burned to death, and Dracula can be staked to death, and the Wolf Man can be killed with silver, their vulnerabilities make for better dramatic action. Because they suffer from their conditions, these monsters make for superior drama in general, compared to the psycho who never dies nor loses. The classic monsters are so everlasting in their influences because they are a reflection of our selves presented, generally, in an environment more interesting than our own.

This month, I recommend you get your hands on any of these original horror classics and watch it without distraction. It's the season that is, in our times, mostly influenced by these old movies. For me, the original horror classics are to October what *White Christmas*, *Rudolph* and that damned Capra movie are to December. Get back to the roots of it all. When the kids knock on the door at the end of the month, give the kid who dressed as Frankenstein (instead of Spiderman) an extra piece of candy.

-- Johnny Asselberger



Adventures in Horror

Robert E Howard's
SOLOMON KANE

For those unfamiliar with the grim Puritan of Robert E. Howard's great tales of dark adventure, you may be surprised to find yourself somewhat familiar with the character when the new movie comes out. If you have seen Universal's *Van Helsing*, you have been treated to a taste of what is to come—yet that film does not truly capture the full essence of what are some of the best horror adventure tales



ever written, if not the model for the sub-genre. Hugh Jackman's role, named for the legendary character from Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*, bears zero resemblance to the good doctor of the Victorian tale. But he is immediately recognizable to Kane readers and to the degree that makes us wonder why they bothered with naming him Van Helsing. There was the tall hat, the black cloak, and the cynical attitude backed up by the

willingness and ability to kick serious ass on any number of hellish creatures threatening good people. In this era of highly conceptualized visual ideas, Van Helsing is a good introduction to such a character as Solomon Kane as it is a pretty decent homage to classic movie monsters.

But there is no substitute for original. Trust me.

Solomon Kane was created by the pulp master Robert E. Howard. Kane is a 17th Century Puritan who wanders the world on a quest to confront evil. Originally published in *Weird Tales*, Kane's adventures take him from Europe to the jungles of Africa.

Howard describes him as a somber and gloomy man of pale face and cold eyes staring out from under the brim of a slouch hat. He wears Puritan black and carries a rapier, a dagger, and flintlock pistols. N'Longa, a black African shaman whom Kane befriends in one of his adventures, gives him a juju staff to ward off evil and use as a weapon. Kane later learns in another story that this is the mythical Staff of King Solomon, a powerful talisman older than the Earth itself. King Solomon used it to combat magicians and capture genies.

Sharp-pointed on one end and with the head of a cat on the other, the staff is made of a wood that exists on earth nowhere today. Kane can use it to communicate with N'Longa over long distances, and it has also been used to slay vampires. The cat's head is a symbol of its previous owners, the Egyptian priests of Bast. It is also alleged to be the staff of Moses with which

he performed wondrous acts and it may have even been used in Atlantis.

Most readers of Howard are big fans of Conan and Kull, but Solomon Kane captured my imagination. I wish there were more of these tales. Often set in darkest uncharted Africa but sometimes in Old Europe, the Kane stories capture a mood usually associated with gothic literature. Though Howard's other heroes battle monsters and sorcerers, there is something distinctly more 'horror' in the Kane stories. What sets these tales apart from most horror fiction is that the Kane stories are also deeply rooted in classic adventure elements, such as sailing ships and dimly lit taverns, dark jungles and ancient temples, double-crossing rogues and exotic women. It is no surprise that Kane encounters evil witches and hellish demons against such a backdrop and among such characters. The adventure and horror of these stories is a natural union.

Among the truly horror tales of the Kane collection are stories like "Skulls in the Stars" in which Kane is on his way to an English hamlet and must choose one of two paths: a route that leads through a moor or one that leads through a swamp. He is warned that the moor route is haunted and all travelers who take that road die, so he decides to investigate and, naturally, terror ensues.

In "Rattle of Bones", Kane is in Germany where he meets Gaston L'Armon, who seems familiar. They stay in a place called the Cleft Skull Tavern and discover the bones of a sorcerer

chained in a secret room. Kane ends up in conflict with the innkeeper and L'Armon.

There is "The Moon of Skulls", an African story wherein Kane is searching for an English girl who was kidnapped and sold to Barbary pirates. Along the trail, Kane finds a hidden city where he encounters Nakari, "the vampire queen of Negari".

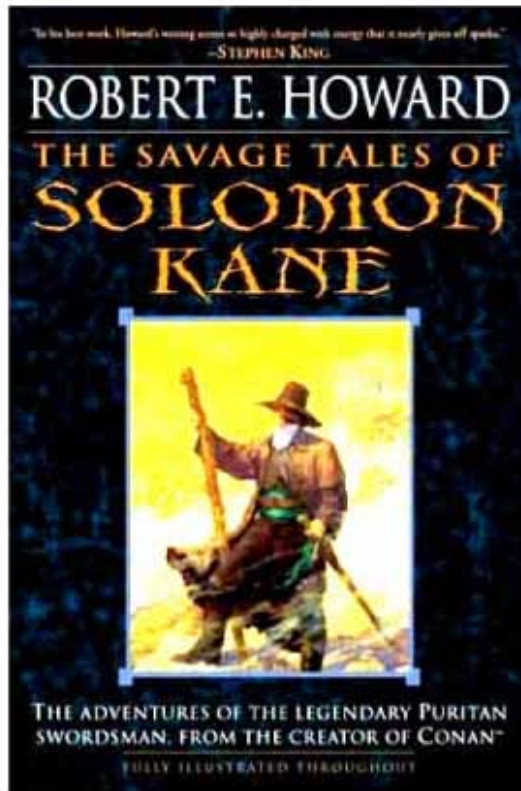


"Hills of the Dead" is the story in which Kane receives the Staff of Solomon. Subsequently, Kane enters the jungle and finds a city of vampires.

Probably one of the most familiar if you've seen the Van Helsing movie is "Wings in the Night" in which Kane comes across a decimated African village. All of the roofs have been ripped off, as if by something was trying to get inside from above – and you guessed it, winged demon creatures!

I first read these stories while traveling through Central Asia and Eastern Europe and

could not have asked for a more perfect setting, except maybe Africa, in some cases. It was the Solomon Kane stories that first gave me a true appreciation for



Robert E Howard. My friend, E A Guest told me he is heavily influenced by Solomon Kane when writing his Julius Corbin stories and I think it shows. The Corbin stories are a good substitute when you've read all of Howard's Kane stories multiple times, as I have. I wish Howard had written more of them and I look forward to the new Solomon Kane film to be released soon.

If adventure-horror is to your liking and you have not yet read these stories, I envy you. The first time is a joy. Go get a volume of Solomon Kane, nestle into your favorite chair on Halloween night with a tankard of your favorite ale, and venture out onto that

shadowy trail of a long ago world where men like Solomon Kane really lived. These tales are without a doubt the ultimate literature for the classic adventure fan during this October season.

But be careful.

Here there be monsters...

-- Monty Greylock

ROBERT E HOWARD'S

SOLOMON KANE



The MOON of SKULLS

CHAPTER I. A MAN COMES SEEKING

A great black shadow lay across the land, cleaving the red flame of the red sunset. To the man who toiled up the jungle trail it loomed like a symbol of death and horror, a menace brooding and terrible, like the shadow of a stealthy assassin flung upon some candle-lit wall.

Yet it was only the shadow of the great crag which reared up in front of him, the first outpost of the grim foothills which were his goal. He halted a moment at its foot, staring upward where it rose blackly limned against the dying sun. He could have sworn that he caught the hint of a movement at the top, as he stared, hand shielding his eyes, but the fading glare dazzled him and he could not be sure. Was it a man who darted to cover? A man, or--?

He shrugged his shoulders and fell to examining the rough trail which led up and over the brow of the crag. At first glance it seemed that only a mountain goat could scale it, but closer investigation showed numbers of finger holds drilled into the solid rock. It would be a task to try his powers to the utmost but he had not come a thousand miles to turn back now.

He dropped the large pouch he wore at his shoulder, and laid down the clumsy musket, retaining only his long rapier, dagger, and one of his pistols, these he strapped behind him, and without a backward glance over the darkening trail he had come, he started the long ascent.

He was a tall man, long-armed and iron-muscled, yet again and again he was forced to halt in his upward climb and rest for a moment clinging like an ant to the precipitous face of the cliff. Night fell swiftly and the crag above him was a shadowy blur in which he was forced to feel with his fingers, blindly, for the holes which served him as a precarious ladder.

Below him, the night noises of the tropical jungle broke forth, yet it

appeared to him that even these sounds were subdued and hushed as though the great black hills looming above threw a spell of silence and fear even over the jungle creatures.

On up he struggled, and now to make his way harder, the cliff bulged outward near its summit, and the strain on nerve and muscle became heart-breaking. Time and again a hold slipped and he escaped falling by a hair's breadth. But every fibre in his lean hard body was perfectly co-ordinated, and his fingers were like steel talons with the grip of a vice. His progress grew slower and slower but on he went until at last he saw the cliffy brow splitting the stars a scant twenty feet above him.

And even as he looked, a vague bulk heaved into view, toppled on the edge and hurtled down toward him with a great rush of air about it. Flesh crawling, he flattened himself against the cliff's face and felt a heavy blow against his shoulder, only a glancing blow, but even so it nearly tore him from his hold, and as he fought desperately to right himself, he heard a reverberating crash among the rocks far below. Cold sweat beading his brow, he looked up. Who--or what--had shoved that boulder over the cliff edge? He was brave, as the bones on many a battlefield could testify, but the thought of dying like a sheep, helpless and with no chance of resistance, turned his blood cold.

Then a wave of fury supplanted his fear and he renewed his climb with reckless speed. The expected second boulder did not come, however, and no living thing met his sight as he clambered up over the edge and leaped erect, sword flashing from its scabbard.

He stood upon a sort of plateau which debouched into a very broken hilly country some half mile to the west. The crag he had just mounted jutted out from the rest of the heights like a sullen promontory, looming above the sea of waving foliage below, now dark and mysterious in the tropic night.

Silence ruled here in absolute sovereignty. No breeze stirred the

sombre depths below, and no footfall rustled amid the stunted bushes which cloaked the plateau, yet that boulder which had almost hurled the climber to his death had not fallen by chance. What beings moved among these grim hills? The tropical darkness fell about the lone wanderer like a heavy veil through which the yellow stars blinked evilly. The steams of the rotting jungle vegetation floated up to him as tangible as a thick fog, and making a wry face he strode away from the cliff, heading boldly across the plateau, sword in one hand and pistol in the other.

There was an uncomfortable feeling of being watched in the very air. The silence remained unbroken save for the soft swishing that marked the stranger's cat-like tread through the tall upland grass, yet the man sensed that living things glided before and behind him and on each side. Whether man or beast trailed him he knew not, nor did he care over-much, for he was prepared to fight human or devil who barred his way. Occasionally he halted and glanced challengingly about him, but nothing met his eye except the shrubs which crouched like short dark ghosts about his trail, blended and blurred in the thick, hot darkness through which the very stars seemed to struggle, redly.

At last he came to the place where the plateau broke into the higher slopes and there he saw a clump of trees blocked out solidly in the lesser shadows. He approached warily, men halted as his gaze, growing somewhat accustomed to the darkness, made out a vague form among the sombre trunks which was not a part of them. He hesitated. The figure neither advanced nor fled. A dim form of silent menace, it lurked as if in wait. A brooding horror hung over that still cluster of trees.

The stranger advanced warily, blade extended. Closer. Straining his eyes for some hint of threatening motion. He decided that the figure was human but he was puzzled at its lack of movement. Then the reason became apparent--it was the corpse of a black man that stood among those trees, held erect by spears through his body, nailing him to the

boles. One arm was extended in front of him, held in place along a great branch by a dagger through the wrist, the index finger straight as if the corpse pointed stiffly--back along the way the stranger had come. The meaning was obvious; that mute grim signpost could have but one significance--death lay beyond. The man who stood gazing upon that grisly warning rarely laughed, but now he allowed himself the luxury of a sardonic smile. A thousand miles of land and sea--ocean travel and jungle travel--and now they expected to turn him back with such mummery--whoever they were. He resisted the temptation to salute the corpse, as an action wanting in decorum, and pushed on boldly through the grove, half expecting an attack from the rear or an ambush. Nothing of the sort occurred, however, and emerging from the trees, he found himself at the foot of a rugged incline, the first of a series of slopes. He strode stolidly upward in the night, nor did he even pause to reflect how unusual his actions must have appeared to a sensible man. The average man would have camped at the foot of the crag and waited for morning before even attempting to scale the cliffs. But this was no ordinary man. Once his objective was in sight, he followed the straightest line to it, without a thought of obstacles, whether day or night. What was to be done, must be done. He had reached the outposts of the kingdom of fear at dusk, and invading its inmost recesses by night seemed to follow as a matter of course.

As he went up the boulder-strewn slopes the moon rose, lending its air of illusion, and in its light the broken hills ahead loomed up like the black spires of wizards' castles. He kept his eyes fixed on the dim trail he was following, for he knew not when another boulder might come hurtling down the inclines. He expected an attack of any sort and, naturally, it was the unexpected which really happened.

Suddenly from behind a great rock stepped a man, an ebony giant in the pale moonlight, a long spear blade gleaming silver in his hand, his headpiece of ostrich plumes floating above him like a white cloud. He lifted

the spear in a ponderous salute, and spoke in the dialect of the river-tribes: "This is not the white man's land. Who is my white brother in his own kraal and why does he come into the Land of Skulls?"

"My name is Solomon Kane." The white man answered in the same language. "I seek the vampire queen of Negari."

"Few seek. Fewer find. None return," answered the other cryptically.

"Will you lead me to her?"

"You bear a long dagger in your right hand. There are no lions here."

"A serpent dislodged a boulder. I thought to find snakes in the bushes."

The giant acknowledged this interchange of subtleties with a grim smile and a brief silence fell.

"Your life," said the black man presently, "is in my hand." Kane smiled thinly. "I carry the lives of many warriors in my hand."

The negro's gaze travelled uncertainly up and down the shimmery length of the Englishman's sword. Then he shrugged his mighty shoulders and let his spear point sink to the earth.

"You bear no gifts," said he; "but follow me and I will lead you to the Terrible One, the Mistress of Doom, The Red Woman, Nakari, who rules the land of Negari."

He stepped aside, and motioned Kane to precede him, but the Englishman, his mind on a spear-thrust in the back, shook his head.

"Who am I that I should walk in front of my brother? We be two chiefs--let us walk side by side." In his heart Kane railed that he should be forced to use such unsavoury diplomacy with a savage warrior, but he showed no sign. The giant bowed with a certain barbaric majesty and together they went up the hill trail, unspeaking.

Kane was aware that men were stepping from hiding places and falling in behind them, and a surreptitious glance over his shoulder showed him some two score warriors trailing out behind them in two wedge-shaped lines. The moonlight glittered on sleek bodies, on waving headgears and long, cruel spear blades.

"My brothers are like leopards," said Kane courteously; "they lie in the low bushes and no eyes see them; they steal through the high grass and no man hears their coming."

The black chief acknowledged the compliment with a courtly inclination of his lion-like head, that set the plumes whispering.

"The mountain leopard is our brother, oh chieftain. Our feet are like drifting smoke but our arms are like iron. When they strike, blood drips red and men die."

Kane sensed an undercurrent of menace in the tone. There was no actual hint of threat on which he might base his suspicions, but the sinister minor note was there. He said no more for a space and the strange band moved silently upward in the moonlight like a cavalcade of spectres.

The trail grew steeper and more rocky, winding in and out among crags and gigantic boulders. Suddenly a great chasm opened before them, spanned by a natural bridge of rock, at the foot of which the leader halted.

Kane stared at the abyss curiously. It was some forty feet wide, and looking down, his gaze was swallowed by impenetrable blackness, hundreds of feet deep, he knew. On the other side rose crags dark and forbidding.

"Here," said the chief, "begin the true borders of Nakari's realm."

Kane was aware that the warriors were casually closing in on him. His fingers instinctively tightened about the hilt of the rapier which he had not sheathed. The air was suddenly super-charged with tension.

"Here, too," the warrior chief said, "they who bring no gifts to Nakari--die!"

The last word was a shriek, as if the thought had transformed the speaker into a maniac, and as he screamed it, the great arm went back and then forward with a ripple of mighty muscles, and the long spear leaped at Kane's breast.

Only a born fighter could have avoided that thrust. Kane's instinctive action saved his life--the great blade grazed his ribs as he swayed aside and returned the blow with a flashing thrust that killed a warrior who jostled between him and the chief at that instant.

Spears flashed in the moonlight and Kane, parrying one and bending under the thrust of another, sprang out upon the narrow bridge where only one could come at him at a time.

None cared to be first. They stood upon the brink and thrust at him, crowding forward when he retreated, giving back when he pressed them. Their spears were longer than his rapier but he more than made up for the difference and the great odds by his scintillant skill and the cold ferocity of his attack.

They wavered back and forth and then suddenly a giant leaped from among his fellows and charged out upon the bridge like a wild buffalo, shoulders hunched, spear held low, eyes gleaming with a look not wholly sane. Kane leaped back before the onslaught, leaped back again, striving to avoid that stabbing spear and to find an opening for his point. He sprang to one side and found himself reeling on the edge of the bridge with eternity gaping beneath him. The warriors yelled in savage exultation as he swayed and fought for his balance, and the giant on the bridge roared and plunged at his rocking foe.

Kane parried with all his strength--a feat few swordsmen could have accomplished, off balance as he was--saw the cruel spear blade flash by his cheek--felt himself falling backward into the abyss. A desperate effort, and he gripped the spear shaft, righted himself

and ran the spearman through the body. The giant's great red cavern of a mouth spouted blood and with a dying effort he hurled himself blindly against his foe. Kane, with his heels over the bridge's edge, was unable to avoid him and they toppled over together, to disappear silently into the depths below.

So swiftly had it all happened that the warriors stood stunned. The giant's roar of triumph had scarcely died on his lips before the two were falling into the darkness. Now the rest of the natives came out on the bridge to peer down curiously, but no sound came up from the dark void.

CHAPTER II.

THE PEOPLE OF THE STALKING DEATH

As Kane fell he followed his fighting instinct, twisting in midair so that when he struck, were it ten or a thousand feet below, he would land on top of the man who fell with him.

The end came suddenly--much more suddenly than the Englishman had thought for. He lay half stunned for an instant, then looking up, saw dimly the narrow bridge banding the sky above him, and the forms of the warriors, limned in the moonlight and grotesquely foreshortened as they leaned over the edge. He lay still, knowing that the beams of the moon did not pierce the deeps in which he was hidden, and that to those watchers he was invisible. Then when they vanished from view he began to review his present plight. His opponent was dead, and only for the fact that his corpse had cushioned the fall, Kane would have been dead likewise, for they had fallen a considerable distance. As it was, the Englishman was stiff and bruised.

He drew his sword from the native's body, thankful that it had not been broken, and began to grope about in the darkness. His hand encountered the edge of what seemed a cliff. He had thought that he was on the bottom of the chasm and that its impression of great depth had been a delusion, but now he decided that he had fallen on a ledge, part of the way down. He

dropped a small stone over the side, and after what seemed a very long time he heard the faint sound of its striking far below.

Somewhat at a loss as to how to proceed, he drew flint and steel from his belt and struck them to some tinder, warily shielding the light with his hands. The faint illumination showed a large ledge jutting out from the side of the cliff, that is, the side next the hills, to which he had been attempting to cross. He had fallen close to the edge and it was only by the narrowest margin that he had escaped sliding off it, not knowing his position.

Crouching there, his eyes seeking to accustom themselves to the abysmal gloom, he made out what seemed to be a darker shadow in the shadows of the wall. On closer examination he found it to be an opening large enough to admit his body standing erect. A cavern, he assumed, and though its appearance was dark and forbidding in the extreme, he entered, groping his way when the tinder burned out.

Where it led to, he naturally had no idea, but any action was preferable to sitting still until the mountain vultures plucked his bones. For a long way the cave floor tilted upward--solid rock beneath his feet--and Kane made his way with some difficulty up the rather steep slant, slipping and sliding now and then. The cavern seemed a large one, for at no time after entering it could he touch the roof, nor could he, with a hand on one wall, reach the other.

At last the floor became level and Kane sensed that the cave was much larger there. The air seemed better, though the darkness was just as impenetrable. Suddenly he stopped dead in his tracks. From somewhere in ? there came a strange indescribable rustling. Without warning something smote him in the face and slashed wildly. All about him sounded the eerie murmurings of many small wings and suddenly Kane smiled crookedly, amused, relieved and chagrined. Bats, of course. The cave was swarming with them. Still, it was a shaky experience, and as he went on

and the wings whispered through the vast emptiness of the great cavern, Kane's mind found space to dally with a bizarre thought-- had he wandered into Hell by some strange means, and were these in truth bats, or were they lost souls winging through everlasting night? Then, thought Solomon Kane, I will soon confront Satan himself--and even as he thought this, his nostrils were assailed by a horrid scent, fetid and repellent. The scent grew as he went slowly on, and Kane swore softly, though he was not a profane man. He sensed that the smell betokened some hidden threat, some unseen malevolence, inhuman and deathly, and his sombre mind sprang at supernatural conclusions. However, he felt perfect confidence in his ability to cope with any fiend or demon, armoured as he was in unshakable faith of creed and the knowledge of the rightness of his cause. What followed happened suddenly. He was groping his way along when in ? two narrow yellow eyes leaped up in the darkness--eyes that were cold and expressionless, too hideously close-set for human eyes and too high for any four-legged beast. What horror had thus reared itself up in front of him?

This is Satan, thought Kane as the eyes swayed above him, and the next instant he was battling for his life with the darkness that seemed to have taken tangible form and thrown itself about his body and limbs in great slimy coils. Those coils lapped his sword arm and rendered it useless; with the other hand he groped for dagger or pistol, flesh crawling as his fingers slipped from slick scales, while the hissing of the monster filled the cavern with a cold paean of terror.

There in the black dark to the accompaniment of the bats' leathery rustlings, Kane fought like a rat in the grip of a mouse-snake, and he could feel his ribs giving and his breath going before his frantic left hand closed on his dagger hilt.

Then with a volcanic twist and wrench of his steel-thewed body he tore his left arm partly free and plunged the keen blade again and again to the hilt in the

sinuous writhing terror which enveloped him, feeling at last the quivering coils loosen and slide from his limbs to lie about his feet like huge cables.

The mighty serpent lashed wildly in its death struggles, and Kane, avoiding its bone-shattering blows, reeled away in the darkness, labouring for breath. If his antagonist had not been Satan himself, it had been Satan's nearest earthly satellite, thought Solomon, hoping devoutly that he would not be called upon to battle another in the darkness there.

It seemed to him that he had been walking through the blackness for ages and he began to wonder if there were any end to the cave when a glimmer of light pierced the darkness. He thought it to be an outer entrance a great way off, and started forward swiftly, but to his astonishment, he brought up short against a blank wall after taking a few strides.

Then he perceived that the light came through a narrow crack in the wall, and feeling over this wall he found it to be of different material from the rest of the cave, consisting, apparently, of regular blocks of stone joined together with mortar of some sort--an indubitably man-built wall. The light streamed between two of these stones where the mortar had crumbled away. Kane ran his hands over the surface with an interest beyond his present needs. The work seemed very old and very much superior to what might be expected of a tribe of ignorant savages. He felt the thrill of the explorer and discoverer. Certainly no white man had ever seen this place and lived to tell of it, for when he had landed on the dank West Coast some months before, preparing to plunge into the interior, he had had no hint of such a country as this. The few white men who knew anything at all of Africa with whom he had talked, had never even mentioned the Land of Skulls, or the she-fiend who ruled it.

Kane thrust against the wall cautiously. The structure seemed weakened from age--a vigorous shove and it gave perceptibly. He hurled himself against it

with all his weight--and a whole section of wall gave way with a crash, precipitating him into a dimly lighted corridor amid a heap of stone, dust and mortar.

He sprang up and looked about, expecting the noise to bring a horde of wild spearmen. Utter silence reigned. The corridor in which he now stood was much like a long narrow cave itself, save that it was the work of man. It was several feet wide and the roof was many feet above his head. Dust lay ankle-deep on the floor as if no foot had trod there for countless centuries, and the dim light, Kane decided, filtered in somehow through the roof or ceiling, for nowhere did he see any doors or windows. At last he decided the source was the ceiling itself, which was of a peculiar phosphorescent quality.

He set off down the corridor, feeling uncomfortably like a grey ghost moving along the grey halls of death and decay. The evident antiquity of his surroundings depressed him, making him sense vaguely the fleeting and futile existence of mankind. That he was now on top of the earth he believed, since light of a sort came in, but where, he could not even offer a conjecture. This was a land of enchantment--a land of horror and fearful mysteries, the jungle and river natives had said, and he had gotten whispered hints of its terrors ever since he had set his back to the Slave Coast and ventured into the hinterlands alone. Now and then he caught a low indistinct murmur which seemed to come through one of the walls, and he at last came to the conclusion that he had stumbled onto a secret passage in some castle or house. The natives who had dared speak to him of Negari, had whispered of a ju-ju city built of stone, set high amid the grim black crags of the fetish hills.

Then, thought Kane, it may be that I have blundered upon the very thing I sought and am in the midst of that city of terror. He halted, and choosing a place at random, began to loosen the mortar with his dagger. As he worked he again heard that low murmur, increasing in volume as he bored

through the wall, and presently the point pierced through, and looking through the aperture it had made, he saw a strange and fantastic scene.

He was looking into a great chamber, whose walls and floors were of stone, and whose mighty roof was upheld by gigantic stone columns, strangely carved. Ranks of feathered black warriors lined the walls and a double column of them stood like statues before a throne set between two stone dragons which were larger than elephants. These men he recognized, by their bearing and general appearance, to be tribesmen of the warriors he had fought at the chasm. But his gaze was drawn irresistibly to the great, grotesquely ornamented throne. There, dwarfed by the ponderous splendour about her, a woman reclined. A tawny woman she was, young and of a tigerish comeliness. She was naked except for a beplumed helmet, armbands, anklets and a girdle of coloured ostrich feathers, and she sprawled upon the silken cushions with her limbs thrown about in voluptuous abandon. Even at that distance Kane could make out that her features were regal yet barbaric, haughty and imperious, yet sensual, and with a touch of ruthless cruelty about the curl of full red lips. Kane felt his pulse quicken. This could be no other than she whose crimes had become almost mythical--Nakari of Negari, demon queen of a demon city, whose monstrous lust for blood had set half a continent shivering. At least she seemed human enough; the tales of the fearful river tribes had lent her a supernatural aspect. Kane had half expected to see a loathsome semi-human monster out of some past and demoniacal age.

The Englishman gazed, fascinated though repelled. Not even in the courts of Europe had he seen such grandeur. The chamber and all its accoutrements, from the carven serpents twined about the bases of the pillars to the dimly seen dragons on the shadowy ceiling, were fashioned on a gigantic scale. The splendour was awesome--elephantine -- inhumanly oversized, and almost numbing to the mind which sought to measure and conceive the magnitude

thereof. To Kane it seemed that these things must have been the work of gods rather than men, for this chamber alone would dwarf most of the castles he had known in Europe.

The fighting men who thronged that mighty room seemed grotesquely incongruous. They were not the architects of that ancient place. As Kane realized this the sinister importance of Queen Nakari dwindled. Sprawled on that august throne in the midst of the terrific glory of another age, she seemed to assume her true proportions, a spoiled, petulant child engaged in a game of make-believe and using for her sport a toy discarded by her elders. And at the same time a thought entered Kane's mind--who were these elders? Still, the child could become deadly in her game, as the Englishman soon saw. A tall and massive warrior came through the ranks fronting the throne, and after prostrating himself four times before it, remained on his knees, evidently waiting permission to speak. The queen's air of lazy indifference fell from her and she straightened with a quick lithe motion that reminded Kane of a leopardess springing erect. She spoke, and the words came faintly to him as he strained his faculties to hear. She spoke in a language very similar to that of the river tribes.

"Speak!"

"Great and Terrible One," said the kneeling warrior, and Kane recognized him as the chief who had first accosted him on the plateau--the chief of the guards on the cliffs, "let not the fire of your fury consume your slave." The young woman's eyes narrowed viciously.

"You know why you were summoned, son of a vulture?"

"Fire of Beauty, the stranger called Kane brought no gifts."

"No gifts?" she spat out the words. "What have I to do with gifts?" The chief hesitated, knowing now that there was some special importance in this stranger.

"Gazelle of Negari, he came climbing the crags in the night like an assassin, with a dagger as long as a man's arm in his hand. The boulder we hurled down missed him, and we met him upon the plateau and took him to the Bridge-Across-the-Sky, where, as is the custom, we thought to slay him; for it was your word that you were weary of men who came wooing you."

"Fool," she snarled. "Fool!"

"Your slave did not know, Queen of Beauty. The strange man fought like a mountain leopard. Two men he slew and fell with the last one into the chasm, and so he perished, Star of Negari."

"Aye," the queen's tone was venomous. "The first great man who ever came to Negari! One who might have--rise, fool!"

The man got to his feet.

"Mighty Lioness, might not this one have come seeking--"

The sentence was never completed. Even as he straightened, Nakari made a swift gesture with her hand. Two warriors plunged from the silent ranks and two spears crossed in the chief's body before he could turn. A gurgling scream burst from his lips, blood spurted high in the air and the corpse fell flatly at the foot of the great throne.

The ranks never wavered, but Kane caught the sidelong flash of strangely red eyes and the involuntary wetting of thick lips. Nakari had half risen as the spears flashed, and now she sank back, an expression of cruel satisfaction on her beautiful face and a strange brooding gleam in her scintillant eyes.

An indifferent wave of her hand and the corpse was dragged away by the heels, the dead arms trailing limply in the wide smear of blood left by the passage of the body. Kane could see other wide stains crossing the stone floor, some almost indistinct, others less dim. How many wild scenes of blood and cruel frenzy had the great stone throne-dragons looked upon with their carven eyes?

He did not doubt, now, the tales told him by the river tribes. These people were bred in rapine and horror. Their prowess had burst their brains. They lived, like some terrible beast, only to destroy. There were strange gleams behind their eyes which at times lit those eyes with up-leading flames and shadows of Hell. What had the river tribes said of these mountain people who had ravaged them for countless centuries?

"That they were henchmen of death, who stalked among them, and whom they worshipped." Still the thought hovered in Kane's mind as he watched--who built this place, and why were these people evidently in possession? Fighting men such as they were could not have reached the culture evidenced by these carvings. Yet the river tribes had spoken of no other men than those upon which he now looked. The Englishman tore himself away from the fascination of the barbaric scene with an effort. He had no time to waste; as long as they thought him dead, he had more chance of eluding possible guards and seeking what he had come to find. He turned and set off down the dim corridor. No plan of action offered itself to his mind and one direction was as good as another. The passage did not run straight; it turned and twisted, following the line of the walls, Kane supposed, and found time to wonder at the evident enormous thickness of those walls. He expected at any moment to meet some guard or slave, but as the corridors continued to stretch empty before him, with the dusty floors unmarked by any footprint, he decided that either the passages were unknown to the people of Negari or else for some reason were never used.

He kept a close lookout for secret doors, and at last found one, made fast on the inner side with a rusty bolt set in a groove of the wall. This he manipulated cautiously, and presently with a creaking which seemed terrifically loud in the stillness the door swung inward. Looking out he saw no one, and stepping warily through the opening, he drew the door to behind him, noting that it assumed the part of a fantastic picture painted on the wall. He scraped a mark

with his dagger at the point where he believed the hidden spring to be on the outer side, for he knew not when he might need to use the passage again.

He was in a great hall, through which ran a maze of giant pillars much like those of the throne chamber. Among them he felt like a child in some great forest, yet they gave him some slight sense of security since he believed that, gliding among them like a ghost through a jungle, he could elude the warriors in spite of their craft.

He set off, choosing his direction at random and going carefully. Once he heard a mutter of voices, and leaping upon the base of a column, clung there while two women passed directly beneath him, but besides these he encountered no one. It was an uncanny sensation, passing through this vast hall which seemed empty of human life, but in some other part of which Kane knew there might be throngs of people, hidden from sight by the pillars.

At last, after what seemed an eternity of following these monstrous mazes, he came upon a huge wall which seemed to be either a side of the hall, or a partition, and continuing along this, he saw in front of him a doorway before which two spearmen stood like black statues.

Kane, peering about the corner of a column base, made out two windows high in the wall, one on each side of the door, and noting the ornate carvings which covered the walls, determined on a desperate plan.

He felt it imperative that he should see what lay within that room. The fact that it was guarded suggested that the room beyond the door was either a treasure chamber or a dungeon, and he felt sure that his ultimate goal would prove to be a dungeon.

Kane retreated to a point out of sight of the guards and began to scale the wall, using the deep carvings for hand and foot holds. It proved even easier than he had hoped, and having climbed to a point level with the windows, he crawled cautiously along a horizontal line,

feeling like an ant on a wall. The guards far below him never looked up, and finally he reached the nearer window and drew himself up over the sill. He looked down into a large room, empty of life, but equipped in a manner sensuous and barbaric. Silken couches and velvet cushions dotted the floor in profusion, and tapestries heavy with gold work hung upon tile walls. The ceiling too was worked in gold.

Strangely incongruous, crude trinkets of ivory and ironwood, unmistakably savage in workmanship, littered the place, symbolic enough of this strange kingdom where signs of barbarism vied with a strange culture. The outer door was shut and in the wall opposite was another door, also closed.

Kane descended from the window, sliding down the edge of a tapestry as a sailor slides down a sail-rope, and crossed the room. His feet sank noiselessly into the deep fabric of the rug which covered the floor, and which, like all the other furnishings, seemed ancient to the point of decay.

At the door he hesitated. To step into the next room might be a desperately hazardous thing to do; should it prove to be filled with warriors, his escape was cut off by the spearman outside the other door. Still, he was used to taking all sorts of wild chances, and now, sword in hand, he flung the door open with a suddenness intended to numb with surprise for an instant any foe who might be on the other side. Kane took a swift step within, ready for anything--then halted suddenly, struck speechless and motionless for a second. He had come thousands of miles in search of something, and there before him lay the object of his search.

CHAPTER III. LILITH

A couch stood in the middle of the room, and its silken surface lay a woman--a woman whose skin was fair and whose reddish gold hair fell about her bare shoulders. She now sprang erect, fright flooding her fine grey eyes, lips parted to utter a cry which she as suddenly checked.

"You!" she exclaimed. "How did you--?"

Solomon Kane closed the door behind him and came toward her, a rare smile on his dark face.

"You remember me, do you not, Marylin?"

The fear had already faded from her eyes even before he spoke, to be replaced by a look of incredible wonder and dazed bewilderment.

"Captain Kane! I can not understand--it seemed no one would ever come--"

She drew a small hand wearily across her brow, swaying suddenly.

Kane caught her in his arms--she was only a child--and laid her gently on the couch. There, chafing her wrists gently, he talked in a low hurried monotone, keeping an eye on the door all the time--which door, by the way, seemed to be the only entrance or egress from the room. While he talked he mechanically took in the chamber, noting that it was almost a duplicate of the outer room as regards hangings and "general furnishings.

"First," said he, "before we go into any other matters, tell me, are you closely guarded?"

"Very closely, sir," she murmured hopelessly, "I know not how you came here, but we can never escape."

"Let me tell you swiftly how I came to be here, and mayhap you will be more hopeful when I tell you of the difficulties already overcome. Lie still now, Marylin, and I will tell you how I came to seek an English heiress in the devil city of Negari.

"I killed Sir John Taferel in a duel. As to the reason, 'tis neither here nor there, but slander and a black lie lay behind it. Ere he died he confessed that he had committed a foul crime some years ago. You remember, of course, the affection cherished for you by your cousin, old Lord Hildred Taferel, Sir

John's uncle? Sir John feared that the old lord, dying without issue, might leave the great Taferal estates to you.

"Years ago you disappeared and Sir John spread the rumour that you had drowned. Yet when he lay dying with my rapier through his body, he gasped out that he had kidnapped you and sold you to a Barbary rover, whom he named--a bloody pirate whose name has not been unknown on England's coasts aforetime. So I came seeking you, and a long weary trail it has been, stretching into long leagues and bitter years.

"First I sailed the seas searching for El Gar, the Barbary corsair named by Sir John. I found him in the crash and roar of an ocean battle; he died, but even as he lay dying he told me that he had sold you in turn to a merchant out of Stamboul. So to the Levant I went and there by chance came upon a Greek sailor whom the Moors had crucified on the shore for piracy. I cut him down and asked him the question I asked all men--if he had in his wanderings seen a captive English girl-child with yellow curls. I learned that he had been one of the crew of the Stamboul merchants, and that she had, on her homeward voyage, been set upon by a Portuguese slaver and sunk--this renegade Greek and the child being among the few who were taken aboard the slaver.

"This slaver then, cruising south for black ivory, had been ambushed in a small bay on the African West Coast, and of your further fate the Greek knew nothing, for he had escaped the general massacre, and taking to sea in an open boat, had been taken up by a ship of Genoese freebooters.

"To the West Coast, then, I came, on the slim chance that you still lived, and there heard among the natives that some years ago a white child had been taken from a ship whose crew had been slain, and sent inland as a part of the tribute the shore tribes paid to the upper river chiefs.

"Then all traces ceased. For months I wandered without a clue as to your whereabouts, nay, without a hint that

you even lived. Then I chanced to hear among the river tribes of the demon city Negari and the evil queen who kept a foreign woman for a slave. I came here."

Kane's matter-of-fact tone, his unfurnished narration, gave no hint of the full meaning of that tale--of what lay behind those calm and measured words--the sea-fights and the land fights--the years of privation and heart-breaking toil, the ceaseless danger, the everlasting wandering through hostile and unknown lands, the tedious and deadening labour of ferreting out the information he wished from ignorant, sullen and unfriendly savages.

"I came here," said Kane simply, but what a world of courage and effort was symbolized by that phrase! A long red trail, black shadows and crimson shadows weaving a devil's dance--marked by flashing swords and the smoke of battle--by faltering words falling like drops of blood from the lips of dying men.

Not a consciously dramatic man, certainly, was Solomon Kane. He told his tale in the same manner in which he had overcome terrific obstacles --coldly, briefly and without heroics.

"You see, Marylin," he concluded gently, "I have not come this far and done this much, to now meet with defeat. Take heart, child. We will find a way out of this fearful place."

"Sir John took me on his saddlebow," the girl said dazedly, and speaking slowly as if her native language came strangely to her from years of unuse, as she framed in halting words an English evening of long ago: "He carried me to the seashore where a galley's boat waited, filled with fierce men, dark and moustached and having scimitars, and great rings to the fingers. The captain, a Moslem with a face like a hawk, took me, I a-weeping with fear, and bore me to his galley. Yet he was kind to me in his way. I being little more than a baby, and at last sold me to a Turkish merchant, as he told you. This merchant he met off the southern coast of France, after many days of sea travel.

"This man did not use me badly, yet I feared him, for he was a man of cruel countenance and made me understand that I was to be sold to a black sultan of the Moors. However, in the Gates of Hercules his ship was set upon by a Cadiz slaver and things came about as you have said.

"The captain of the slaver believed me to be the child of some wealthy English family and intended holding me for ransom, but in a grim darksome bay on the African coast he perished with all his men except the Greek you have mentioned, and I was taken captive by a savage chieftain.

"I was terribly afraid and thought he would slay me, but he did me no harm and sent me upcountry with an escort, who also bore much loot taken from the ship. This loot, together with myself, was, as you know, intended for a powerful king of the river peoples. But it never reached him, for a roving band of Negari fell upon the beach warriors and slew them all. Then I was taken to this city, and have since remained, slave to Queen Nakari.

"How I have lived through all those terrible scenes of battle and cruelty and murder, I know not."

"A providence has watched over you, child," said Kane, "the power which doth care for weak women and helpless children; which led me to you in spite of all hindrances, and which shall yet lead us forth from this place, God willing."

"My people!" she exclaimed suddenly like one awaking from a dream; "what of them?"

"All in good health and fortune, child, save that they have sorrowed for you through the long years. Nay, old Sir Mildred hath the gout and doth so swear thereat that I fear for his soul at times. Yet methinks that the sight of you, little Marylin, would mend him."

"Still, Captain Kane," said the girl, "I can not understand why you came alone."

"Your brothers would have come with me, child, but it was not sure that you lived, and I was loth that any other Taferal should die in a land far from good English soil. I rid the country of an evil Taferal-- 'twas but just I should restore in his place a good Taferal, if so be she still lived--I, and I alone."

This explanation Kane himself believed. He never sought to analyse his motives and he never wavered once his mind was made up. Though he always acted on impulse, he firmly believed that all his actions were governed by cold and logical reasonings. He was a man born out of his time--a strange blending of Puritan and Cavalier, with a touch of the ancient philosopher, and more than a touch of the pagan, though the last assertion would have shocked him unspeakably. An atavist of the days of blind chivalry he was, a knight errant in the sombre clothes of a fanatic. A hunger in his soul drove him on and on, an urge to right all wrongs, protect all weaker things, avenge all crimes against right and justice. Wayward and restless as the wind, he was consistent in only one respect--he was true to his ideals of justice and right. Such was Solomon Kane.

"Marylin," he now said kindly, taking her small hands in his sword-calloused fingers, "methinks you have changed greatly in the years. You were a rosy and chubby little maid when I used to dandle you on my knee in old England. Now you seem drawn and pale of face, though you are beautiful as the nymphs of the heathen books. There are haunting ghosts in your eyes, child--do they misuse you here?"

She lay back on the couch and the blood drained slowly from her already pallid features until she was deathly white. Kane bent over her, startled. Her voice came in a whisper.

"Ask me not. There are deeds better hidden in the darkness of night and forgetfulness. There are sights which blast the eyes and leave their burning mark forever on the brain. The walls of ancient cities, recked not of by men,

have looked upon scenes not to be spoken of, even in whispers."

Her eyes closed wearily and Kane's troubled, sombre eyes unconsciously traced the thin blue lines of her veins, prominent against the unnatural whiteness of her skin.

"Here is some demoniacal thing," he muttered. "A mystery--"

"Aye," murmured the girl, "a mystery that was old when Egypt was young! And nameless evil more ancient than dark Babylon--that spawned in terrible black cities when the world was young and strange."

Kane frowned, troubled. At the girl's strange words he felt an eery crawling fear at the back of his brain, as if dim racial memories stirred in the eon-deep gulfs, conjuring up grim chaotic visions, illusive and nightmarish.

Suddenly Marylin sat erect, her eyes flaring wide with fright. Kane heard a door open somewhere.

"Nakari!" whispered the girl urgently.

"Swift! She must not find you here! Hide quickly, and"--as Kane turned--"keep silent, whatever may chance!"

She lay back on the couch, feigning slumber as Kane crossed the room and concealed himself behind some tapestries which, hanging upon the wall, hid a niche that might have once held a statue of some sort.

He had scarcely done so when the single door of the room opened and a strange barbaric figure stood framed in it. Nakari, queen of Negari, had come to her slave.

The woman was clad as she had been when he had seen her on the throne, and the coloured armlets and anklets clanked as she closed the door behind her and came into the room. She moved with the easy sinuousness of a she-leopard and in spite of himself the watcher was struck with admiration for her lithe beauty. Yet at the same time a

shudder of repulsion shook him, for her eyes gleamed with vibrant and magnetic evil, older than the world.

"Lilith!" thought Kane. "She is beautiful and terrible as Purgatory. She is Lilith--that foul, lovely woman of ancient legend."

Nakari halted by the couch, stood looking down upon her captive for a moment, then with an enigmatic smile, bent and shook her. Marilyn opened her eyes, sat up, then slipped from her couch and knelt before her savage mistress--an act which caused Kane to curse beneath his breath. The queen laughed and seating herself upon the couch, motioned the girl to rise, and then put an arm about her waist and drew her upon her lap. Kane watched, puzzled, while Nakari caressed the girl in a lazy, amused manner. This might be affection, but to Kane it seemed more like a sated leopard teasing its victim. There was an air of mockery and studied cruelty about the whole affair.

"You are very soft and pretty, Mara," Nakari murmured lazily, "much prettier than the other girls who serve me. The time approaches, little one, for your nuptial. And a fairer bride has never been borne up the Black Stairs."

Marilyn began to tremble and Kane thought she was going to faint. Nakari's eyes gleamed strangely beneath her long-lashed drooping lids, and her full red lips curved in a faint tantalizing smile. Her every action seemed fraught with some sinister meaning. Kane began to sweat profusely.

"Mara," said the queen, "you are honoured above all other girls, and yet you are not content. Think how the girls of Negari will envy you, Mara, when the priests sing the nuptial song and the Moon of Skulls looks over the black crest of the Tower of Death. Think, little bride, of the Master, how many girls have given their lives to be his bride!"

And Nakari laughed in her hateful, musical way as at a rare jest. And then suddenly she stopped short. Her eyes narrowed to slits as they swept the

room, and her whole body tensed. Her hand went to her girdle and came away with a long thin dagger. Kane sighted along the barrel of his pistol, finger against the trigger. Only a natural hesitancy against shooting a woman kept him from sending death into the savage heart of Nakari, for he believed that she was about to murder the girl.

Then, with a lithe, cat-like motion, she thrust the girl from her knees and bounded back across the room, her eyes fixed with blazing intensity on the tapestry behind which Kane stood. Had those keen eyes discovered him? He quickly learned.

"Who is there?" she rapped out fiercely.

"Who hides behind those hangings? I do not see you nor hear you, but I know someone is there!" Kane remained silent. Nakari's wild beast instinct had betrayed him, and he was uncertain as to what course to follow. His next actions depended on the queen.

"Mara!" Nakari's voice slashed like a whip, "who is behind those hangings? Answer me! Shall I give you a taste of the whip again?" The girl seemed incapable of speech. She cowered where she had fallen, her beautiful eyes full of terror. Nakari, her blazing gaze never wavering, reached behind her with her free hand and gripped a cord hanging from the wall. She jerked viciously. Kane felt the tapestries whip back on either side of him and he stood revealed. For a moment the strange tableau held--the gaunt adventurer in the blood-stained, tattered garments, the long pistol gripped in his right hand--across the room the savage queen in her barbaric finery, one arm still lifted to the cord, the other hand holding the dagger in front of her--the imprisoned girl cowering on the floor. Then Kane spoke: "Keep silent, Nakari, or you die!" The queen seemed numbed and struck speechless by the sudden apparition. Kane stepped from among the tapestries and slowly approached her.

"You!" she found her voice at last. "You must be he of whom the guardsmen spake! There are not two other white

men in Negari! They said you fell to your death! How then--"

"Silence!" Kane's voice cut in harshly on her amazed babblings; he knew that the pistol meant nothing to her, but she sensed the threat of the long blade in his left hand. "Marylin," still unconsciously speaking in the river tribes' language, "take cords from the hangings and bind her--" He was about the middle of the chamber now. Nakari's face had lost much of its helpless bewilderment and into her blazing eyes stole a crafty gleam. She deliberately let her dagger fall as in token of surrender, then suddenly her hands shot high above her head and gripped another thick cord. Kane heard Marylin scream, but before he could pull the trigger or even think, the floor fell beneath his feet and he shot down into abysmal blackness. He did not fall far and he landed on his feet; but the force of the fall sent him to his knees and even as he went down, sensing a presence in the darkness beside him, something crashed against his skull and he dropped into a yet blacker abyss of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER IV. DREAMS OF EMPIRE

Slowly Kane drifted back from the dim realms where the unseen assailant's bludgeon had hurled him. Something hindered the motion of his hands, and there was a metallic clanking when he sought to raise them to his aching, throbbing head. He lay in utter darkness, but he could not determine whether this was absence of light, or whether he was still blinded by the blow. He dazedly collected his scattered faculties and realized that he was lying on a damp stone floor, shackled by wrist and ankle with heavy iron chains which were rough and rusty to the touch.

How long he lay there, he never knew. The silence was broken only by the drumming pulse in his own aching head and the scamper and chattering of rats. At last a red glow sprang up in the darkness and grew before his eyes. Framed in the grisly radiance rose the sinister and sardonic face of Nakari. Kane shook his head, striving to rid himself of the illusion. But the light grew and as his eyes accustomed

themselves to it, he saw that it emanated from a torch borne in the hand of the queen.

In the illumination he now saw that he lay in a small dank cell whose walls, ceiling and floor were of stone. The heavy chains which held him captive were made fast to metal rings set deep in the wall. There was but one door, which was apparently of bronze.

Nakari set the torch in a niche near the door, and coming forward, stood over her captive, gazing down at him in a manner rather speculating than mocking.

"You are he who fought the men on the cliff." The remark was an assertion rather than a question. "They said you fell into the abyss--did they lie? Did you bribe them to lie? Or how did you escape? Are you a magician and did you fly to the bottom of the chasm and then fly to my palace? Speak!"

Kane remained silent. Nakari cursed.

"Speak or I will have your eyes torn out! I will cut your fingers off and burn your feet!" She kicked him viciously, but Kane lay silent, his deep sombre eyes boring up into her face, until the feral gleam faded from her eyes to be replaced by an avid interest and wonder.

She seated herself on a stone bench, resting her elbows on her knees and her chin on her hands.

"I never saw a white man before," she said.

"Are all white men like you? Bah! That cannot be! Most men are fools, black or white. I know that white men are not gods as the river tribes say--they are only men. I, who know all the ancient mysteries, say they are only men.

"But white men have strange mysteries too, they tell me--the wanderers of the river tribes and Mara. They have war clubs that make a noise like thunder and kill afar off--that thing which you held in your right hand, was that one of those clubs?"

Kane permitted himself a grim smile.

"Nakari, if you know all mysteries, how can I tell you aught that you know not already?"

"How deep and cold and strange your eyes are!" the queen said as if he had not spoken.

"How strange your whole appearance is--and you have the bearing of a king! You do not fear me--I never met a man who neither loved nor feared me. You would never fear me, but you could learn to love me. Look at me, bold one--am I not beautiful?"

"You are beautiful," answered Kane.

Nakari smiled and then frowned. "The way you say that, it is no compliment. You hate me, do you not?"

"As a man hates a serpent," Kane replied bluntly.

Nakari's eyes blazed with almost insane fury. Her hands clenched until the long nails sank into the palms; then as quickly as her anger had arisen, it ebbed away.

"You have the heart of a king," she said calmly, "else you would fear me. Are you a king your land?"

"I am only a landless wanderer."

"You might be a king here," Nakari said slowly. Kane laughed grimly. "Do you offer me my life?"

"I offer you more than that!" Kane's eyes narrowed as the queen leaned toward him, vibrant with suppressed excitement.

"Kane, what is it that you want more than anything else in the world?"

"To take the white girl you call Mara, and go." Nakari sank back with an impatient exclamation.

"You can not have her; she is the promised bride of the Master. Even I could not save her. I even if I wished.

Forget her. I will help you forget her. Listen, listen to the words of Nakari, queen of Negari! You say you are a landless man--I will make you a king! I will give you the world for a toy! "No, no keep silent until I have finished." she rushed on, her words tumbling over each other in her eagerness. Her eyes blazed, her whole body quivered with dynamic intensity. "I have talked to travellers, to captives and slaves, men from far countries. I know that this land of mountains and rivers and jungle is not all the world. There are far-off nations and cities, and kings and queens to be crushed and broken.

"Negari is fading, her might is crumbling, but a strong man beside her queen might build it up again--might restore all her vanishing glory. Listen, Kane! Sit by me on the throne of Negari! Send afar to your people for the thunder-clubs to arm my warriors! My nation is still lord of central Africa. Together we will band the conquered tribes--call back the days when the realm of ancient Negari spanned the land from sea to sea! We will subjugate all the tribes of the river, the plain and the sea-shore, and instead of slaying them all, we will make one mighty army of them! And then, when all Africa is under our heel, we will sweep forth upon the world like a hungry lion to rend and tear and destroy!"

Solomon's brain reeled. Perhaps it was the woman's fierce magnetic personality, the dynamic power she instilled in her fiery words, but at the moment her wild plan seemed not at all wild and impossible. Lurid and chaotic visions flamed through the Puritan's brain--Europe torn by civil and religious strife, divided against herself, betrayed by her rulers, tottering--aye, Europe was in desperate straits now, and might prove an easy victim for some strong savage race of conquerors. What man can say truthfully that in his heart there lurks not a yearning for power and conquest?

For a moment the Devil sorely tempted Solomon Kane. Then before his mind's eye rose the wistful, sad face of Marylin Taferal, and Solomon cursed.

"Out on ye, daughter of Satan! Avaunt! Am I a beast of the forest to lead your savage devils against mine own people? Nay, no beast ever did so. Begone! If you wish my friendship, set me free and let me go with the girl."

Nakari leaped like a tiger-cat to her feet, her eyes flaming now with passionate fury. A dagger gleamed in her hand and she raised it high above Kane's breast with a feline scream of hate. A moment she hovered like a shadow of death above him; then her arm sank and she laughed. Freedom? She will find her freedom when the Moon of Skulls leers down on the black altar. As for you, you shall rot in this dungeon. You are a fool; Africa's greatest queen has offered you her love and the empire of the world--and you revile her! You love the slave girl, perhaps? Until the Moon of Skulls she is mine and I leave you to think about this: that she shall be punished as I have punished her before--hung up by her wrists, naked, and whipped until she swoons!"

Nakari laughed as Kane tore savagely at his shackles. She crossed to the door, opened it, then hesitated and turned back for another word.

"This is a foul place, bold one, and maybe you hate me the more for chaining you here. Maybe in Nakari's beautiful throne room, with wealth and luxury spread before you, you will look upon her with more favour. Very soon I shall send for you, but first I will leave you here awhile to reflect. Remember--love Nakari and the kingdom of the world is yours; hate her--this cell is your realm."

The bronze door clanged sullenly, but more hateful to the imprisoned Englishman was the venomous, silvery laugh of Nakari.

Time passed slowly in the darkness. After what seemed a long time the door opened again, this time to admit a huge warrior who brought food and a sort of thin wine. Kane ate and drank ravenously and afterward slept. The strain of the last few days had worn him

greatly, mentally and physically, but when he awoke he felt fresh and strong.

Again the door opened and two great savage warriors entered. In the light of the torches they bore, Kane saw that they were giants, clad in loin-cloths and ostrich plume headgear, and bearing long spears in their hands.

"Nakari wishes you to come to her, white man," was all they said, as they took off his shackles. He arose, exultant in even brief freedom, his keen brain working fiercely for a way of escape.

Evidently the fame of his prowess had spread, for the two warriors showed great respect for him. They motioned him to precede them, and walked carefully behind him, the points of their spears boring into his back. Though they were two to one, and he was unarmed, they were taking no chances. The gazes they directed at him were full of awe and suspicion.

Down a long, dark corridor they went, his captors guiding him with light prods of their spears, up a narrow winding stair, down another passageway, up another stair, and then they emerged into the vast maze of gigantic pillars into which Kane had first come. As they started down this huge hall, Kane's eyes suddenly fell on a strange and fantastic picture painted on the wall ahead of him. His heart gave a sudden leap as he recognized it. It was some distance in front of him and he edged imperceptibly toward the wall until he and his guards were walking along very close to it. Now he was almost abreast of the picture and could even make out the mark his dagger had made upon it.

The warriors following Kane were amazed to hear him gasp suddenly like a man struck by a spear. He wavered in his stride and began clutching at the air for support.

They eyed each other doubtfully and prodded him, but he cried out like a dying man and slowly crumpled to the floor, where he lay in a strange, unnatural position, one leg doubled back

under him and one arm half supporting his lolling body.

The guards looked at him fearfully. To all appearances he was dying, but there was no wound upon him. They threatened him with their spears, but he paid no heed. Then they lowered their weapons uncertainly and one of them bent over him.

Then it happened. The instant the guard stooped forward. Kane came up like a steel spring released. His right fist following his motion curved up from the hip in a whistling half-circle and crashed against the warrior's jaw. Delivered with all the power of arm and shoulder, propelled by the upthrust of the powerful legs as Kane straightened, the blow was like that of a sling-shot. The guard slumped to the floor, unconscious before his knees gave way.

The other warrior plunged forward with a bellow, but even as his victim fell, Kane twisted aside and his frantic hand found the secret spring in the painting and pressed.

All happened in the breath of a second. Quick, as the warrior was, Kane was quicker, for he moved with the dynamic speed of a famished wolf. For an instant the falling body of the senseless guard hindered the other warrior's thrust, and in that instant Kane felt the hidden door give way. From the corner of his eye he saw a long gleam of steel shooting for his heart. He twisted about and hurled himself against the door, vanishing through it even as the stabbing spear slit the skin on his shoulder.

To the dazed and bewildered warrior, standing there with weapon upraised for another thrust, it seemed as if his prisoner had simply vanished through a solid wall, for only a fantastic picture met his gaze and this did not give to his efforts.

CHAPTER V.

"FOR A THOUSAND YEARS--"

Kane slammed the hidden door shut behind him, jammed down the spring and for a moment leaned against it,

every muscle tensed, expecting to hold it against the efforts of a horde of spearmen. But nothing of the sort materialized. He heard his guard fumbling outside for a time; then that sound, too, ceased. It seemed impossible that these people should have lived in this palace as long as they had without discovering the secret doors and passages, but it was a conclusion which forced itself upon Kane's mind. At last he decided that he was safe from pursuit for the time being, and turning, started down the long, narrow corridor with its eon-old dust and its dim grey light. He felt baffled and furious, though he was free from Nakari's shackles. He had no idea how long he had been in the palace; it seemed ages. It must be day now, for it was light in the outer halls, and he had seen no torches after they had left the subterranean dungeons. He wondered if Nakari had carried out her threat of vengeance on the helpless girl, and swore passionately. Free for the time being, yes; but unarmed and hunted through this infernal palace like a rat. How could he aid either himself or Marylin? But his confidence never faltered. He was in the right and some way would present itself. Suddenly a narrow stairway branched off the main passageway, and up this he went, the light growing stronger and stronger until he stood in the full glare of the African sunlight. The stair terminated in a sort of small landing directly in front of which was a tiny window, heavily barred. Through this he saw the blue sky tinted gold with the blazing sunlight, the sight was like wine to him and he drew in deep breaths of fresh, untainted air, breathing deep as if to rid his lungs of the aura of dust and decayed grandeur through which he had been passing.

He was looking out over a weird and bizarre landscape. Far to the right and the left loomed up great black crags and beneath them there reared castles and towers of stone, of strange architecture--it was as if giants from some other planet had thrown them up in a wild and chaotic debauch of creation. These buildings were backed solidly against the cliffs, and Kane knew that Nakari's palace also must be built into the wall of

the crag behind it. He seemed to be in the front of that palace in a sort of minaret built on the outer wall. But there was only one window in it and his view was limited.

Far below him through the winding and narrow streets of that strange city, swarms of people went to and fro, seeming like black ants to the watcher above. East, north and south, the cliffs formed a natural bulwark; only to the west was a built wall.

The sun was sinking west. Kane turned reluctantly from the barred window and went down the stairs again. Again he paced down the narrow grey corridor, aimlessly and planlessly, for what seemed miles and miles. He descended lower and lower into passages that lay below passages. The light grew dimmer, and a dank slime appeared on the walls. Then Kane halted, a faint sound from beyond the wall arresting him. What was that? A faint rattle--the rattle of chains.

Kane leaned close to the wall, and in the semi-darkness his hand encountered a rusty spring. He worked at it cautiously and presently felt the hidden door it betokened swing inward. He gazed out warily.

He was looking into a cell, the counterpart of the one in which he had been confined. A smouldering torch was thrust into a niche on the wall, and by its lurid and flickering light he made out a form on the floor, shackled wrist and ankle as he had been shackled.

A man; at first Kane thought him to be a native, but a second glance made him doubt. His skin was dark, but his features were finely chiselled, and he possessed a high, magnificent forehead, hard vibrant eyes, and straight dark hair.

The man spoke in an-unfamiliar dialect, one which was strangely distinct and clear-cut in contrast to the guttural jargon of the natives with whom Kane was familiar. The Englishman spoke in English, and then in the language of the river tribes.

"You who come through the ancient door," said the other in the latter dialect, "who are you? You are no savage--at first I thought you one of the Old Race, but now I see you are not as they. Whence come you?"

"I am Solomon Kane," said the Puritan, "a prisoner in this devil-city. I come from far across the blue salt sea."

The man's eyes lighted at the word.

"The sea. The ancient and everlasting! The sea which I have never seen, but which cradled the glory of my ancestors! Tell me, stranger, have you, like they, sailed across the breast of the great blue monster, and have your eyes looked on the golden spires of Atlantis and the crimson walls of Mu?"

"Truly," answered Solomon uncertainly. "I have sailed the seas, even to Hindostan and Cathay, but of the countries you mention I know nothing."

"Nay," the other sighed. "I dream--I dream. Already the shadow of the great night falls across my brain and my words wander. Stranger, there have been times when these cold walls and floor have seemed to melt into green, surging deeps and my soul was filled with the deep booming of the everlasting sea. I who have never seen the sea!"

Kane shuddered involuntarily. Surely this man was insane. Suddenly the other shot out a withered, claw-like hand and gripped his arm, despite the hampering chain,

"You whose skin is so strangely fair. Have you seen Nakari, the she-fiend who rules this crumbling city?"

"I have seen her," said Kane grimly, "and now I flee like a hunted rat from her murderers."

"You hate her!" the other cried. "Ha, I know! You seek Mara, the white girl who is her slave?"

"Aye."

"Listen," the shackled one spoke with strange solemnity; "I am dying. Nakari's rack has done its work. I die and with me dies the shadow of the glory that was my nation's. For I am the last of my race. In all the world there is none like me. Hark now, to the voice of a dying race."

And Kane leaning there in the flickering semi-darkness of the cell heard the strangest tale to which man has ever listened, brought out of the mist of the dim dawn ages by the lips of delirium. Clear and distinct the words fell from the dying man and Kane alternately burned and froze as vista after gigantic vista of time and space swept up before him.

"Long eons ago--ages, ages ago--the empire of my race rose proudly above the waves. So long ago was it that no man remembers an ancestor who remembered it. In a great land to the west our cities rose. Our golden spires split the stars; our purple-prowed galleys broke the waves around the world, looting the sunset for its treasure and the sunrise for its wealth.

"Our legions swept forth to the north and to the south, to the west and the east, and none could stand before them. Our cities banded the world; we sent our colonies to all lands to subdue all savages, men of all colours, and enslave them. They toiled for us in the mines and at the galley's oars. All over the world the people of Atlantis reigned supreme. We were a sea-people, and we delved the deeps of all the oceans. The mysteries were known to us, and the secret things of land and sea and sky. We read the stars and were wise. Sons of the sea, we exalted him above all others.

"We worshipped Valka and Hotah, Honen and Golgor. Many virgins, many strong youths, died on their altars and the smoke of the shrines blotted out the sun. Then the sea rose and shook himself. He thundered from his abyss and the thrones of the world fell before him! New lands rose from the deep and Atlantis and Mu were swallowed up by the gulf. The green sea roared through

the fanes and the castles, and the seaweed encrusted the golden spires and the topaz towers. The empire of Atlantis vanished and was forgotten, passing into the everlasting gulf of time and oblivion. Likewise the colony cities in barbaric lands, cut off from their mother kingdom, perished. The savage barbarians rose and burned and destroyed until in all the world only the colony city of Negari remained as a symbol of the lost empire.

"Here my ancestors ruled as kings, and the ancestors of Nakari--the she-cat!--bent the knee of slavery to them. Years passed, stretching into centuries. The empire of Negari dwindled. Tribe after tribe rose and flung off the chains, pressing the lines back from the sea, until at last the sons of Atlantis gave way entirely and retreated into the city itself--the last stronghold of the race. Conquerors no longer, hemmed in by ferocious tribes, yet they held those tribes at bay for a thousand years. Negari was invincible from without; her walls held firm; but within evil influences were at work.

"The sons of Atlantis had brought their slaves into the city with them. The rulers were warriors, scholars, priests, artisans; they did no menial work. For that they depended upon the slaves. There were more of these slaves than there were masters. And they increased while the sons of Atlantis dwindled.

"They mixed with each other more and more as the race degenerated until at last only the priestcraft was free of the taint of savage blood. Rulers sat on the throne of Negari who possessed little of the blood of Atlantis, and these allowed more and more wild tribesmen to enter the city in the guise of servants, mercenaries and friends.

"Then came a day when these fierce slaves revolted and slew all who bore a trace of the blood of Atlantis, except the priests and their families. These they imprisoned as 'fetish people'. For a thousand years savages have ruled in Negari, their kings guided by the captive priests, who though prisoners, were yet the masters of kings." Kane listened

enthralled. To his imaginative mind, the tale burned and lived with strange fire from cosmic time and space.

"After all the sons of Atlantis, save the priests, were dead, there rose a great king to the defiled throne of ancient Negari. He was a tiger and his warriors were like leopards. They called themselves Negari, ravishing even the name of their former masters, and none could stand before them. They swept the land from sea to sea, and the smoke of destruction put out the stars. The great river ran red and the new lords of Negari strode above the corpses of their tribal foes. Then the great king died and the empire crumbled, even as the Atlantean kingdom of Negari had crumbled.

"They were skilled in war. The dead sons of Atlantis, their former masters, had trained them well in the ways of battle, and against the wild tribesmen they were invincible. But only the ways of war had they learned, and the empire was torn with civil strife. Murder and intrigue stalked redhanded through the palaces and the streets, and the boundaries of the empire dwindled and dwindled. All the while, savage kings with red, frenzied brains sat on the throne, and behind the curtains, unseen but greatly feared, the Atlantean priests guided the nation, holding it together, keeping it from absolute destruction.

"Prisoners in the city were we, for there was nowhere else in the world to go. We moved like ghosts through the secret passages in the walls and under the earth, spying on intrigue and doing secret magic. We upheld the cause of the royal family--the descendants of that tiger-like king of long ago--against all plotting chiefs, and grim are the tales which these silent walls could tell.

"These savages are not like the other natives of the region. A latent insanity lurks in the brains of every one. They have tasted so deeply and so long of slaughter and victory that they are as human leopards, forever thirsting for blood. On their myriad wretched slaves they have sated all lusts and desires until they have become foul and terrible

beasts, forever seeking some new sensation, forever quenching their fearful thirsts in blood.

"Like a lion have they lurked in these crags for a thousand years, to rush forth and ravage the jungle and river people, enslaving and destroying. They are still invincible from without, though their possessions have dwindled to the very walls of this city, and their former great conquests and invasions have dwindled to raids for slaves.

"But as they faded, so too faded their secret masters, the Atlantean priests. One by one they died, until only I remained. In the last century they too have mixed with their rulers and slaves, and now--oh, the shame upon me--I, the last son of Atlantis, bear in my veins the taint of barbarian blood. They died; I remained, doing magic and guiding the savage kings, I the last priest of Negari. Then the she-fiend, Nakari, arose."

Kane leaned forward with quickened interest. New life surged into the tale as it touched upon his own time.

"Nakari!" the name was spat as a snake hisses; "slave and the daughter of a slave! Yet she prevailed when her hour came and all the royal family died.

"And me, the last son of Atlantis, me she prisoned and chained. She feared not the silent Atlantean priests, for she was the daughter of a Satellite--one of the lesser, native priests. They were men who did the menial work of the masters--performing the lesser sacrifices, divining from the livers of fowls and serpents and keeping the holy fires for ever burning. Much she knew of us and our ways, and evil ambition burned in her.

"As a child she danced in the March of the New Moon, and as a young girl she was one of the Starmaidens. Much of the lesser mysteries was known to her, and more she learned, spying upon the secret rites of the priests who enacted hidden rituals that were old when the earth was young.

"For the remnants of Atlantis secretly kept alive the old worships of Valka and

Hotah, Honen and Golgor, long forgotten and not to be understood by these savage people whose ancestors died screaming on their altars. Alone of all the savage Negari, she feared us not. Nakari not only overthrew the king and set herself on the throne, but she dominated the priests--the Satellites and the few Atlantean masters who were left. All these last, save me, died beneath the daggers of her assassins or on her racks. She alone of all the myriad savage thousands who have lived and died between these walls guessed at the hidden passages and subterranean corridors, secrets which we of the priestcraft had guarded jealously from the people for a thousand years.

"Ha! Ha! Blind, savage fools! To pass an ageless age in this city, yet never to learn of the secrets thereof! Apes--fools! Not even the lesser priests know of the long grey corridors, lit by phosphorescent ceilings, through which in bygone ages strange forms have glided silently. For our ancestors built Negari as they built Atlantis on a mighty scale and with an unknown art. Not for men alone did we build, but for the gods who moved unseen among us. And deep the secrets these ancient walls hold!

"Torture could not wring these secrets from our lips, but shackled in her dungeons, we trod our hidden corridors no more. For years the dust has gathered there, untouched by human foot, while we, and finally I alone, lay chained in these foul cells. And among the temples and the dark, mysterious shrines of old, move vile Satellites, elevated by Nakari to glories that were once mine--for I am the last Atlantean high priest.

"Their doom is ascertained, and red will be their ruin. Valka and Golgor, gods lost and forgotten, whose memory shall die with me, strike down their walls and humble them unto the dust! Break the altars of their blind pagan gods--"

Kane realized that the man was wandering in his mind. The keen brain had begun to crumble at last.

"Tell me," said he; "you mentioned the fair girl. Mara. What do you know of her?"

"She was brought to Negari years ago by raiders," the other answered, "only a few years after the rise of the savage queen, whose slave she is. Little of her I know, for shortly after her arrival, Nakari turned on me--and the years that lie between have been grim dark years, shot red with torture and agony. Here I have lain, hampered by my chains from escape which lay in that door through which you entered--and for the knowledge of which Nakari has torn me on racks and suspended me over slow fires."

Kane shuddered. "You know not if they have so misused the white girl? Her eyes are haunted, and she has wasted away."

"She has danced with the Starmaidens at Nakari's command, and has looked on the bloody and terrible rites of the Black Temple. She has lived for years among a people with whom blood is cheaper than water, who delight in slaughter and foul torture, and such sights as she has looked upon would blast the eyes and wither the flesh of strong men. She has seen the victims of Nakura die amid horrid torments, and the sight is burned forever in the brain of the beholder. The rites of the Atlanteans the savages took whereby to honour their own crude gods, and though the essence of those rites is lost in the wasting years, yet even Nakari's minions perform them, they are not such as men can look on, unshaken."

Kane was thinking: "A fair day for the world when this Atlantis sank, for most certainly it bred a race of strange and unknown evil." Aloud he said; "Who is this Master of whom Nakari spake, and what meant she by calling Mara his bride?"

"Nakura--Nakura. The skull of evil, the symbol of Death that they worship. What know these savages of the gods of sea-girt Atlantis? What know they of the dread and unseen gods whom their masters worshipped with majestic and mysterious rites? They understand not of the un-seen essence, the invisible deity

that reigns in the air and the elements; they must worship a material object, endowed with human shape. Nakura was the last great wizard of Atlantean Negari. A renegade he was, who conspired against his own people and aided the revolt of the savages. In life they followed him and in death they deified him. High in the Tower of Death his fleshless skull is set, and on that skull hinge the brains of all the people of Negari.

"Nay, we of Atlantis worshipped Death, but we likewise worshipped Life. These people worship only Death and call themselves Sons of Death. And the skull of Nakura has been to them for a thousand years the symbol of their power, the evidence of their greatness.

"Do you mean," Kane broke in impatiently on these ramblings, "that they will sacrifice the girl to their god?"

"In the Moon of Skulls she will die on the Black Altar."

"What in God's name is this Moon of Skulls?" Kane cried passionately.

"The full moon. At the full of each moon, which we name the Moon of Skulls, a virgin dies on the Black Altar before the Tower of Death, where centuries ago, virgins died in honour of Golgor, the god of Atlantis. Now from the face of the tower that once housed the glory of Golgor, leers down the skull of the renegade wizard, and the people believe that his brain still lives therein to guide the star of the city. For look ye, stranger, when the full moon gleams over the rim of the tower and the chant of the priests falls silent, then from the skull of Nakura thunders a great voice, raised in an ancient Atlantean chant, and the people fall on their faces before it.

"But hark, there is a secret way, a stair leading up to a hidden niche behind the skull, and there a priest lurks and chants. In days gone by one of the sons of Atlantis had this office, and by all rights of men and gods it should be mine this day. For though we sons of Atlantis worshipped our ancient gods in secret,

these savages would have none of them. To hold our power we were devotees to their foul gods and we sang and sacrificed to him whose memory we cursed.

"But Nakari discovered the secret, known before only to the Atlantean priests, and now one of her Satellites mounts the hidden stair and yammers forth the strange and terrible chant which is but meaningless gibberish to him, as to those who hear it. I, and only I, know its grim and fearful meaning."

Kane's brain whirled in his efforts to formulate some plan of action. For the first time during the whole search for the girl, he felt himself against a blank wall. The palace was a labyrinth, a maze in which he could decide no direction. The corridors seemed to run without plan or purpose, and how could he find Marylin, prisoned as she doubtless was in one of the myriad chambers or cells? Or had she already passed over the borderline of life, or succumbed to the brutal torture-lust of Nakari?

He scarcely heard the ravings and mutterings of the dying man.

"Stranger, do you indeed live or are you but one of the ghosts which have haunted me of late, stealing through the darkness of my cell? Nay, you are flesh and blood--but you are a savage, even as Nakari's race are savages. Eons ago when your ancestors were defending their caves against the tiger and the mammoth, with crude spears of flint, the gold spires of my people split the stars! They are gone and forgotten, and the world is a waste of barbarians. Let me, too, pass as a dream that is forgotten in the mists of the ages--" Kane rose and paced the cell. His fingers closed like steel talons as on a sword hilt and a blind red wave of fury surged through his brain. Oh God! to get his foes before the keen blade that had been taken from him--to face the whole city, one man against them all.

Kane pressed his hands against his temples.

"The moon was nearly full when last I saw it. But I know not how long ago that was. I know not how long I have been in this accursed palace, or how long I lay in that dungeon where Nakari threw me. The time of full moon may be past, and--oh merciful God!--Marylin may be dead already."

"Tonight is the Moon of Skulls," muttered the other; "I heard one of my jailers speak of it."

Kane gripped the dying man's shoulder with unconscious force.

"If you hate Nakari or love mankind, in God's name tell me how to save the child."

"Love mankind?" the priest laughed insanely.

"What has a son of Atlantis and a priest of forgotten Golgor to do with love? What are mortals but food for the jaws of the gods? Softer girls than your Mara have died screaming beneath these hands and my heart was as iron to their cries. Yet hate"--the strange eyes flamed with fearful light--"for hate I will tell you what you wish to know!"

"Go to the Tower of Death when the moon is risen. Slay the false priest who lurks behind the skull of Nakura, and then when the chanting of the worshippers below ceases, and the masked slayer beside the Black Altar raises the sacrificial dagger, speak in a loud voice that the people can understand, bidding them set free the victim and offer up instead, Nakari, queen of Negari!"

"As for the rest, afterward you must rely on your own craft and prowess if you come free."

Kane shook him.

"Swift! Tell me how I am to reach this tower!"

"Go back through the door whence you came." The man was sinking fast, his words dropped to whispers. "Turn to the left and go a hundred paces. Mount the

stair you come to, as high as it goes. In the corridor where it ceases go straight for another hundred paces, and when you come to what seems a blank wall, feel over it until you find a projecting spring. Press this and enter the door which will open. You will then be out of the palace and in the cliffs against which it is built, and in the only one of the secret corridors known to the people of Negari. Turn to your right and go straight down the passage for five hundred paces. There you will come to a stair, which leads up to the niche behind the skull. The Tower of Death is built into the cliff and projects above it. There are two stairs--"

Suddenly the voice trailed out. Kane leaned forward and shook the man, and the priest suddenly rose up with a great effort. His eyes blazed with a wild and unearthly light and he flung his shackled arms wide.

"The sea!" he cried in a great voice. "The golden spires of Atlantis and the sun on the deep blue waters! I come!"

And as Kane reached to lay him down again, he slumped back, dead.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SHATTERING OF THE SKULL

Kane wiped the cold sweat from his pale brow as he hurried down the shadowy passage. Outside this horrible palace it must be night. Even now the full moon--the grim Moon of Skulls--might be rising above the horizon. He paced off a hundred paces and came upon the stair the dying priest had mentioned. This he mounted, and coming into the corridor above, he measured off another hundred paces and brought up short against what appeared to be a door-less wall. It seemed an age before his frantic fingers found a piece of projecting metal. There was a creak of rusty hinges as the hidden door swung open and Kane looked into a passageway darker than the one in which he stood.

He entered, and when the door shut behind him he turned to his right and groped his way along for five hundred paces. There the corridor was lighter;

light sifted in from without, and Kane discerned a stairway. Up this he went for several steps, then halted, baffled. At a sort of landing the stairway became two, one leading away to the left, the other to the right. Kane cursed. He felt that he could not afford to make a mistake--time was too precious--but how was he to know which would lead him to the niche where the priest hid?

The Atlantean had been about to tell him of these stairs when struck by the delirium which precedes death, and Kane wished fervently that he had lived only a few moments longer.

At any rate, he had no time to waste; right or wrong, he must chance it. He chose the right hand stair and ran swiftly up it. No time for caution now.

He felt instinctively that the time of sacrifice was close at hand. He came into another passage and discerned by the change in masonry that he was out of the cliffs again and in some building--presumably the Tower of Death. He expected any moment to come upon another stair, and suddenly his expectations were realized--but instead of up, it led down. From somewhere in front of him Kane heard a vague, rhythmic murmur and a cold hand gripped his heart. The chanting of the worshippers before--the Black Altar!

He raced forward recklessly, rounded a turn in the corridor, brought up short against a door and looked through a tiny aperture. His heart sank. He had chosen the wrong stair and had wandered into some other building adjoining the Tower of Death.

He looked upon a grim and terrible scene. In a wide open space before a great black tower whose spire rose above the crags behind it, two long lines of savage dancers swayed and writhed. Their voices rose in a strange meaningless chant, and they did not move from their tracks.

From their knees upward their bodies swayed in fantastic rhythmical motions, and in their hands torches tossed and whirled, shedding a lurid shifting red

light over the scene. Behind them were ranged a vast concourse of people who stood silent.

The dancing torchlight gleamed on a sea of glittering eyes and eager faces. In front of the dancers rose the Tower of Death, gigantically tall, black and horrific. No door or window opened in its face, but high on the wall in a sort of ornamented frame there leered a grim symbol of death and decay. The skull of Nakura! A faint, eery glow surrounded it, lit somehow from within the tower, Kane knew, and wondered by what strange art the priests had kept the skull from decay and dissolution so long.

But it was neither the skull nor the tower which gripped the Puritan's horrified gaze and held it. Between the converging lines of yelling, swaying worshippers there rose a great black altar. On this altar lay a slim, white shape.

"Marylin!" the word burst from Kane's lips in a great sob.

For a moment he stood frozen, helpless, struck blind. No time now to retrace his steps and find the niche where the skull priest lurked.

Even now a faint glow was apparent behind the spire of the tower, etching that spire blackly against the sky. The moon had risen. The chant of the dancers soared up to a frenzy of sound, and from the silent watchers behind them began a sinister low rumble of drums. To Kane's dazed mind it seemed that he looked on some red debauch of a lower Hell.

What ghastly worship of past eons did these perverted and degenerate rites symbolize? Kane knew that these people aped the rituals of their former masters in their crude way, and even in his despair he found time to shudder at the thought of what those original rites must have been.

Now a fearful shape rose up beside the altar where lay the silent girl. A tall figure, entirely naked save for a hideous painted mask on his face and a great

head-dress of waving plumes. The drone of the chant sank low for an instant, then rose up again to wilder heights. Was it the vibrations of their song that made the floor quiver beneath Kane's feet?

Kane with shaking fingers began to unbar the door. Naught to do now but to rush out barehanded and die beside the girl he could not save. Then his gaze was blocked by a giant form which shouldered in front of the door. A huge man, a chief by his bearing and apparel, leaned idly against the wall as he watched the proceedings. Kane's heart gave a great leap. This was too good to be true. Thrust in the chief's girdle was the pistol that he himself had carried! He knew that his weapons must have been divided among his captors. This pistol meant nothing to the chief, but he must have been taken by its strange shape and was carrying it as savages will wear useless trinkets. Or perhaps he thought it a sort of war-club. At any rate, there it was. And again floor and building seemed to tremble.

Kane pulled the door silently inward and crouched in the shadows behind his victim like a great brooding tiger.

His brain worked swiftly and formulated his plan of action. There was a dagger in the girdle beside the pistol; the chief's back was turned squarely to him and he must strike from the left to reach the heart and silence him quickly. All this passed through Solomon's brain in a flash as he crouched.

The chief was not aware of his foe's presence until Kane's lean right hand shot across his shoulder and clamped on his mouth, jerking him backward. At the same instant the Puritan's left hand tore the dagger from the girdle and with one desperate plunge sank the keen blade home.

The warrior crumpled without a sound and in an instant Kane's pistol was in its owner's hand. A second's investigation showed that it was still loaded and the flint still in place. No one had seen the swift murder. Those few who stood near the doorway were all facing the Black

Altar, enwrapped in the drama, which was there unfolding. As Kane stepped across the corpse, the chanting of the dancers ceased abruptly. In the instant of silence which followed, Kane heard, above the pounding of his own pulse, the night wind rustle the death-like plumes of the masked horror beside the altar. A rim of the moon glowed above the spire. Then, from high up on the face of the Tower of Death, a deep voice boomed out in a strange chant. Mayhap the priest who spoke behind the skull knew not what his words meant, but Kane believed that he at least mimicked the very intonation of those long-dead Atlantean acolytes. Deep, mystic, resonant the voice sounded out, like the endless flowing of long tides on the broad white beaches.

The masked one beside the altar drew himself up to his great height and raised a long, glimmering blade. Kane recognized his own sword, even as he levelled his pistol and fired--not at the masked priest but full at the skull which gleamed in the face of the tower. For in one blinding flash of intuition he remembered the dying Atlantean's words: "Their brains hinge on the skull of Nakura!"

Simultaneously with the crack of the pistol came a shattering crash; the dry skull flew into a thousand pieces and vanished, and behind it the chant broke off short in a death shriek. The rapier fell from the hand of the masked priest and many of the dancers crumpled to the earth, the others halting short, spellbound. Through the deathly silence which reigned for an instant, Kane rushed toward the altar; then all Hell broke loose.

A babel of bestial screams rose to the shuddering stars. For centuries only their faith in the dead Nakura had held together the blood-drenched brains of the savage Negari. Now their symbol had vanished, had been blasted into nothing before their eyes. It was to them as if the skies had split, the moon fallen and the world ended. All the red visions which lurked at the backs of their corroded brains leaped into fearful life, all the latent insanity which was their heritage

rose to claim its own, and Kane looked upon a whole nation turned to bellowing maniacs.

Screaming and roaring they turned on each other, men and women, tearing with frenzied fingernails, stabbing with spears with daggers, beating each other with the flaming torches, while over all rose the roar of frantic human beasts.

With clubbed pistol Kane battered his way through the surging, writhing ocean of flesh, to the foot of the altar stairs. Nails raked him, knives slashed at him, torches scorched his garments, but he paid no heed.

Then as he reached the altar, a terrible figure broke from the struggling mass and charged him. Nakari, queen of Negari, crazed as any of her subjects, rushed upon the Englishman with dagger bared and eyes horribly aflame.

"You shall not escape this time!" she was screaming, but before she reached him a great warrior, dripping blood and blind from a gash across his eyes, reeled across her path and lurched into her. She screamed like a wounded cat and struck her dagger into him, and then groping hands closed on her. The blind giant whirled her on high with one dying effort, and her last scream knifed the din of battle as Nakari, last queen of Negari, crashed against the stones of the altar and fell shattered and dead at Kane's feet. Kane sprang up the black steps, worn deep by the feet of myriad priests and victims, and as he came, the masked figure, who had stood like one turned to stone, came suddenly to life. He bent swiftly, caught up the sword he had dropped and thrust savagely at the charging Englishman. But the dynamic quickness of Solomon Kane was such as few men could match. A twist and sway of his steely body and he was inside the thrust, and as the blade slid harmlessly between arm and chest, he brought down the heavy pistol barrel among the waving plumes, crushing headdress, mask and skull with one blow. Then ere he turned to the fainting girl who lay bound on the altar, he flung aside the shattered pistol and snatched his stolen sword from the nerveless hand which

still grasped it, feeling a fierce thrill of renewed confidence at the familiar feel of the hilt. Marilyn lay white and silent, her death-like face turned blindly to the light of the moon which shone calmly down on the frenzied scene. At first Kane thought her to be dead, but his searching fingers detected a faint flutter of pulse. He cut her bonds and lifted her tenderly--only to drop her again and whirl as a hideous, blood-stained figure of insanity came leaping and gibbering up the steps. Full upon Kane's outthrust blade the creature ran, and toppled back into the red swirl below, clawing beast-like at its mortal wound. Then beneath Kane's feet the altar rocked; a sudden tremor hurled him to his knees and his horrified eyes beheld the Tower of Death sway to and fro. Some horror of Nature was taking place, and this fact pierced the crumbling brains of the fiends who fought and screamed below. A new element entered into their shrieking, and then the Tower of Death swayed far out with a terrible and awesome majesty--broke from the rocking crags and--gave way with a thunder of crashing worlds. Great stones and shards of masonry came raining down, bringing death and destruction to hundreds of screaming humans below. One of these stones crashed to pieces on the altar beside Kane, showering him with dust.

"Earthquake!" he gasped, and smitten by this new terror he caught up the senseless girl and plunged recklessly down the cracking steps, hacking and stabbing a way through the crimson whirlpools of bestial humanity that still tore and ravened. The rest was a red nightmare in which Kane's dazed brain refused to record all its horrors. It seemed that for screaming crimson centuries he reeled through narrow winding streets where bellowing, screeching demons battled and died, among titanic walls and black columns that rocked against the sky and crashed to ruin about him, while the earth heaved and trembled beneath his staggering feet and the thunder of crashing towers filled the world.

Gibbering fiends in human shape clutched and clawed at him, to fade

before his flailing sword, and falling stones bruised and battered him. He crouched as he reeled along, covering the girl with his body as best he could, sheltering her alike from blind stone and blinder human.

At last, when it seemed mortal endurance had reached its limit, he saw the great black outer wall of the city loom before him, rent from earth; to parapet and tottering for its fall. He dashed through a crevice, and gathering his efforts, made one last sprint. And scarce was he out of reach than the wall crashed, falling inward like a great black wave.

The night wind was in his face and behind him rose the clamour of the doomed city as Kane staggered down the hill path that trembled beneath his feet.

CHAPTER VII. THE FAITH OF SOLOMON

Dawn lay like a cool white hand on the brow of Solomon Kane. The nightmares faded from his soul as he breathed deep of the morning wind which blew up from the jungle far below his feet--a wind laden with the musk of decaying vegetation. Yet it was like the breath of life to him, for the scents were those of the clean natural disintegration of outdoor things, not the loathsome aura of decadent antiquity that lurks in the walls of eon-old cities--Kane shuddered involuntarily.

He bent over the sleeping girl who lay at his feet, arranged as comfortably as possible with the few soft tree branches he had been able to find for her bed. Now she opened her eyes and stared about wildly for an instant; then as her gaze met the face of Solomon, lighted by one of his rare smiles, she gave a little sob of thankfulness and clung to him.

"Oh, Captain Kane! Have we in truth escaped from yon fearful city? Now it seems all like a dream--after you fell through the secret door in my chamber Nakari later went to your dungeon as she told me--and returned in vile humour. She said you were a fool, for she had offered you the kingdom of the world and you had but insulted her. She

screamed and raved and cursed like one insane and swore that she would yet, alone, build a great empire of Negari.

"Then she turned on me and reviled me, saying that you held me--a slave--in more esteem than a queen and all her glory. And in spite of my pleas she took me across her knees and whipped me until I swooned.

"Afterward I lay half senseless for a long time, and was only dimly aware that men came to Nakari and said that you had escaped. They said you were a sorcerer, for you faded through a solid wall like a ghost. But Nakari killed the men who had brought you from the cell, and for hours she was like a wild beast.

"How long I lay thus I know not. In those terrible rooms and corridors where no natural sunlight ever entered, one lost all track of time. But from the time you were captured by Nakari and the time that I was placed on the altar, at least a day and a night and another day must have passed. It was only a few hours before the sacrifice that word came you had escaped.

"Nakari and her Star-maidens came to prepare me for the rite." At the bare memory of that fearful ordeal she whimpered and hid her face in her hands. "I must have been drugged. I only know that they clothed me in the white robe of the sacrifice and carried me into a great black chamber filled with horrid statues.

"There I lay for a space like one in a trance, while the women performed various strange and shameful rites according to their grim religion. Then I fell into a swoon, and when I emerged I was lying bound on the Black Altar--the torches were tossing and the devotees chanting--behind the Tower of Death the rising moon was beginning to glow--all this I knew faintly, as in a deep dream. And as in a dream I saw the glowing skull high on the tower--and the gaunt, naked priest holding a sword above my heart, then I knew no more. What happened?"

"At about that moment," Kane answered, "I emerged from a building wherein I had wandered by mistake, and blasted their hellish skull to atoms with a pistol ball. Whereupon, all these people, being cursed from birth by demons, and being likewise possessed of devils, fell to slaying one another, in the midst of the tumult an earthquake cometh to pass which shakes the walls down. Then I snatch you up, and running at random, come upon a rent in the outer wall and thereby escape, carrying you, who seem in a swoon.

"Once only you awoke, after I had crossed the Bridge-Across-the-Sky, as the people of Negari called it, which was crumbling beneath our feet by reason of the earthquake. After I had come to these cliffs, but dared not descend them in the darkness, the moon being nigh to setting by that time, you awoke and screamed and clung to me, whereupon I soothed you as best I might, and after a time you fell into a natural sleep."

"And now what?" asked the girl.

"England!" Kane's deep eyes lighted at the word. "I find it hard to remain in the land of my birth for more than a month at a time; yet though I am cursed with the wanderlust, 'tis a name which ever rouses a glow in my bosom. And how of you, child?"

"Oh heaven!" she cried, clasping her small hands. "Home! Something of which to be dreamed--never attained, I fear. Oh Captain Kane, how shall we gain through all the vast leagues of jungle which lie between this place and the coast?"

"Marylin," said Kane gently, stroking her curly hair, "methinks you lack somewhat in faith, both in Providence and in me. Nay, alone I am a weak creature, having no strength or might in me; yet in times past hath God made me a great vessel of wrath and a sword of deliverance. And, I trust, shall do so again.

"Look you, little Marylin: in the last few hours as it were, we have seen the passing of an evil race and the fall of a

foul empire. Men died by thousands about us, and the earth rose beneath our feet, hurling down towers that broke the heavens; yea, death fell about us in a red rain, yet we escaped unscathed.

"Therein is--more than the hand of man! Nay, a Power--the mightiest Power! That which guided me across the world, straight to that demon city--which led me to your chamber--which aided me to escape again and led me to the one man in all the city who would give the information I must have, the strange, evil priest of an elder race who lay dying in a subterranean cell--and which guided me to the outer wall, as I ran blindly and at random--for should I have come under the cliffs which formed the rest of the wall, we had surely perished. That same Power brought us safely out of the dying city, and safe across the rocking bridge--which shattered and sundered down into the chasm just as my feet touched solid earth!

"Think you that having led me this far, and accomplished such wonders, the Power will strike us down now? Nay! Evil flourishes and rules in the cities of men and the waste places of the world, but anon the great giant that is God rises and smites for the righteous, and they lay faith him.

"I say this: this cliff shall we descend in safety, and yon dank jungle traverse in safety, and it is as sure that in old Devon your people shall clasp you again to their bosom, as that you stand here." And now for the first time Marylin smiled, with the quick eagerness of a normal young girl, and Kane sighed in relief. Already the ghosts were fading from her haunted eyes, and Kane looked to the day when her horrible experiences should be as a dimming dream. One glance he flung behind him, where beyond the scowling hills the lost city of Negari lay shattered and silent, amid the ruins of her own walls and the fallen crags which had kept her invincible so long, but which had at last betrayed her to her doom.

A momentary pang smote him as he thought of the myriad of crushed, still

forms lying amid those ruins; then the blasting memory of their evil crimes surged over him and his eyes hardened.

"And it shall come to pass, that he who fleeth from the noise of the fear shall fall into the pit; and he that cometh up out of the midst of the pit shall be taken in the snare; for the windows from on high are open, and the foundations of the earth do shake.

"For Thou hast made of a city an heap; of a defended city a ruin; a palace of strangers to be no city; it shall never be built.

"Moreover, the multitude of tiny strangers shall be like small dust and the multitude of the terrible ones shall be as chaff that passeth suddenly away; yea, it shall be at an instant suddenly.

"Stay yourselves and wonder; cry ye out and cry; they are drunken but not with wine; they stagger but not with strong drink.

"Verily, Marylin," said Kane with a sigh, "with mine own eyes have I seen the prophecies of Isaiah come to pass. They were drunken but not with wine. Nay, blood was their drink and in that red flood they dipped deep and terribly."

Then taking the girl by the hand he started toward the edge of the cliff. At this very point had he ascended in the night--how long ago it seemed.

Kane's clothing hung in tatters about him. He was torn, scratched and bruised. But in his eyes shone the clear calm light of serenity as the sun came up, flooding cliffs and jungle with a golden light that was like a promise of joy and happiness.

THE END

JAMES PUREFOY



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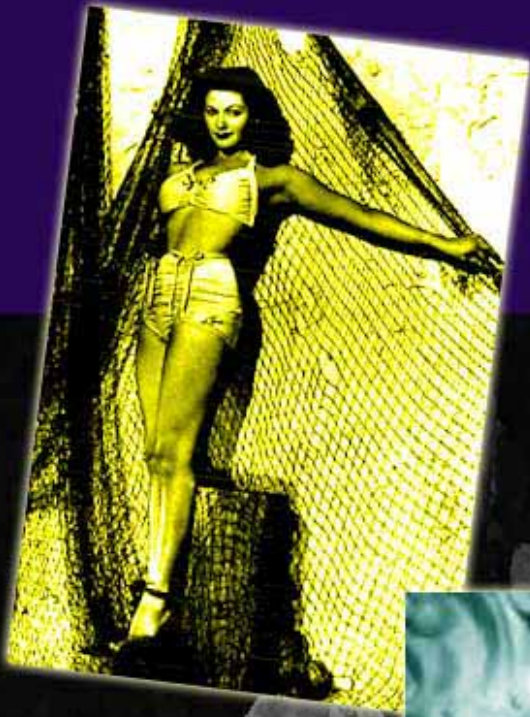
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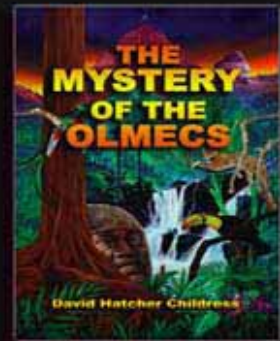
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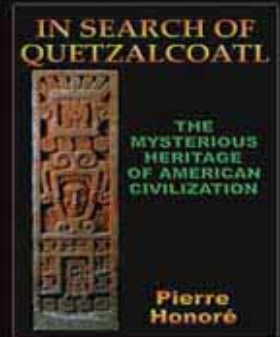
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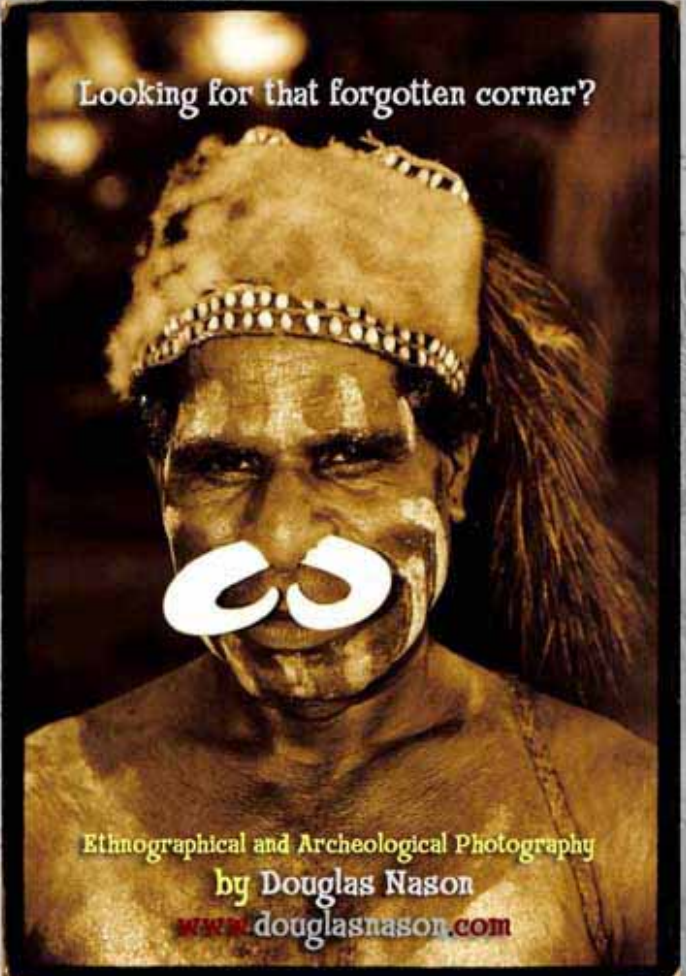
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SAMUEL TAYLOR
COLERIDGE



CHRISTABEL

PART I

'Tis the middle of night by the castle clock
And the owls have awakened the crowing cock;
 Tu-whit!- Tu-who!
And hark, again! the crowing cock,
 How drowsily it crew.
 Sir Leoline, the Baron rich,
 Hath a toothless mastiff, which
 From her kennel beneath the rock
 Maketh answer to the clock,
Four for the quarters, and twelve for the hour;
Ever and aye, by shine and shower,
Sixteen short howls, not over loud;
Some say, she sees my lady's shroud.

Is the night chilly and dark?
The night is chilly, but not dark.
The thin gray cloud is spread on high,
It covers but not hides the sky.
The moon is behind, and at the full;
And yet she looks both small and dull.
The night is chill, the cloud is gray:
'T is a month before the month of May,
And the Spring comes slowly up this way.
The lovely lady, Christabel,
Whom her father loves so well,
What makes her in the wood so late,
A furlong from the castle gate?
She had dreams all yesternight
Of her own betrothed knight;
And she in the midnight wood will pray
For the weal of her lover that's far away.

She stole along, she nothing spoke,
The sighs she heaved were soft and low,
And naught was green upon the oak,
 But moss and rarest mistletoe:
She kneels beneath the huge oak tree,
And in silence prayeth she.

The lady sprang up suddenly,
The lovely lady, Christabel!
It moaned as near, as near can be,
But what it is she cannot tell.-
On the other side it seems to be,
Of the huge, broad-breasted, old oak tree.
The night is chill; the forest bare;
Is it the wind that moaneth bleak?
There is not wind enough in the air
To move away the ringlet curl
From the lovely lady's cheek-
There is not wind enough to twirl
The one red leaf, the last of its clan,
That dances as often as dance it can,
Hanging so light, and hanging so high,
On the topmost twig that looks up at the sky.

Hush, beating heart of Christabell
Jesu, Maria, shield her well!
She folded her arms beneath her cloak,
And stole to the other side of the oak.
What sees she there?

There she sees a damsel bright,
Dressed in a silken robe of white,
That shadowy in the moonlight shone:
The neck that made that white robe wan,
Her stately neck, and arms were bare;
Her blue-veined feet unsandaled were;
And wildly glittered here and there
The gems entangled in her hair.
I guess, 't was frightful there to see
A lady so richly clad as she-
Beautiful exceedingly!

'Mary mother, save me now!
Said Christabel, 'and who art thou?'

The lady strange made answer meet,
And her voice was faint and sweet:-
'Have pity on my sore distress,
I scarce can speak for weariness:
Stretch forth thy hand, and have no fear!
Said Christabel, 'How camest thou here?'
And the lady, whose voice was faint and sweet,
Did thus pursue her answer meet:-
'My sire is of a noble line,
And my name is Geraldine:
Five warriors seized me yesternorn,
Me, even me, a maid forlorn:
They choked my cries with force and fright,
And tied me on a palfrey white.
The palfrey was as fleet as wind,
And they rode furiously behind.
They spurred amain, their steeds were white:
And once we crossed the shade of night.
As sure as Heaven shall rescue me,
I have no thought what men they be;
Nor do I know how long it is
(For I have lain entranced, I wis)
Since one, the tallest of the five,
Took me from the palfrey's back,
A weary woman, scarce alive.
Some muttered words his comrades spoke:
He placed me underneath this oak;
He swore they would return with haste;
Whither they went I cannot tell-
I thought I heard, some minutes past,
Sounds as of a castle bell.
Stretch forth thy hand,' thus ended she,
'And help a wretched maid to flee.'

Then Christabel stretched forth her hand,
And comforted fair Geraldine:

'O well, bright dame, may you command
The service of Sir Leoline;
And gladly our stout chivalry
Will he send forth, and friends withal,
To guide and guard you safe and free
Home to your noble father's hall.'

She rose: and forth with steps they passed
That strove to be, and were not, fast.
Her gracious stars the lady blest,
And thus spake on sweet Christabel:
'All our household are at rest,
The hall is silent as the cell;
Sir Leoline is weak in health,
And may not well awakened be,
But we will move as if in stealth;
And I beseech your courtesy,
This night, to share your couch with me.'

They crossed the moat, and Christabel
Took the key that fitted well;
A little door she opened straight,
All in the middle of the gate;
The gate that was ironed within and without,
Where an army in battle array had marched out.
The lady sank, belike through pain,
And Christabel with might and main
Lifted her up, a weary weight,
Over the threshold of the gate:
Then the lady rose again,
And moved, as she were not in pain.

So, free from danger, free from fear,
They crossed the court: right glad they were,
And Christabel devoutly cried
To the Lady by her side;
'Praise we the Virgin all divine,
Who hath rescued thee from thy distress!
'Alas, alas!' said Geraldine,
'I cannot speak for weariness.'
So, free from danger, free from fear,
They crossed the court: right glad they were.

Outside her kennel the mastiff old
Lay fast asleep, in moonshine cold.
The mastiff old did not awake,
Yet she an angry moan did make.
And what can ail the mastiff bitch?
Never till now she uttered yell
Beneath the eye of Christabel.
Perhaps it is the owlet's scritch:
For what can ail the mastiff bitch?

They passed the hall, that echoes still,
Pass as lightly as you will.
The brands were flat, the brands were dying,

Amid their own white ashes lying;
But when the lady passed, there came
A tongue of light, a fit of flame;
And Christabel saw the lady's eye,
And nothing else saw she thereby,
Save the boss of the shield of Sir Leoline tall,
Which hung in a murky old niche in the wall.
'O softly tread,' said Christabel,
'My father seldom sleepeth well.'
Sweet Christabel her feet doth bare,
And, jealous of the listening air,
They steal their way from stair to stair,
Now in glimmer, and now in gloom,
And now they pass the Baron's room,
As still as death, with stifled breath!
And now have reached her chamber door;
And now doth Geraldine press down
The rushes of the chamber floor.

The moon shines dim in the open air,
And not a moonbeam enters here.
But they without its light can see
The chamber carved so curiously,
Carved with figures strange and sweet,
All made out of the carver's brain,
For a lady's chamber meet:
The lamp with twofold silver chain
Is fastened to an angel's feet.
The silver lamp burns dead and dim;
But Christabel the lamp will trim.
She trimmed the lamp, and made it bright,
And left it swinging to and fro,
While Geraldine, in wretched plight,
Sank down upon the floor below.
'O weary lady, Geraldine,
I pray you, drink this cordial wine!
It is a wine of virtuous powers;
My mother made it of wild flowers.'

'And will your mother pity me,
Who am a maiden most forlorn?'
Christabel answered- 'Woe is me!
She died the hour that I was born.
I have heard the gray-haired friar tell,
How on her death-bed she did say,
That she should hear the castle-bell
Strike twelve upon my wedding-day.
O mother dear! that thou wert here!'
'I would,' said Geraldine, 'she were!'

But soon, with altered voice, said she-
'Off, wandering mother! Peak and pine!
I have power to bid thee flee.'
Alas! what ails poor Geraldine?
Why stares she with unsettled eye?
Can she the bodiless dead espy?
And why with hollow voice cries she,
'Off, woman, off! this hour is mine-

Though thou her guardian spirit be,
Off, woman. off! 't is given to me.'

Then Christabel knelt by the lady's side,
And raised to heaven her eyes so blue-
'Alas!' said she, 'this ghastly ride-
Dear lady! it hath wildered you!
The lady wiped her moist cold brow,
And faintly said, 'T is over now!
Again the wild-flower wine she drank:
Her fair large eyes 'gan glitter bright,
And from the floor, whereon she sank,
The lofty lady stood upright:
She was most beautiful to see,
Like a lady of a far countree.

And thus the lofty lady spake-
'All they, who live in the upper sky,
Do love you, holy Christabell
And you love them, and for their sake,
And for the good which me befell,
Even I in my degree will try,
Fair maiden, to requite you well.
But now unrobe yourself; for I
Must pray, ere yet in bed I lie.'

Quoth Christabel, 'So let it be!
And as the lady bade, did she.
Her gentle limbs did she undress
And lay down in her loveliness.

But through her brain, of weal and woe,
So many thoughts moved to and fro,
That vain it were her lids to close;
So half-way from the bed she rose,
And on her elbow did recline,
To look at the lady Geraldine.
Beneath the lamp the lady bowed,
And slowly rolled her eyes around;
Then drawing in her breath aloud,
Like one that shuddered, she unbound
The cincture from beneath her breast:
Her silken robe, and inner vest,
Dropped to her feet, and full in view,
Behold! her bosom and half her side-
A sight to dream of, not to tell!
O shield her! shield sweet Christabell

Yet Geraldine nor speaks nor stirs:
Ah! what a stricken look was hers!
Deep from within she seems half-way
To lift some weight with sick assay,
And eyes the maid and seeks delay;
Then suddenly, as one defied,
Collects herself in scorn and pride,
And lay down by the maiden's side!
And in her arms the maid she took,
Ah, well-a-day!

And with low voice and doleful look
These words did say:

'In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell,
Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabell
Thou knowest to-night, and wilt know to-morrow,
This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow;
But vainly thou warrest,
For this is alone in
Thy power to declare,
That in the dim forest
Thou heard'st a low moaning,
And found'st a bright lady, surpassingly fair:
And didst bring her home with thee, in love and in charity,
To shield her and shelter her from the damp air.'

It was a lovely sight to see
The lady Christabel, when she
Was praying at the old oak tree.
Amid the jagged shadows
Of mossy leafless boughs,
Kneeling in the moonlight,
To make her gentle vows;
Her slender palms together prest,
Heaving sometimes on her breast;
Her face resigned to bliss or bale-
Her face, oh, call it fair not pale,
And both blue eyes more bright than clear.
Each about to have a tear.
With open eyes (ah, woe is me!)
Asleep, and dreaming fearfully,
Fearfully dreaming, yet, I wis,
Dreaming that alone, which is-
O sorrow and shame! Can this be she,
The lady, who knelt at the old oak tree?
And lo! the worker of these harms,
That holds the maiden in her arms,
Seems to slumber still and mild,
As a mother with her child.

A star hath set, a star hath risen,
O Geraldine! since arms of thine
Have been the lovely lady's prison.
O Geraldine! one hour was thine-
Thou'st had thy will! By tarn and rill,
The night-birds all that hour were still.
But now they are jubilant anew,
From cliff and tower, tu-who! tu-who!
Tu-who! tu-who! from wood and fell!

And see! the lady Christabel
Gathers herself from out her trance;
Her limbs relax, her countenance
Grows sad and soft; the smooth thin lids
Close o'er her eyes; and tears she sheds-
Large tears that leave the lashes bright!

And oft the while she seems to smile
As infants at a sudden light!
Yea, she doth smile, and she doth weep,
Like a youthful hermitess,
Beauteous in a wilderness,
Who, praying always, prays in sleep.
And, if she move unquietly,
Perchance, 't is but the blood so free
Comes back and tingles in her feet.
No doubt, she hath a vision sweet.
What if her guardian spirit 't were,
What if she knew her mother near?
But this she knows, in joys and woes,
That saints will aid if men will call:
For the blue sky bends over all.

PART II

Each matin bell, the Baron saith,
Knells us back to a world of death.
These words Sir Leoline first said,
When he rose and found his lady dead:
These words Sir Leoline will say
Many a morn to his dying day!

And hence the custom and law began
That still at dawn the sacristan,
Who duly pulls the heavy bell,
Five and forty beads must tell
Between each stroke- a warning knell,
Which not a soul can choose but hear
From Bratha Head to Wyndermere.
Saith Bracy the bard, 'So let it knell!
And let the drowsy sacristan
Still count as slowly as he can!
There is no lack of such, I ween,
As well fill up the space between.
In Langdale Pike and Witch's Lair,
And Dungeon-ghyll so foully rent,
With ropes of rock and bells of air
Three sinful sextons' ghosts are pent,
Who all give back, one after t' other,
The death-note to their living brother;
And oft too, by the knell offended,
Just as their one! two! three! is ended,
The devil mocks the doleful tale
With a merry peal from Borrowdale.

The air is still! through mist and cloud
That merry peal comes ringing loud;
And Geraldine shakes off her dread,
And rises lightly from the bed;
Puts on her silken vestments white,
And tricks her hair in lovely plight,
And nothing doubting of her spell
Awakens the lady Christabel.
'Sleep you, sweet lady Christabel?
I trust that you have rested well.'

And Christabel awoke and spied
The same who lay down by her side-
O rather say, the same whom she
Raised up beneath the old oak tree!
Nay, fairer yet! and yet more fair!
For she belike hath drunken deep
Of all the blessedness of sleep!
And while she spake, her looks, her air,
Such gentle thankfulness declare,
That (so it seemed) her girded vests
Grew tight beneath her heaving breasts.
'Sure I have sinned!' said Christabel,
'Now heaven be praised if all be well!
And in low faltering tones, yet sweet,
Did she the lofty lady greet
With such perplexity of mind
As dreams too lively leave behind.

So quickly she rose, and quickly arrayed
Her maiden limbs, and having prayed
That He, who on the cross did groan,
Might wash away her sins unknown,
She forthwith led fair Geraldine
To meet her sire, Sir Leoline.
The lovely maid and the lady tall
Are pacing both into the hall,
And pacing on through page and groom,
Enter the Baron's presence-room.

The Baron rose, and while he prest
His gentle daughter to his breast,
With cheerful wonder in his eyes
The lady Geraldine espies,
And gave such welcome to the same,
As might beseem so bright a dame!

But when he heard the lady's tale,
And when she told her father's name,
Why waxed Sir Leoline so pale,
Murmuring o'er the name again,
Lord Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine?
Alas! they had been friends in youth;
But whispering tongues can poison truth;
And constancy lives in realms above;
And life is thorny; and youth is vain;
And to be wroth with one we love
Doth work like madness in the brain.
And thus it chanced, as I divine,
With Roland and Sir Leoline.
Each spake words of high disdain
And insult to his heart's best brother:
They parted- ne'er to meet again!
But never either found another
To free the hollow heart from paining-
They stood aloof, the scars remaining,
Like cliffs which had been rent asunder;
A dreary sea now flows between.

But neither heat, nor frost, nor thunder,
Shall wholly do away, I ween,
The marks of that which once hath been.
Sir Leoline, a moment's space,
Stood gazing on the damsel's face:
And the youthful Lord of Tryermaine
Came back upon his heart again.

O then the Baron forgot his age,
His noble heart swelled high with rage;
He swore by the wounds in Jesu's side
He would proclaim it far and wide,
With trump and solemn heraldry,
That they, who thus had wronged the dame
Were base as spotted infamy!
'And if they dare deny the same,
My herald shall appoint a week,
And let the recreant traitors seek
My tourney court- that there and then
I may dislodge their reptile souls
From the bodies and forms of men!
He spake: his eye in lightning rolls!
For the lady was ruthlessly seized; and he kenned
In the beautiful lady the child of his friend!

And now the tears were on his face,
And fondly in his arms he took
Fair Geraldine who met the embrace,
Prolonging it with joyous look.
Which when she viewed, a vision fell
Upon the soul of Christabel,
The vision of fear, the touch and pain!
She shrunk and shuddered, and saw again-
(Ah, woe is me! Was it for thee,
Thou gentle maid! such sights to see?)
Again she saw that bosom old,
Again she felt that bosom cold,
And drew in her breath with a hissing sound:
Whereat the Knight turned wildly round,
And nothing saw, but his own sweet maid
With eyes upraised, as one that prayed.

The touch, the sight, had passed away,
And in its stead that vision blest,
Which comforted her after-rest,
While in the lady's arms she lay,
Had put a rapture in her breast,
And on her lips and o'er her eyes
Spread smiles like light!
With new surprise,
'What ails then my beloved child?'
The Baron said- His daughter mild
Made answer, 'All will yet be well!'
I ween, she had no power to tell
Aught else: so mighty was the spell.

Yet he who saw this Geraldine,
Had deemed her sure a thing divine.

Such sorrow with such grace she blended,
As if she feared she had offended
Sweet Christabel, that gentle maid!
And with such lowly tones she prayed
She might be sent without delay
Home to her father's mansion.

'Nay!

Nay, by my soul!' said Leoline,
'Hoi Bracy the bard, the charge be thine!
Go thou, with music sweet and loud,
And take two steeds with trappings proud,
And take the youth whom thou lov'st best
To bear thy harp, and learn thy song,
And clothe you both in solemn vest,
And over the mountains haste along,
Lest wandering folk, that are abroad,
Detain you on the valley road.

'And when he has crossed the Irthing flood,
My merry bard! he hastes, he hastes
Up Knorren Moor, through Halegarth Wood,
And reaches soon that castle good
Which stands and threatens Scotland's wastes.

'Bard Bracy! bard Bracy! your horses are fleet,
Ye must ride up the hall, your music so sweet,
More loud than your horses' echoing feet!
And loud and loud to Lord Roland call,
Thy daughter is safe in Langdale hall!
Thy beautiful daughter is safe and free-
Sir Leoline greets thee thus through me.
He bids thee come without delay
With all thy numerous array;
And take thy lovely daughter home:
And he will meet thee on the way
With all his numerous array
White with their panting palfreys' foam:
And, by mine honor! I will say,
That I repent me of the day
When I spake words of fierce disdain
To Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine!
- For since that evil hour hath flown,
Many a summer's sun hath shone;
Yet ne'er found I a friend again
Like Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine.'

The lady fell, and clasped his knees,
Her face upraised, her eyes o'erflowing;
And Bracy replied, with faltering voice,
His gracious hail on all bestowing;
'Thy words, thou sire of Christabel,
Are sweeter than my harp can tell;
Yet might I gain a boon of thee,
This day my journey should not be,
So strange a dream hath come to me;
That I had vowed with music loud

To clear yon wood from thing unblest,
Warned by a vision in my rest!
For in my sleep I saw that dove,
That gentle bird, whom thou dost love,
And call'st by thy own daughter's name-
Sir Leoline! I saw the same,
Fluttering, and uttering fearful moan,
Among the green herbs in the forest alone.
Which when I saw and when I heard,
I wondered what might ail the bird;
For nothing near it could I see,
Save the grass and herbs underneath the old tree.
And in my dream methought I went
To search out what might there be found;
And what the sweet bird's trouble meant,
That thus lay fluttering on the ground.
I went and peered, and could descry
No cause for her distressful cry;
But yet for her dear lady's sake
I stooped, methought, the dove to take,
When lo! I saw a bright green snake
Coiled around its wings and neck.
Green as the herbs on which it couched,
Close by the dove's its head it crouched;
And with the dove it heaves and stirs,
Swelling its neck as she swelled hers!
I woke; it was the midnight hour,
The clock was echoing in the tower;
But though my slumber was gone by,
This dream it would not pass away-
It seems to live upon my eye!
And thence I vowed this self-same day
With music strong and saintly song
To wander through the forest bare,
Lest aught unholy loiter there.'

Thus Bracy said: the Baron, the while,
Half-listening heard him with a smile;
Then turned to Lady Geraldine,
His eyes made up of wonder and love;
And said in courtly accents fine,
'Sweet maid, Lord Roland's beauteous dove,
With arms more strong than harp or song,
Thy sire and I will crush the snake!
He kissed her forehead as he spake,
And Geraldine in maiden wise
Casting down her large bright eyes,
With blushing cheek and courtesy fine
She turned her from Sir Leoline;
Softly gathering up her train,
That o'er her right arm fell again;
And folded her arms across her chest,
And couched her head upon her breast,
And looked askance at Christabel-
Jesu, Maria, shield her well!

A snake's small eye blinks dull and shy,
And the lady's eyes they shrunk in her head,

Each shrunk up to a serpent's eye,
And with somewhat of malice, and more of dread,
At Christabel she looked askance!-
One moment- and the sight was fled!
But Christabel in dizzy trance
Stumbling on the unsteady ground
Shuddered aloud, with a hissing sound;
And Geraldine again turned round,
And like a thing that sought relief,
Full of wonder and full of grief,
She rolled her large bright eyes divine
Wildly on Sir Leoline.

The maid, alas! her thoughts are gone,
She nothing sees- no sight but one!
The maid, devoid of guile and sin,
I know not how, in fearful wise,
So deeply had she drunken in
That look, those shrunken serpent eyes,
That all her features were resigned
To this sole image in her mind:
And passively did imitate
That look of dull and treacherous hate!
And thus she stood, in dizzy trance,
Still picturing that look askance
With forced unconscious sympathy
Full before her father's view-
As far as such a look could be
In eyes so innocent and blue!

And when the trance was o'er, the maid
Paused awhile, and inly prayed:
Then falling at the Baron's feet,
'By my mother's soul do I entreat
That thou this woman send away!
She said: and more she could not say;
For what she knew she could not tell,
O'er-mastered by the mighty spell.
Why is thy cheek so wan and wild,
Sir Leoline? Thy only child
Lies at thy feet, thy joy, thy pride.
So fair, so innocent, so mild;
The same, for whom thy lady died!
O by the pangs of her dear mother
Think thou no evil of thy child!
For her, and thee, and for no other,
She prayed the moment ere she died:
Prayed that the babe for whom she died,
Might prove her dear lord's joy and pride!
That prayer her deadly pangs beguiled,
Sir Leoline!
And wouldst thou wrong thy only child,
Her child and thine?

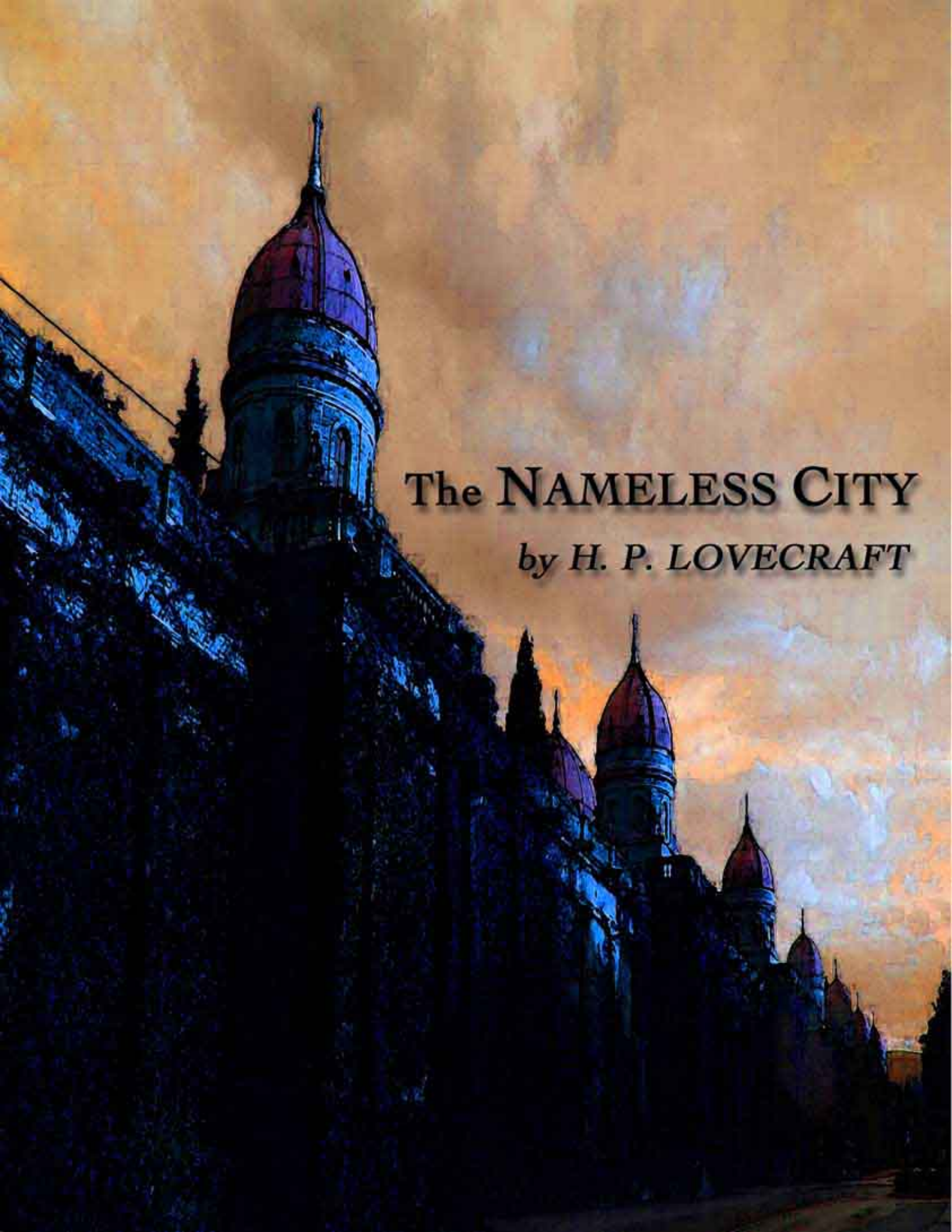
Within the Baron's heart and brain
If thoughts, like these, had any share,
They only swelled his rage and pain,
And did but work confusion there.

His heart was cleft with pain and rage,
His cheeks they quivered, his eyes were wild,
Dishonored thus in his old age;
Dishonored by his only child,
And all his hospitality
To the insulted daughter of his friend
By more than woman's jealousy
Brought thus to a disgraceful end-
He rolled his eye with stern regard
Upon the gentle minstrel bard,
And said in tones abrupt, austere-
'Why, Bracy! dost thou loiter here?
I bade thee hence!' The bard obeyed;
And turning from his own sweet maid,
The aged knight, Sir Leoline,
Led forth the lady Geraldine!

THE CONCLUSION TO PART II

A little child, a limber elf,
Singing, dancing to itself,
A fairy thing with red round cheeks,
That always finds, and never seeks,
Makes such a vision to the sight
As fills a father's eyes with light;
And pleasures flow in so thick and fast
Upon his heart, that he at last
Must needs express his love's excess
With words of unmeant bitterness.
Perhaps 'tis pretty to force together
Thoughts so all unlike each other;
To mutter and mock a broken charm,
To dally with wrong that does no harm.
Perhaps 'tis tender too and pretty
At each wild word to feel within
A sweet recoil of love and pity,
And what, if in a world of sin
(O sorrow and shame should this be true!)
Such giddiness of heart and brain
Comes seldom save from rage and pain,
So talks as it's most used to do.

THE END



The NAMELESS CITY
by H. P. LOVECRAFT

When I drew nigh the nameless city I knew it was accursed. I was traveling in a parched and terrible valley under the moon, and afar I saw it protruding uncannily above the sands as parts of a corpse may protrude from an ill-made grave. Fear spoke from the age-worn stones of this hoary survivor of the deluge, this great-grandfather of the eldest pyramid; and a viewless aura repelled me and bade me retreat from antique and sinister secrets that no man should see, and no man else had dared to see.

Remote in the desert of Araby lies the nameless city, crumbling and inarticulate, its low walls nearly hidden by the sands of uncounted ages. It must have been thus before the first stones of Memphis were laid, and while the bricks of Babylon were yet unbaked. There is no legend so old as to give it a name, or to recall that it was ever alive; but it is told of in whispers around campfires and muttered about by grandams in the tents of sheiks so that all the tribes shun it without wholly knowing why. It was of this place that Abdul Alhazred the mad poet dreamed of the night before he sang his unexplained couplet:

*That is not dead which can eternal lie,
And with strange aeons death may die.*

I should have known that the Arabs had good reason for shunning the nameless city, the city told of in strange tales but seen by no living man, yet I defied them and went into the untrodden waste with my camel. I alone have seen it, and that is why no other face bears such hideous lines of fear as mine; why no other man shivers so horribly when the night wind rattles the windows. When I came upon it in the ghastly stillness of unending sleep it looked at me, chilly from the rays of a cold moon amidst the desert's heat. And as I returned its look I forgot my triumph at finding it, and stopped still with my camel to wait for the dawn.

For hours I waited, till the east grew grey and the stars faded, and the grey turned to roseate light edged with gold. I heard a moaning and saw a storm of sand stirring among the antique stones though the sky was clear and the vast reaches of desert still. Then suddenly above the desert's far rim came the blazing edge of the sun, seen

through the tiny sandstorm which was passing away, and in my fevered state I fancied that from some remote depth there came a crash of musical metal to hail the fiery disc as Memnon hails it from the banks of the Nile. My ears rang and my imagination seethed as I led my camel slowly across the sand to that unvoiced place; that place which I alone of living men had seen.

In and out amongst the shapeless foundations of houses and places I wandered, finding never a carving or inscription to tell of these men, if men they were, who built this city and dwelt therein so long ago. The antiquity of the spot was unwholesome, and I longed to encounter some sign or device to prove that the city was indeed fashioned by mankind. There were certain proportions and dimensions in the ruins which I did not like. I had with me many tools, and dug much within the walls of the obliterated edifices; but progress was slow, and nothing significant was revealed. When night and the moon returned I felt a chill wind which brought new fear, so that I did not dare to remain in the city. And as I went outside the antique walls to sleep, a small sighing sandstorm gathered behind me, blowing over the grey stones though the moon was bright and most of the desert still.

I awakened just at dawn from a pageant of horrible dreams, my ears ringing as from some metallic peal. I saw the sun peering redly through the last gusts of a little sandstorm that hovered over the nameless city, and marked the quietness of the rest of the landscape. Once more I ventured within those brooding ruins that swelled beneath the sand like an ogre under a coverlet, and again dug vainly for relics of the forgotten race. At noon I rested, and in the afternoon I spent much time tracing the walls and bygone streets, and the outlines of the nearly vanished buildings. I saw that the city had been mighty indeed, and wondered at the sources of its greatness. To myself I pictured all the splendours of an age so distant that Chaldea could not recall it, and thought of Sarnath the Doomed, that stood in the land of Mnar when mankind was young, and of Ib, that was

carven of grey stone before mankind existed.

All at once I came upon a place where the bedrock rose stark through the sand and formed a low cliff; and here I saw with joy what seemed to promise further traces of the antediluvian people. Hewn rudely on the face of the cliff were the unmistakable facades of several small, squat rock houses or temples; whose interiors might preserve many secrets of ages too remote for calculation, though sandstorms had long effaced any carvings which may have been outside.

Very low and sand-choked were all the dark apertures near me, but I cleared one with my spade and crawled through it, carrying a torch to reveal whatever mysteries it might hold. When I was inside I saw that the cavern was indeed a temple, and beheld plain signs of the race that had lived and worshipped before the desert was a desert. Primitive altars, pillars, and niches, all curiously low, were not absent; and though I saw no sculptures or frescoes, there were many singular stones clearly shaped into symbols by artificial means. The lowness of the chiselled chamber was very strange, for I could hardly kneel upright; but the area was so great that my torch showed only part of it at a time. I shuddered oddly in some of the far corners; for certain altars and stones suggested forgotten rites of terrible, revolting and inexplicable nature and made me wonder what manner of men could have made and frequented such a temple. When I had seen all that the place contained, I crawled out again, avid to find what the temples might yield.

Night had now approached, yet the tangible things I had seen made curiosity stronger than fear, so that I did not flee from the long mooncast shadows that had daunted me when first I saw the nameless city. In the twilight I cleared another aperture and with a new torch crawled into it, finding more vague stones and symbols, though nothing more definite than the other temple had contained. The room was just as low, but much less broad, ending in a very narrow passage crowded with obscure and cryptical shrines. About these shrines I was prying when the

noise of a wind and my camel outside broke through the stillness and drew me forth to see what could have frightened the beast.

The moon was gleaming vividly over the primitive ruins, lighting a dense cloud of sand that seemed blown by a strong but decreasing wind from some point along the cliff ahead of me. I knew it was this chilly, sandy wind which had disturbed the camel and was about to lead him to a place of better shelter when I chanced to glance up and saw that there was no wind atop the cliff. This astonished me and made me fearful again, but I immediately recalled the sudden local winds that I had seen and heard before at sunrise and sunset, and judged it was a normal thing. I decided it came from some rock fissure leading to a cave, and watched the troubled sand to trace it to its source; soon perceiving that it came from the black orifice of a temple a long distance south of me, almost out of sight. Against the choking sand-cloud I plodded toward this temple, which as I neared it loomed larger than the rest, and shewed a doorway far less clogged with caked sand. I would have entered had not the terrific force of the icy wind almost quenched my torch. It poured madly out of the dark door, sighing uncannily as it ruffled the sand and spread among the weird ruins. Soon it grew fainter and the sand grew more and more still, till finally all was at rest again; but a presence seemed stalking among the spectral stones of the city, and when I glanced at the moon it seemed to quiver as though mirrored in unquiet waters. I was more afraid than I could explain, but not enough to dull my thirst for wonder; so as soon as the wind was quite gone I crossed into the dark chamber from which it had come.

This temple, as I had fancied from the outside, was larger than either of those I had visited before; and was presumably a natural cavern since it bore winds from some region beyond. Here I could stand quite upright, but saw that the stones and altars were as low as those in the other temples. On the walls and roof I beheld for the first time some traces of the pictorial art of the ancient race, curious curling streaks of paint that had almost faded or crumbled

away; and on two of the altars I saw with rising excitement a maze of well-fashioned curvilinear carvings. As I held my torch aloft it seemed to me that the shape of the roof was too regular to be natural, and I wondered what the prehistoric cutters of stone had first worked upon. Their engineering skill must have been vast.

Then a brighter flare of the fantastic flame showed that form which I had been seeking, the opening to those remoter abysses whence the sudden wind had blown; and I grew faint when I saw that it was a small and plainly artificial door chiselled in the solid rock. I thrust my torch within, beholding a black tunnel with the roof arching low over a rough flight of very small, numerous and steeply descending steps. I shall always see those steps in my dreams, for I came to learn what they meant. At the time I hardly knew whether to call them steps or mere footholds in a precipitous descent. My mind was whirling with mad thoughts, and the words and warning of Arab prophets seemed to float across the desert from the land that men know to the nameless city that men dare not know. Yet I hesitated only for a moment before advancing through the portal and commencing to climb cautiously down the steep passage, feet first, as though on a ladder.

It is only in the terrible phantasms of drugs or delirium that any other man can have such a descent as mine. The narrow passage led infinitely down like some hideous haunted well, and the torch I held above my head could not light the unknown depths toward which I was crawling. I lost track of the hours and forgot to consult my watch, though I was frightened when I thought of the distance I must have been traversing. There were changes of direction and of steepness; and once I came to a long, low, level passage where I had to wriggle my feet first along the rocky floor, holding torch at arm's length beyond my head. The place was not high enough for kneeling. After that were more of the steep steps, and I was still scrambling down interminably when my failing torch died out. I do not think I noticed it at the time, for when I did notice it I was still holding it above

me as if it were ablaze. I was quite unbalanced with that instinct for the strange and the unknown which had made me a wanderer upon earth and a haunter of far, ancient, and forbidden places.

In the darkness there flashed before my mind fragments of my cherished treasury of daemonic lore; sentences from Alhazred the mad Arab, paragraphs from the apocryphal nightmares of Damascius, and infamous lines from the delirious Image du Monde of Gauthier de Metz. I repeated queer extracts, and muttered of Afrasiab and the daemons that floated with him down the Oxus; later chanting over and over again a phrase from one of Lord Dunsany's tales—"The unreverberate blackness of the abyss." Once when the descent grew amazingly steep I recited something in sing-song from Thomas Moore until I feared to recite more:

*A reservoir of darkness, black
As witches' cauldrons are, when fill'd
With moon-drugs in th' eclipse distill'd
Leaning to look if foot might pass
Down thro' that chasm, I saw, beneath,
As far as vision could explore,
The jetty sides as smooth as glass,
Looking as if just varnish'd o'er
With that dark pitch the Seat of Death
Throws out upon its slimy shore.*

Time had quite ceased to exist when my feet again felt a level floor, and I found myself in a place slightly higher than the rooms in the two smaller temples now so incalculably far above my head. I could not quite stand, but could kneel upright, and in the dark I shuffled and crept hither and thither at random. I soon knew that I was in a narrow passage whose walls were lined with cases of wood having glass fronts. As in that Palaeozoic and abysmal place I felt of such things as polished wood and glass I shuddered at the possible implications. The cases were apparently ranged along each side of the passage at regular intervals, and were oblong and horizontal, hideously like coffins in shape and size. When I tried to move two or three for further examination, I found that they were firmly fastened.

I saw that the passage was a long one, so floundered ahead rapidly in a creeping run that would have seemed horrible had any eye watched me in the

blackness; crossing from side to side occasionally to feel of my surroundings and be sure the walls and rows of cases still stretched on. Man is so used to thinking visually that I almost forgot the darkness and pictured the endless corridor of wood and glass in its low-studded monotony as though I saw it. And then in a moment of indescribable emotion I did see it.

Just when my fancy merged into real sight I cannot tell; but there came a gradual glow ahead, and all at once I knew that I saw the dim outlines of a corridor and the cases, revealed by some unknown subterranean phosphorescence. For a little while all was exactly as I had imagined it, since the glow was very faint; but as I mechanically kept stumbling ahead into the stronger light I realised that my fancy had been but feeble. This hall was no relic of crudity like the temples in the city above, but a monument of the most magnificent and exotic art. Rich, vivid, and daringly fantastic designs and pictures formed a continuous scheme of mural paintings whose lines and colours were beyond description. The cases were of a strange golden wood, with fronts of exquisite glass, and containing the mummified forms of creatures outreaching in grotesqueness the most chaotic dreams of man.

To convey any idea of these monstrosities is impossible. They were of the reptile kind, with body lines suggesting sometimes the crocodile, sometimes the seal, but more often nothing of which either the naturalist or the palaeontologist ever heard. In size they approximated a small man, and their fore-legs bore delicate and evident feet curiously like human hands and fingers. But strangest of all were their heads, which presented a contour violating all known biological principles. To nothing can such things be well compared - in one flash I thought of comparisons as varied as the cat, the bullfrog, the mythic Satyr, and the human being. Not Jove himself had had so colossal and protuberant a forehead, yet the horns and the noselessness and the alligator-like jaw placed things outside all established categories. I debated for a time on the reality of the mummies, half suspecting they were

artificial idols; but soon decided they were indeed some palaeogean species which had lived when the nameless city was alive. To crown their grotesqueness, most of them were gorgeously enrobed in the costliest of fabrics, and lavishly laden with ornaments of gold, jewels, and unknown shining metals.

The importance of these crawling creatures must have been vast, for they held first place among the wild designs on the frescoed walls and ceiling. With matchless skill had the artist drawn them in a world of their own, wherein they had cities and gardens fashioned to suit their dimensions; and I could not help but think that their pictured history was allegorical, perhaps shewing the progress of the race that worshipped them. These creatures, I said to myself, were to men of the nameless city what the she-wolf was to Rome, or some totem-beast is to a tribe of Indians.

Holding this view, I could trace roughly a wonderful epic of the nameless city; the tale of a mighty seacoast metropolis that ruled the world before Africa rose out of the waves, and of its struggles as the sea shrank away, and the desert crept into the fertile valley that held it. I saw its wars and triumphs, its troubles and defeats, and afterwards its terrible fight against the desert when thousands of its people - here represented in allegory by the grotesque reptiles - were driven to chisel their way down though the rocks in some marvellous manner to another world whereof their prophets had told them. It was all vividly weird and realistic, and its connection with the awesome descent I had made was unmistakable. I even recognized the passages.

As I crept along the corridor toward the brighter light I saw later stages of the painted epic - the leaving of the race that had dwelt in the nameless city and the valley around for ten million years; the race whose souls shrank from quitting scenes their bodies had known so long where they had settled as nomads in the earth's youth, hewing in the virgin rock those primal shrines at which they had never ceased to worship. Now that the light was better I studied the pictures more closely and, remembering that the strange

reptiles must represent the unknown men, pondered upon the customs of the nameless city. Many things were peculiar and inexplicable. The civilization, which included a written alphabet, had seemingly risen to a higher order than those immeasurably later civilizations of Egypt and Chaldaea, yet there were curious omissions. I could, for example, find no pictures to represent deaths or funeral customs, save such as were related to wars, violence, and plagues; and I wondered at the reticence shown concerning natural death. It was as though an ideal of immortality had been fostered as a cheering illusion.

Still nearer the end of the passage was painted scenes of the utmost picturesqueness and extravagance: contrasted views of the nameless city in its desertion and growing ruin, and of the strange new realm of paradise to which the race had hewed its way through the stone. In these views the city and the desert valley were shewn always by moonlight, golden nimbus hovering over the fallen walls, and half-revealing the splendid perfection of former times, shown spectrally and elusively by the artist. The paradisaical scenes were almost too extravagant to be believed, portraying a hidden world of eternal day filled with glorious cities and ethereal hills and valleys. At the very last I thought I saw signs of an artistic anticlimax. The paintings were less skillful, and much more bizarre than even the wildest of the earlier scenes. They seemed to record a slow decadence of the ancient stock, coupled with a growing ferocity toward the outside world from which it was driven by the desert. The forms of the people - always represented by the sacred reptiles - appeared to be gradually wasting away, through their spirit as shewn hovering above the ruins by moonlight gained in proportion. Emaciated priests, displayed as reptiles in ornate robes, cursed the upper air and all who breathed it; and one terrible final scene shewed a primitive-looking man, perhaps a pioneer of ancient Irem, the City of Pillars, torn to pieces by members of the elder race. I remember how the Arabs fear the nameless city,

and was glad that beyond this place the grey walls and ceiling were bare.

As I viewed the pageant of mural history I had approached very closely to the end of the low-ceiled hall, and was aware of a gate through which came all of the illuminating phosphorescence. Creeping up to it, I cried aloud in transcendent amazement at what lay beyond; for instead of other and brighter chambers there was only an illimitable void of uniform radiance, such one might fancy when gazing down from the peak of Mount Everest upon a sea of sunlit mist. Behind me was a passage so cramped that I could not stand upright in it; before me was an infinity of subterranean effulgence.

Reaching down from the passage into the abyss was the head of a steep flight of steps - small numerous steps like those of black passages I had traversed - but after a few feet the glowing vapours concealed everything. Swung back open against the left-hand wall of the passage was a massive door of brass, incredibly thick and decorated with fantastic bas-reliefs, which could if closed shut the whole inner world of light away from the vaults and passages of rock. I looked at the step, and for the nonce dared not try them. I touched the open brass door, and could not move it. Then I sank prone to the stone floor, my mind aflame with prodigious reflections which not even a death-like exhaustion could banish.

As I lay still with closed eyes, free to ponder, many things I had lightly noted in the frescoes came back to me with new and terrible significance - scenes representing the nameless city in its heyday - the vegetations of the valley around it, and the distant lands with which its merchants traded. The allegory of the crawling creatures puzzled me by its universal prominence, and I wondered that it would be so closely followed in a pictured history of such importance. In the frescoes the nameless city had been shewn in proportions fitted to the reptiles. I wondered what its real proportions and magnificence had been, and reflected a moment on certain oddities I had noticed in the ruins. I thought curiously of the lowness of the primal temples and of the underground corridor, which were

doubtless hewn thus out of deference to the reptile deities there honoured; though it perforce reduced the worshippers to crawling. Perhaps the very rites here involved crawling in imitation of the creatures. No religious theory, however, could easily explain why the level passages in that awesome descent should be as low as the temples - or lower, since one could not even kneel in it. As I thought of the crawling creatures, whose hideous mummified forms were so close to me, I felt a new throb of fear. Mental associations are curious, and I shrank from the idea that except for the poor primitive man torn to pieces in the last painting, mine was the only human form amidst the many relics and symbols of the primordial life.

But as always in my strange and roving existence, wonder soon drove out fear; for the luminous abyss and what it might contain presented a problem worthy of the greatest explorer. That a weird world of mystery lay far down that flight of peculiarly small steps I could not doubt, and I hoped to find there those human memorials which the painted corridor had failed to give. The frescoes had pictured unbelievable cities, and valleys in this lower realm, and my fancy dwelt on the rich and colossal ruins that awaited me.

My fears, indeed, concerned the past rather than the future. Not even the physical horror of my position in that cramped corridor of dead reptiles and antediluvian frescoes, miles below the world I knew and faced by another world of eery light and mist, could match the lethal dread I felt at the abysmal antiquity of the scene and its soul. An ancientness so vast that measurement is feeble seemed to leer down from the primal stones and rock-hewn temples of the nameless city, while the very latest of the astounding maps in the frescoes shewed oceans and continents that man has forgotten, with only here and there some vaguely familiar outlines. Of what could have happened in the geological ages since the paintings ceased and the death-hating race resentfully succumbed to decay, no man might say. Life had once teemed in these caverns and in the luminous realm beyond; now I was alone with vivid relics, and I trembled to think of the

countless ages through which these relics had kept a silent deserted vigil.

Suddenly there came another burst of that acute fear which had intermittently seized me ever since I first saw the terrible valley and the nameless city under a cold moon, and despite my exhaustion I found myself starting frantically to a sitting posture and gazing back along the black corridor toward the tunnels that rose to the outer world. My sensations were like those which had made me shun the nameless city at night, and were as inexplicable as they were poignant. In another moment, however, I received a still greater shock in the form of a definite sound - the first which had broken the utter silence of these tomb-like depths. It was a deep, low moaning, as of a distant throng of condemned spirits, and came from the direction in which I was staring. Its volume rapidly grew, till it soon reverberated frightfully through the low passage, and at the same time I became conscious of an increasing draught of old air, likewise flowing from the tunnels and the city above. The touch of this air seemed to restore my balance, for I instantly recalled the sudden gusts which had risen around the mouth of the abyss each sunset and sunrise, one of which had indeed revealed the hidden tunnels to me. I looked at my watch and saw that sunrise was near, so bracing myself to resist the gale that was sweeping down to its cavern home as it had swept forth at evening. My fear again waned low, since a natural phenomenon tends to dispel broodings over the unknown.

More and more madly poured the shrieking, moaning night wind into the gulf of the inner earth. I dropped prone again and clutched vainly at the floor for fear of being swept bodily through the open gate into the phosphorescent abyss. Such fury I had not expected, and as I grew aware of an actual slipping of my form toward the abyss I was beset by a thousand new terrors of apprehension and imagination. The malignancy of the blast awakened incredible fancies; once more I compared myself shudderingly to the only human image in that frightful corridor, the man who was torn to pieces by the nameless race, for in the fiendish

clawing of the swirling currents there seemed to abide a vindictive rage all the stronger because it was largely impotent. I think I screamed frantically near the last - I was almost mad - of the howling wind-wraiths. I tried to crawl against the murderous invisible torrent, but I could not even hold my own as I was pushed slowly and inexorably toward the unknown world. Finally reason must have wholly snapped; for I fell babbling over and over that unexplainable couplet of the mad Arab Alhazred, who dreamed of the nameless city:

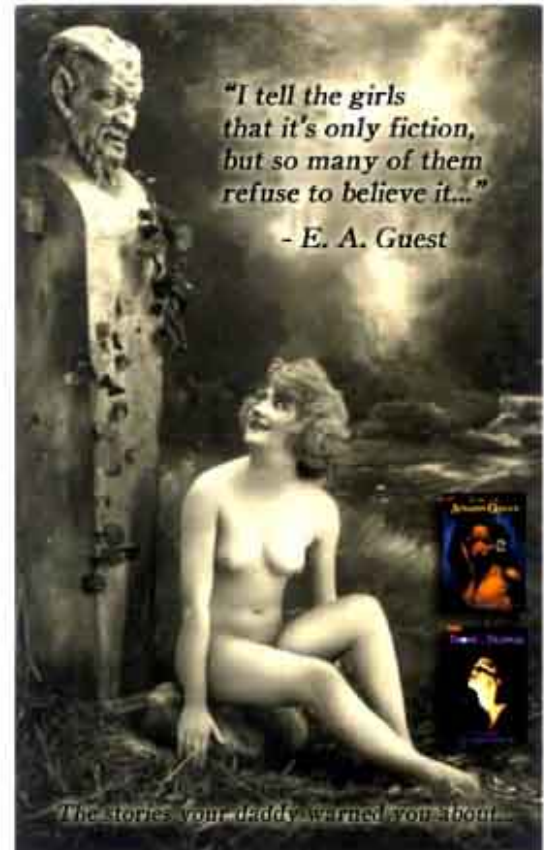
*That is not dead which can eternal lie,
And with strange aeons even death may die.*

Only the grim brooding desert gods know what really took place—what indescribable struggles and scrambles in the dark I endured or what Abaddon guided me back to life, where I must always remember and shiver in the night wind till oblivion - or worse - claims me. Monstrous, unnatural, colossal, was the thing - too far beyond all the ideas of man to be believed except in the silent damnable small hours of the morning when one cannot sleep.

I have said that the fury of the rushing blast was infernal - cacodaemoniacal - and that its voices were hideous with the pent-up viciousness of desolate eternities. Presently these voices, while still chaotic before me, seemed to my beating brain to take articulate form behind me; and down there in the grave of unnumbered aeon-dead antiquities, leagues below the dawn-lit world of men, I heard the ghastly cursing and snarling of strange-tongued fiends. Turning, I saw outlined against the luminous aether of the abyss what could not be seen against the dusk of the corridor - a nightmare horde of rushing devils; hate distorted, grotesquely panoplied, half transparent devils of a race no man might mistake - the crawling reptiles of the nameless city.

And as the wind died away I was plunged into the ghoulish darkness of earth's bowels; for behind the last of the creatures the great brazen door clanged shut with a deafening peal of metallic music whose reverberations swelled out to the distant world to hail the rising sun as Memnon hails it from the banks of the Nile.

THE END



JOHANN LUDWIG FIECK'S



Wake Not The Dead

“Wilt thou for ever sleep? Wilt thou never more awake, my beloved, but henceforth repose for ever from thy short pilgrimage on earth? O yet once again return! and bring back with thee the vivifying dawn of hope to one whose existence hath, since thy departure, been obscured by the dunnest shades. What! dumb? for ever dumb? Thy friend lamenteth, and thou heedest him not? He sheds bitter, scalding tears, and thou reposest unregarding his affliction? He is in despair, and thou no longer openest thy arms to him as an asylum from his grief? Say then, doth the paly shroud become thee better than the bridal veil? Is the chamber of the grave a warmer bed than the couch of love? Is the spectre death more welcome to thy arms than thy enamoured consort? Oh! return, my beloved, return once again to this anxious disconsolate bosom.”

Such were the lamentations which Walter poured forth for his Brunhilda, the partner of his youthful passionate love; thus did he bewail over her grave at the midnight hour, what time the spirit that presides in the troublous atmosphere, sends his legions of monsters through mid-air; so that their shadows, as they flit beneath the moon and across the earth, dart as wild, agitating thoughts that chase each other o'er the sinner's bosom: -- thus did he lament under the tall linden trees by her grave, while his head reclined on the cold stone.

Walter was a powerful lord in Burgundy, who, in his earliest youth, had been smitten with the charms of the fair Brunhilda, a beauty far surpassing in loveliness all her rivals; for her tresses, dark as the raven face of night, streaming over her shoulders, set off to the utmost advantage the beaming lustre of her slender form, and the rich dye of a cheek whose tint was deep and

brilliant as that of the western heaven; her eyes did not resemble those burning orbs whose pale glow gems the vault of night, and whose immeasurable distance fills the soul with deep thoughts of eternity. but rather as the sober beams which cheer this nether world, and which, while they enlighten, kindle the sons of earth to joy and love. Brunhilda became the wife of Walter, and both being equally enamoured and devoted, they abandoned themselves to the enjoyment of a passion that rendered them reckless of aught besides, while it lulled them in a fascinating dream. Their sole apprehension was lest aught should awaken them from a delirium which they prayed might continue for ever. Yet how vain is the wish that would arrest the decrees of destiny! as well might it seek to divert the circling planets from their eternal course. Short was the duration of this phrenzied passion; not that it gradually decayed and subsided into apathy, but death snatched away his blooming victim, and left Walter to a widowed couch. Impetuous, however, as was his first burst of grief, he was not inconsolable, for ere long another bride became the partner of the youthful nobleman.

Swanhilda also was beautiful; although nature had formed her charms on a very different model from those of Brunhilda. Her golden locks waved bright as the beams of morn: only when excited by some emotion of her soul did a rosy hue tinge the lily paleness of her cheek; her limbs were proportioned in the nicest symmetry, yet did they not possess that luxuriant fullness of animal life: her eye beamed eloquently, but it was with the milder radiance of a star, tranquillizing to tenderness rather than exciting to warmth. Thus formed, it was not possible that she should steep him in his former delirium, although she rendered happy his waking

hours—tranquil and serious, yet cheerful, studying in all things her husband's pleasure, she restored order and comfort in his family, where her presence shed a general influence all around. Her mild benevolence tended to restrain the fiery, impetuous disposition of Walter: while at the same time her prudence recalled him in some degree from his vain, turbulent wishes, and his aspirings after unattainable enjoyments, to the duties and pleasures of actual life. Swanhilda bore her husband two children, a son and a daughter; the latter was mild and patient as her mother, well contented with her solitary sports, and even in these recreations displayed the serious turn of her character. The boy possessed his father's fiery, restless disposition, tempered, however, with the solidity of his mother. Attached by his offspring more tenderly towards their mother, Walter now lived for several years very happily: his thoughts would frequently, indeed, recur to Brunhilda, but without their former violence, merely as we dwell upon the memory of a friend of our earlier days, borne from us on the rapid current of time to a region where we know that he is happy.

But clouds dissolve into air, flowers fade, the sands of the hourglass run impeceptibly away, and even so, do human feelings dissolve, fade, and pass away, and with them too, human happiness. Walter's inconstant breast again sighed for the ecstatic dreams of those days which he had spent with his equally r o m a n t i c , enamoured Brunhilda—again did she present herself to his ardent fancy in all the glow of her bridal charms, and he began to draw a parallel between the past and the present; nor did imagination, as it is wont, fail to array the former in her brightest hues, while it proportionably obscured the latter; so that he

pictured to himself, the one much more rich in enjoyment, and the other, much less so than they really were. This change in her husband did not escape Swanhilda; whereupon, redoubling her attentions towards him, and her cares towards their children, she expected, by this means, to reunite the knot that was slackened; yet the more she endeavoured to regain his affections, the colder did he grow, -- the more intolerable did her caresses seem, and the more continually did the image of Brunhilda haunt his thoughts. The children, whose endearments were now become indispensable to him, alone stood between the parents as genii eager to affect a reconciliation; and, beloved by them both, formed a uniting link between them. Yet, as evil can be plucked from the heart of man, only ere its root has yet struck deep, its fangs being afterwards too firm to be eradicated; so was Walter's diseased fancy too far affected to have its disorder stopped, for, in a short time, it completely tyrannized over him. Frequently of a night, instead of retiring to his consort's chamber, he repaired to Brunhilda's grave, where he murmured forth his discontent, saying: "Wilt thou sleep for ever?"

One night as he was reclining on the turf, indulging in his wonted sorrow, a sorcerer from the neighbouring mountains, entered into this field of death for the purpose of gathering, for his mystic spells, such herbs as grow only from the earth wherein the dead repose, and which, as if the last production of mortality, are gifted with a powerful and supernatural influence. The sorcerer perceived the mourner, and approached the spot where he was lying.

"Wherefore, fond wretch, dost thou grieve thus, for what is now a hideous mass of mortality—mere bones, and nerves, and veins? Nations have fallen unlamented; even worlds

themselves, long ere this globe of ours was created, have mouldered into nothing; nor hath any one wept over them; why then should'st thou indulge this vain affliction for a child of the dust—a being as frail as thyself, and like thee the creature but of a moment?"

Walter raised himself up: -- "Let yon worlds that shine in the firmament" replied he, "lament for each other as they perish. It is true, that I who am myself clay, lament for my fellow-clay: yet is this clay impregnated with a fire, -- with an essence, that none of the elements of creation possess— with love: and this divine passion, I felt for her who now sleepeth beneath this sod."

"Will thy complaints awaken her: or could they do so, would she not soon upbraid thee for having disturbed that repose in which she is now hushed?"

"Avaunt, cold-hearted being: thou knowest not what is love. Oh! that my tears could wash away the earthy covering that conceals her from these eyes;

- that my groan of anguish could rouse her from her slumber of death! --

No, she would not again seek her earthy couch."

"Insensate that thou art, and couldst thou endure to gaze without shuddering on one disgorged from the jaws of the grave? Art thou too thyself the same from whom she parted; or hath time passed o'er thy brow and left no traces there? Would not thy love rather be converted into hate and disgust?"

"Say rather that the stars would leave yon firmament, that the sun will henceforth refuse to shed his beams through the heavens. Oh! that she stood once more before me; -- that once again she reposed on this bosom! -- how quickly should we

then forget that death or time had ever stepped between us."

"Delusion! mere delusion of the brain, from heated blood, like to that which arises from the fumes of wine. It is not my wish to tempt thee; -- to restore to thee thy dead; else wouldst thou soon feel that I have spoken truth."

"How! restore her to me," exclaimed Walter casting himself at the sorcerer's feet. "Oh! if thou art indeed able to effect that, grant it to my earnest supplication; if one throb of human feeling vibrates in thy bosom, let my tears prevail with thee; restore to me my beloved; so shalt thou hereafter bless the deed, and see that it was a good work."

"A good work! a blessed deed!"—returned the sorcerer with a smile of scorn; "for me there exists nor good nor evil; since my will is always the same. Ye alone know evil, who will that which ye would not. It is indeed in my power to restore her to thee: yet, bethink thee well, whether it will prove thy weal. Consider too, how deep the abyss between life and death; across this, my power can build a bridge, but it can never fill up the frightful chasm."

Walter would have spoken, and have sought to prevail on this powerful being

by fresh entreaties, but the latter prevented him, saying: "Peace! bethink

thee well! and return hither to me tomorrow at midnight. Yet once more do I

warn thee, 'Wake not the dead.' "

Having uttered these words, the mysterious being disappeared. Intoxicated with fresh hope, Walter found no sleep on his couch; for fancy, prodigal of her richest stores, expanded before him the glittering web of futurity; and his eye, moistened with the dew of rapture, glanced from one vision of happiness

to another. During the next day he wandered through the woods, lest wonted objects by recalling the memory of later and less happier times, might disturb the blissful idea, that he should again behold her—again fold her in his arms, gaze on her beaming brow by day, repose on her bosom at night: and, as this sole idea filled his imagination, how was it possible that the least doubt should arise; or that the warning of the mysterious old man should recur to his thoughts?

No sooner did the midnight hour approach, than he hastened before the grave-field where the sorcerer was already standing by that of Brunhilda. "Hast thou maturely considered?" inquired he.

"Oh! restore to me the object of my ardent passion," exclaimed Walter with impetuous eagerness. "Delay not thy generous action, lest I die even this night, consumed with disappointed desire; and behold her face no more."

"Well then," answered the old man, "return hither again tomorrow at the same hour. But once more do I give thee this friendly warning, 'Wake not the dead.'"

All in the despair of impatience, Walter would have prostrated himself at his feet, and supplicated him to fulfil at once a desire now increased to agony; but the sorcerer had already disappeared. Pouring forth his lamentations more wildly and impetuously than ever, he lay upon the grave of his adored one, until the grey dawn streaked the east. During the day, which seemed to him longer than any he had ever experienced, he wandered to and fro, restless and impatient, seemingly without any object, and deeply buried in his own reflections, inquest as the murderer who meditates his first deed of blood: and the stars of evening found him once more at the

appointed spot. At midnight the sorcerer was there also.

"Hast thou yet maturely deliberated?" inquired he, "as on the preceding night?"

"Oh what should I deliberate?" returned Walter impatiently. "I need not to deliberate; what I demand of thee, is that which thou hast promised me—that which will prove my bliss. Or dost thou but mock me? if so, hence from my sight, lest I be tempted to lay my hand on thee."

"Once more do I warn thee." answered the old man with undisturbed composure, "'Wake not the dead'—let her rest."

"Aye, but not in the cold grave: she shall rather rest on this bosom which burns with eagerness to clasp her."

"Reflect, thou mayst not quit her until death, even though aversion and horror should seize thy heart. There would then remain only one horrible means."

"Dotard!" cried Walter, interrupting him, 'how may I hate that which I love with such intensity of passion? how should I abhor that for which my every drop of blood is boiling?"

"Then be it even as thou wishest," answered the sorcerer; "step back."

The old man now drew a circle round the grave, all the while muttering words of enchantment. Immediately the storm began to howl among the tops of the trees; owls flapped their wings, and uttered their low voice of omen; the stars hid their mild, beaming aspect, that they might not behold so unholy and impious a spectacle; the stone then rolled from the grave with a hollow sound, leaving a free passage for the inhabitant of that dreadful tenement. The sorcerer scattered into the yawning earth, roots and herbs of most magic power, and of most penetrating odour, so that the worms crawling forth from the earth

congregated together, and raised themselves in a fiery column over the grave: while rushing wind burst from the earth, scattering the mould before it, until at length the coffin lay uncovered. The moonbeams fell on it, and the lid burst open with a tremendous sound. Upon this the sorcerer poured upon it some blood from out of a human skull, exclaiming at the same time, "Drink, sleeper, of this warm stream, that thy heart may again beat within thy bosom." And, after a short pause, shedding on her some other mystic liquid, he cried aloud with the voice of one inspired: "Yes, thy heart beats once more with the flood of life: thine eye is again opened to sight. Arise, therefore, from the tomb."

As an island suddenly springs forth from the dark waves of the ocean, raised upwards from the deep by the force of subterraneous fires, so did Brunhilda start from her earthy couch, borne forward by some invisible power. Taking her by the hand, the sorcerer led her towards Walter, who stood at some little distance, rooted to the ground with amazement.

"Receive again," said he, "the object of thy passionate sighs: mayest thou never more require my aid; should that, however, happen, so wilt thou find me, during the full of the moon, upon the mountains in that spot and where the three roads meet."

Instantly did Walter recognize in the form that stood before him, her whom he so ardently loved; and a sudden glow shot through his frame at finding her thus restored to him: yet the night-frost had chilled his limbs and palsied his tongue. For a while he gazed upon her without either motion or speech, and during this pause, all was again become hushed and serene; and the stars shone brightly in the clear heavens.

"Walter!" exclaimed the figure; and at once the well-known sound,

thrilling to his heart, broke the spell by which he was bound.

"Is it reality? Is it truth?" cried he, "or a cheating delusion?"

"No, it is no imposture; I am really living: -- conduct me quickly to thy castle in the mountains."

Walter looked around: the old man had disappeared, but he perceived close by his side, a coal-black steed of fiery eye, ready equipped to conduct him thence; and on his back lay all proper attire for Brunhilda, who lost no time in arraying herself. This being done, she cried; "Haste, let us away ere the dawn breaks, for my eye is yet too weak to endure the light of day." Fully recovered from his stupor, Walter leaped into his saddle, and catching up, with a mingled feeling of delight and awe, the beloved being thus mysteriously restored from the power of the grave, he spurred on across the wild, towards the mountains, as furiously as if pursued by the shadows of the dead, hastening to recover from him their sister.

The castle to which Walter conducted his Brunhilda, was situated on a rock between other rocks rising up above it. Here they arrived, unseen by any save one aged domestic, on whom Walter imposed secrecy by the severest threats.

"Here will we tarry," said Brunhilda, "until I can endure the light, and until thou canst look upon me without trembling as if struck with a cold chill." They accordingly continued to make that place their abode: yet no one knew that Brunhilda existed, save only that aged attendant, who provided their meals. During seven entire days they had no light except that of tapers: during the next seven, the light was admitted through the lofty casements

only while the rising or setting-sun faintly illumined the mountain-tops, the valley being still enveloped in shade.

Seldom did Walter quit Brunhilda's side: a nameless spell seemed to attach him to her; even the shudder which he felt in her presence, and which would not permit him to touch her, was not unmixed with pleasure, like that thrilling awful emotion felt when strains of sacred music float under the vault of some temple; he rather sought, therefore, than avoided this feeling. Often too as he had indulged in calling to mind the beauties of Brunhilda, she had never appeared so fair, so fascinating, so admirable when depicted by his imagination, as when now beheld in reality. Never till now had her voice sounded with such tones of sweetness; never before did her language possess such eloquence as it now did, when she conversed with him on the subject of the past. And this was the magic fairy-land towards which her words constantly conducted him. Ever did she dwell upon the days of their first love, those hours of delight which they had participated together when the one derived all enjoyment from the other: and so rapturous, so enchanting, so full of life did she recall to his imagination that blissful season, that he even doubted whether he had ever experienced with her so much felicity, or had been so truly happy. And, while she thus vividly portrayed their hours of past delight, she delineated in still more glowing, more enchanting colours, those hours of approaching bliss which now awaited them, richer in enjoyment than any preceding ones. In this manner did she charm her attentive auditor with enrapturing hopes for the future, and lull him into dreams of more than mortal ecstasy; so that while he listened to her siren strain, he entirely forgot how little blissful was the latter period of their

union, when he had often sighed at her imperiousness, and at her harshness both to himself and all his household. Yet even had he recalled this to mind would it have disturbed him in his present delirious trance? Had she not now left behind in the grave all the frailty of mortality? Was not her whole being refined and purified by that long sleep in which neither passion nor sin had approached her even in dreams? How different now was the subject of her discourse! Only when speaking of her affection for him, did she betray anything of earthly feeling: at other times, she uniformly dwelt upon themes relating to the invisible and future world; when in descanting and declaring the mysteries of eternity, a stream of prophetic eloquence would burst from her lips.

In this manner had twice seven days elapsed, and, for the first time, Walter beheld the being now dearer to him than ever, in the full light of day. Every trace of the grave had disappeared from her countenance; a roseate tinge like the ruddy streaks of dawn again beamed on her pallid cheek; the faint, mouldering taint of the grave was changed into a delightful violet scent; the only sign of earth that never disappeared. He no longer felt either apprehension or awe, as he gazed upon her in the sunny light of day: it was not until now, that he seemed to have recovered her completely; and, glowing with all his former passion towards her, he would have pressed her to his bosom, but she gently repulsed him, saying: -- "Not yet—spare your caresses until the moon has again filled her horn."

Spite of his impatience, Walter was obliged to await the lapse of another period of seven days: but, on the night when the moon was arrived at the full, he hastened to Brunhilda, whom he found more lovely than she had ever appeared before. Fearing

no obstacles to his transports, he embraced with all the fervour of a deeply enamoured and successful lover. Brunhilda, however, still refused to yield to his passion. "What!" exclaimed she, "is it fitting that I who have been purified by death from the frailty of mortality, should become thy concubine, while a mere daughter of the earth bears the title of thy wife: never shall it be. No, it must be within the walls of thy palace, within that chamber where I once reigned as queen, that thou obtainest the end of thy wishes, -- and of mine also," added she, imprinting a glowing kiss on the lips, and immediately disappeared.

Heated with passion, and determined to sacrifice everything to the accomplishment of his desires, Walter hastily quitted the apartment, and shortly after the castle itself. He travelled over mountain and across heath, with the rapidity of a storm, so that the turf was flung up by his horse's hoofs; nor once stopped until he arrived home.

Here, however, neither the affectionate caresses of Swanhilda, or those of his children could touch his heart, or induce him to restrain his furious desires. Alas! is the impetuous torrent to be checked in its devastating course by the beauteous flowers over which it rushes, when they exclaim: --

"Destroyer, commiserate our helpless innocence and beauty, nor lay us waste?"—the stream sweeps over them unregarding, and a single moment annihilates the pride of a whole summer.

Shortly afterwards did Walter begin to hint to Swanhilda that they were ill-suited to each other; that he was anxious to taste that wild, tumultuous life, so well according with the spirit of his sex, while she, on the contrary, was satisfied with the monotonous circle of household enjoyments:

That he was eager for whatever promised novelty, while she felt most attached to what was familiarized to her by habit: and lastly, that her cold disposition, bordering upon indifference, but ill assorted with his ardent temperament: it was therefore more prudent that they should seek apart from each other that happiness which they could not find together. A sigh, and a brief acquiescence in his wishes was all the reply that Swanhilda made: and, on the following morning, upon his presenting her with a paper of separation, informing her that she was at liberty to return home to her father, she received it most submissively: yet, ere she departed, she gave him the following warning:

"Too well do I conjecture to whom I am indebted for this our separation. Often have I seen thee at Brunhilda's grave, and beheld thee there even on that night when the face of the heavens was suddenly enveloped in a veil of clouds. Hast thou rashly dared to tear aside the awful veil that separates the mortality that dreams, from that which dreameth not? Oh! then woe to thee, thou wretched man, for thou hast attached to thyself that which will prove thy destruction."

She ceased: nor did Walter attempt any reply, for the similar admonition uttered by the sorcerer flashed upon his mind, all obscured as it was by passion, just as the lightning glares momentarily through the gloom of night without dispersing the obscurity.

Swanhilda then departed, in order to pronounce to her children, a bitter farewell, for they, according to national custom, belonged to the father; and, having bathed them in her tears, and consecrated them with the holy water of maternal love, she quitted her husband's residence, and departed to the home of her father's.

Thus was the kind and benevolent Swanhilda driven an exile from those halls where she had presided with grace; -- from halls which were now newly decorated to receive another mistress. The day at length arrived on which Walter, for the second time, conducted Brunhilda home as a newly made bride. And he caused it to be reported among his domestics that his new consort had gained his affections by her extraordinary likeness to Brunhilda, their former mistress. How ineffably happy did he deem himself as he conducted his beloved once more into the chamber which had often witnessed their former joys, and which was now newly gilded and adorned in a most costly style: among the other decorations were figures of angels scattering roses, which served to support the purple draperies whose ample folds o'ershadowed the nuptial couch. With what impatience did he await the hour that was to put him in possession of those beauties for which he had already paid so high a price, but, whose enjoyment was to cost him most dearly yet! Unfortunate Walter! revelling in bliss, thou beholdest not the abyss that yawns beneath thy feet, intoxicated with the luscious perfume of the flower thou hast plucked, thou little deemest how deadly is the venom with which it is fraught, although, for a short season, its potent fragrance bestows new energy on all thy feelings.

Happy, however, as Walter was now, his household were far from being equally so. The strange resemblance between their new lady and the deceased Brunhilda filled them with a secret dismay, -- an undefinable horror; for there was not a single difference of feature, of tone of voice, or of gesture. To add too to these mysterious circumstances, her female attendants discovered a particular mark on her back, exactly

like one which Brunhilda had. A report was now soon circulated, that their lady was no other than Brunhilda herself, who had been recalled to life by the power of necromancy. How truly horrible was the idea of living under the same roof with one who had been an inhabitant of the tomb, and of being obliged to attend upon her, and acknowledge her as mistress! There was also in Brunhilda much to increase this aversion, and favour their superstition: no ornaments of gold ever decked her person; all that others were wont to wear of this metal, she had formed of silver; no richly coloured and sparkling jewels glittered upon her; pearls alone, lent their pale lustre to adorn her bosom. Most carefully did she always avoid the cheerful light of the sun, and was wont to spend the brightest days in the most retired and gloomy apartments: only during the twilight of the commencing or declining day did she ever walk abroad, but her favourite hour was when the phantom light of the moon bestowed on all objects a shadowy appearance and a sombre hue; always too at the crowing of the cock an involuntary shudder was observed to seize her limbs. Imperious as before her death, she quickly imposed her iron yoke on every one around her, while she seemed even far more terrible than ever, since a dread of some supernatural power attached to her, appalled all who approached her. A malignant withering glance seemed to shoot from her eye on the unhappy object of her wrath, as if it would annihilate its victim. In short, those halls which, in the time of Swanhilda were the residence of cheerfulness and mirth, now resembled an extensive desert tomb. With fear imprinted on their pale countenances, the domestics glided through the apartments of the castle; and in this abode of terror, the crowing of the cock caused the living to tremble, as if they were the spirits

of the departed; for the sound always reminded them of their mysterious mistress. There was no one but who shuddered at meeting her in a lonely place, in the dusk of evening, or by the light of the moon, a circumstance that was deemed to be ominous of some evil: so great was the apprehension of her female attendants, they pined in continual disquietude, and, by degrees, all quitted her. In the course of time even others of the domestics fled, for an insupportable horror had seized them.

The art of the sorcerer had indeed bestowed upon Brunhilda an artificial life, and due nourishment had continued to support the restored body: yet this body was not able of itself to keep up the genial glow of vitality, and to nourish the flame whence springs all the affections and passions, whether of love or hate; for death had for ever destroyed and withered it: all that Brunhilda now possessed was a chilled existence, colder than that of the snake. It was nevertheless necessary that she should love, and return with equal ardour the warm caresses of her spell-enthralled husband, to whose passion alone she was indebted for her renewed existence. It was necessary that a magic draught should animate the dull current in her veins and awaken her to the glow of life and the flame of love—a potion of abomination—one not even to be named without a curse—human blood, imbibed whilst yet warm, from the veins of youth. This was the hellish drink for which she thirsted: possessing no sympathy with the purer feelings of humanity; deriving no enjoyment from aught that interests in life and occupies its varied hours; her existence was a mere blank, unless when in the arms of her paramour husband, and therefore was it that she craved incessantly after the horrible draught. It was even with the utmost

effort that she could forbear sucking even the blood of Walter himself, reclined beside her. Whenever she beheld some innocent child whose lovely face denoted the exuberance of infantine health and vigour, she would entice it by soothing words and fond caresses into her most secret apartment, where, lulling it to sleep in her arms, she would suck from its bosom the war, purple tide of life. Nor were youths of either sex safe from her horrid attack: having first breathed upon her unhappy victim, who never failed immediately to sink into a lengthened sleep, she would then in a similar manner drain his veins of the vital juice. Thus children, youths, and maidens quickly faded away, as flowers gnawed by the cankering worm: the fullness of their limbs disappeared; a sallow line succeeded to the rosy freshness of their cheeks, the liquid lustre of the eye was deadened, even as the sparkling stream when arrested by the touch of frost; and their locks became thin and grey, as if already ravaged by the storm of life. Parents beheld with horror this desolating pestilence devouring their offspring; nor could simple or charm, potion or amulet avail aught against it. The grave swallowed up one after the other; or did the miserable victim survive, he became cadaverous and wrinkled even in the very morn of existence. Parents observed with horror this devastating pestilence snatch away their offspring—a pestilence which, nor herb however potent, nor charm, nor holy taper, nor exorcism could avert. They either beheld their children sink one after the other into the grave, or their youthful forms, withered by the unholy, vampire embrace of Brunhilda, assume the decrepitude of sudden age.

At length strange surmises and reports began to prevail; it was whispered that Brunhilda herself was the cause of all these horrors;

although no one could pretend to tell in what manner she destroyed her victims, since no marks of violence were discernible. Yet when young children confessed that she had frequently lulled them asleep in her arms, and elder ones said that a sudden slumber had come upon them whenever she began to converse with them, suspicion became converted into certainty, and those whose offspring had hitherto escaped unharmed, quitted their hearths and home—all their little possessions—the dwellings of their fathers and the inheritance of their children, in order to rescue from so horrible a fate those who were dearer to their simple affections than aught else the world could give.

Thus daily did the castle assume a more desolate appearance; daily did its environs become more deserted; none but a few aged decrepit old women and grey-headed menials were to be seen remaining of the once numerous retinue. Such will in the latter days of the earth be the last generation of mortals, when childbearing shall have ceased, when youth shall no more be seen, nor any arise to replace those who shall await their fate in silence.

Walter alone noticed not, or heeded not, the desolation around him; he apprehended not death, lapped as he was in a glowing elysium of love. Far more happy than formerly did he now seem in the possession of Brunhilda. All those caprices and frowns which had been wont to overcloud their former union had now entirely disappeared. She even seemed to doat on him with a warmth of passion that she had never exhibited even during the happy season of bridal love; for the flame of that youthful blood, of which she drained the veins of others, rioted in her own. At night, as soon as he closed his eyes, she would breathe on him till he sank into delicious dreams, from which he

awoke only to experience more rapturous enjoyments. By day she would continually discourse with him on the bliss experienced by happy spirits beyond the grave, assuring him that, as his affection had recalled her from the tomb, they were now irrevocably united. Thus fascinated by a continual spell, it was not possible that he should perceive what was taking place around him. Brunhilda, however, foresaw with savage grief that the source of her youthful ardour was daily decreasing, for, in a short time, there remained nothing gifted with youth, save Walter and his children, and these latter she resolved should be her next victims.

On her first return to the castle, she had felt an aversion towards the offspring of another, and therefore abandoned them entirely to the attendants appointed by Swanhilda. Now, however, she began to pay considerable attention to them, and caused them to be frequently admitted into her presence. The aged nurses were filled with dread at perceiving these marks of regard from her towards their young charges, yet dared they not to oppose the will of their terrible and imperious mistress. Soon did Brunhilda gain the affection of the children, who were too unsuspecting of guile to apprehend any danger from her; on the contrary, her caresses won them completely to her. Instead of ever checking their mirthful gambols, she would rather instruct them in new sports: often too did she recite to them tales of such strange and wild interest as to exceed all the stories of their nurses. Were they wearied either with play or with listening to her narratives, she would take them on her knees and lull them to slumber. Then did visions of the most surpassing magnificence attend their dreams: they would fancy themselves in some garden where flowers of every hue

rose in rows one above the other, from the humble violet to the tall sunflower, forming a parti-coloured broidery of every hue, sloping upwards towards the golden clouds where little angels whose wings sparkled with azure and gold descended to bring them delicious cakes or splendid jewels; or sung to them soothing melodious hymns. So delightful did these dream in short time become to the children that they longed for nothing so eagerly as to slumber on Brunhilda's lap, for never did they else enjoy such visions of heavenly forms. They were they most anxious for that which was to prove their destruction: -- yet do we not all aspire after that which conducts us to the grave—after the enjoyment of life? These innocents stretched out their arms to approaching death because it assumed the mask of pleasure; for, which they were lapped in these ecstatic slumbers, Brunhilda sucked the life-stream from their bosoms. On waking, indeed, they felt themselves faint and exhausted, yet did no pain nor any mark betray the cause. Shortly, however, did their strength entirely fail, even as the summer brook is gradually dried up; their sports became less and less noisy; their loud, frolicsome laughter was converted into a faint smile; the full tones of their voices died away into a mere whisper. Their attendants were filled with horror and despair; too well did they conjecture the horrible truth, yet dared not to impart their suspicions to Walter, who was so devotedly attached to his horrible partner. Death had already smote his prey: the children were but the mere shadows of their former selves, and even this shadow quickly disappeared.

The anguished father deeply bemoaned their loss, for, notwithstanding his apparent neglect, he was strongly attached to

them, nor until he had experienced their loss was he aware that his love was so great. His affliction could not fail to excite the displeasure of Brunhilda: "Why dost thou lament so fondly," said she, "for these little ones? What satisfaction could such unformed beings yield to thee unless thou wert still attached to their mother? Thy heart then is still hers? Or dost thou now regret her and them because thou art satiated with my fondness and weary of my endearments? Had these young ones grown up, would they not have attached thee, thy spirit and thy affections more closely to this earth of clay—to this dust and have alienated thee from that sphere to which I, who have already passed the grave, endeavour to raise thee? Say is thy spirit so heavy, or thy love so weak, or thy faith so hollow, that the hope of being mine for ever is unable to touch thee?" Thus did Brunhilda express her indignation at her consort's grief, and forbade him her presence. The fear of offending her beyond forgiveness and his anxiety to appease her soon dried up his tears; and he again abandoned himself to his fatal passion, until approaching destruction at length awakened him from his delusion.

Neither maiden, nor youth, was any longer to be seen, either within the dreary walls of the castle, or the adjoining territory: -- all had disappeared; for those whom the grave had not swallowed up had fled from the region of death. Who, therefore, now remained to quench the horrible thirst of the female vampire save Walter himself? and his death she dared to contemplate unmoved; for that divine sentiment that unites two beings in one joy and one sorrow was unknown to her bosom. Was he in his tomb, so was she free to search out other victims and glut herself with destruction, until she herself should, at the last day, be consumed with the earth

itself, such is the fatal law to which the dead are subject when awoke by the arts of necromancy from the sleep of the grave.

She now began to fix her blood-thirsty lips on Walter's breast, when cast into a profound sleep by the odour of her violet breath he reclined beside her quite unconscious of his impending fate: yet soon did his vital powers begin to decay; and many a grey hair peeped through his raven locks. With his strength, his passion also declined; and he now frequently left her in order to pass the whole day in the sports of the chase, hoping thereby to regain his wonted vigour. As he was reposing one day in a wood beneath the shade of an oak, he perceived, on the summit of a tree, a bird of strange appearance, and quite unknown to him; but, before he could take aim at it with his bow, it flew away into the clouds; at the same time letting fall a rose-coloured root which dropped at Walter's feet, who immediately took it up and, although he was well acquainted with almost every plant, he could not remember to have seen any at all resembling this. Its delightfully odoriferous scent induced him to try its flavour, but ten times more bitter than wormwood it was even as gall in his mouth; upon which, impatient of the disappointment, he flung it away with violence. Had he, however, been aware of its miraculous quality and that it acted as a counter charm against the opiate perfume of Brunhilda's breath, he would have blessed it in spite of its bitterness: thus do mortals often blindly cast away in displeasure the unsavoury remedy that would otherwise work their weal.

When Walter returned home in the evening and laid him down to repose as usual by Brunhilda's side, the magic power of her breath produced no effect upon him; and for the first time during many months did he close his eyes in a natural slumber.

Yet hardly had he fallen asleep, ere a pungent smarting pain disturbed him from his dreams; and, opening his eyes, he discerned, by the gloomy rays of a lamp, that glimmered in the apartment what for some moments transfixed him quite aghast, for it was Brunhilda, drawing with her lips, the warm blood from his bosom. The wild cry of horror which at length escaped him, terrified Brunhilda, whose mouth was besmeared with the warm blood. "Monster!" exclaimed he, springing from the couch, "is it thus that you love me?"

"Aye, even as the dead love," replied she, with a malignant coldness.

"Creature of blood!" continued Walter, "the delusion which has so long blinded me is at an end: thou art the fiend who hast destroyed my children -- who hast murdered the offspring of my vassals." Raising herself upwards and, at the same time, casting on him a glance that froze him to the spot with dread, she replied. "It is not I who have murdered them; -- I was obliged to pamper myself with warm youthful blood, in order that I might satisfy thy furious desires--thou art the murderer!"—These dreadful words summoned, before Walter's terrified conscience, the threatening shades of all those who had thus perished; while despair choked his voice.

"Why," continued she, in a tone that increased his horror, "why dost thou make mouths at me like a puppet? Thou who hadst the courage to love the dead -- to take into thy bed, one who had been sleeping in the grave, the bed-fellow of the worm—who hast clasped in thy lustful arms, the corruption of the tomb—dost thou, unhallowed as thou art, now raise this hideous cry for the sacrifice of a few lives? -- They are but leaves swept from their branches by a storm.—Come, chase these idiot fancies, and taste the bliss thou hast

so dearly purchased." So saying, she extended her arms towards him; but this motion served only to increase his terror, and exclaiming: "Accursed Being,"—he rushed out of the apartment.

All the horrors of a guilty, upbraiding conscience became his companions, now that he was awakened from the delirium of his unholy pleasures. Frequently did he curse his own obstinate blindness, for having given no heed to the hints and admonitions of his children's nurses, but treating them as vile calumnies. But his sorrow was now too late, for, although repentance may gain pardon for the sinner, it cannot alter the immutable decrees of fate—it cannot recall the murdered from the tomb. No sooner did the first break of dawn appear, than he set out for his lonely castle in the mountains, determined no longer to abide under the same roof with so terrific a being; yet vain was his flight, for, on waking the following morning, he perceived himself in Brunhilda's arms, and quite entangled in her long raven tresses, which seemed to involve him, and bind him in the fetters of his fate; the powerful fascination of her breath held him still more captivated, so that, forgetting all that had passed, he returned her caresses, until awakening as if from a dream he recoiled in unmixed horror from her embrace. During the day he wandered through the solitary wilds of the mountains, as a culprit seeking an asylum from his pursuers; and, at night, retired to the shelter of a cave; fearing less to couch himself within such a dreary place, than to expose himself to the horror of again meeting Brunhilda; but alas! it was in vain that he endeavoured to flee her. Again, when he awoke, he found her the partner of his miserable bed. Nay, had he sought the centre of the earth as his hiding place; had he even imbedded himself beneath rocks, or

formed his chamber in the recesses of the ocean, still had he found her his constant companion; for, by calling her again into existence, he had rendered himself inseparably hers; so fatal were the links that united them.

Struggling with the madness that was beginning to seize him, and brooding incessantly on the ghastly visions that presented themselves to his horror-stricken mind, he lay motionless in the gloomiest recesses of the woods, even from the rise of sun till the shades of eve. But, no sooner was the light of day extinguished in the west, and the woods buried in impenetrable darkness, than the apprehension of resigning himself to sleep drove him forth among the mountains. The storm played wildly with the fantastic clouds, and with the rattling leaves, as they were caught up into the air, as if some dread spirit was sporting with these images of transitoriness and decay: it roared among the summits of the oaks as if uttering a voice of fury, while its hollow sound rebounding among the distant hills, seemed as the moans of a departing sinner, or as the faint cry of some wretch expiring under the murderer's hand: the owl too, uttered its ghastly cry as if foreboding the wreck of nature. Walter's hair flew disorderly in the wind, like black snakes wreathing around his temples and shoulders; while each sense was awake to catch fresh horror. In the clouds he seemed to behold the forms of the murdered; in the howling wind to hear their laments and groans; in the chilling blast itself he felt the dire kiss of Brunhilda; in the cry of the screeching bird he heard her voice; in the mouldering leaves he scented the charnel-bed out of which he had awakened her. "Murderer of thy own offspring," exclaimed he in a voice making night, and the conflict of the element still more hideous, "paramour of a blood-thirsty vampire, reveller with the corruption

of the tomb!" while in his despair he rent the wild locks from his head. Just then the full moon darted from beneath the bursting clouds; and the sight recalled to his remembrance the advice of the sorcerer, when he trembled at the first apparition of Brunhilda rising from her sleep of death; -- namely, to seek him at the season of the full moon in the mountains, where three roads met. Scarcely had this gleam of hope broke in on his bewildered mind than he flew to the appointed spot.

On his arrival, Walter found the old man seated there upon a stone as calmly as though it had been a bright sunny day and completely regardless of the uproar around. "Art thou come then?" exclaimed he to the breathless wretch, who, flinging himself at his feet, cried in a tone of anguish: -- "Oh save me--succour me--rescue me from the monster that scattereth death and desolation around her.

"Wherefore a mysterious warning? why didst thou not rather disclose to me at once all the horrors that awaited my sacrilegious profanation of the grave?"

"And wherefore a mysterious warning? why didst thou not perceivest how wholesome was the advice--'Wake not the dead.'

"Wert thou able to listen to another voice than that of thy impetuous passions? Did not thy eager impatience shut my mouth at the very moment I would have cautioned thee?"

"True, true: -- thy reproof is just: but what does it avail now; -- I need the promptest aid."

"Well," replied the old man, "there remains even yet a means of rescuing thyself, but it is fraught with horror and demands all thy resolution."

"Utter it then, utter it; for what can be more appalling, more hideous than the misery I now endure?"

"Know then," continued the sorcerer, "that only on the night of the new moon does she sleep the sleep of mortals; and then all the supernatural power which she inherits from the grave totally fails her. 'Tis then that thou must murder her."

"How! murder her!" echoed Walter.

"Aye," returned the old man calmly, "pierce her bosom with a sharpened dagger, which I will furnish thee with; at the same time renounce her memory for ever, swearing never to think of her intentionally, and that, if thou dost involuntarily, thou wilt repeat the curse."

"Most horrible! yet what can be more horrible than she herself is? -- I'll do it."

"Keep then this resolution until the next new moon."

"What, must I wait until then?" cried Walter, "alas ere then, either her savage thirst for blood will have forced me into the night of the tomb, or horror will have driven me into the night of madness."

"Nay," replied the sorcerer, "that I can prevent;" and, so saying, he conducted him to a cavern further among the mountains. "Abide here twice seven days," said he; "so long can I protect thee against her deadly caresses. Here wilt thou find all due provision for thy wants; but take heed that nothing tempt thee to quit this place. Farewell, when the moon renews itself, then do I repair hither again." So saying, the sorcerer drew a magic circle around the cave, and then immediately disappeared.

Twice seven days did Walter continue in this solitude, where his companions were his own terrifying thoughts, and his bitter repentance. The present was all desolation and

dread; the future presented the image of a horrible deed which he must perforce commit; while the past was poisoned by the memory of his guilt. Did he think on his former happy union with Brunhilda, her horrible image presented itself to his imagination with her lips defiled with dropping blood: or, did he call to mind the peaceful days he had passed with Swanhilda, he beheld her sorrowful spirit with the shadows of her murdered children. Such were the horrors that attended him by day: those of night were still more dreadful, for then he beheld Brunhilda herself, who, wandering round the magic circle which she could not pass, called upon his name till the cavern reechoed the horrible sound. "Walter, my beloved," cried she, "wherefore dost thou avoid me? art thou not mine? for ever mine -- mine here, and mine hereafter? And dost thou seek to murder me? -- ah! commit not a deed which hurls us both to perdition--thyself as well as me." In this manner did the horrible visitant torment him each night, and, even when she departed, robbed him of all repose.

The night of the new moon at length arrived, dark as the deed it was doomed to bring forth. The sorcerer entered the cavern; "Come," said he to Walter, "let us depart hence, the hour is now arrived:" and he forthwith conducted him in silence from the cave to a coal-black steed, the sight of which recalled to Walter's remembrance the fatal night. He then related to the old man Brunhilda's nocturnal visits and anxiously inquired whether her apprehensions of eternal perdition would be fulfilled or not. "Mortal eye," exclaimed the sorcerer, "may not pierce the dark secrets of another world, or penetrate the deep abyss that separates earth from heaven." Walter hesitated to mount the steed. "Be resolute," exclaimed his companion, "but this once is it

granted to thee to make the trial, and, should thou fail now, nought can rescue thee from her power."

"What can be more horrible than she herself? -- I am determined:" and he leaped on the horse, the sorcerer mounting also behind him.

Carried with a rapidity equal to that of the storm that sweeps across the plain they in brief space arrived at Walter's castle. All the doors flew open at the bidding of his companion, and they speedily reached Brunhilda's chamber, and stood beside her couch. Reclining in a tranquil slumber; she reposed in all her native loveliness, every trace of horror had disappeared from her countenance; she looked so pure, meek and innocent that all the sweet hours of their endearments rushed to Walter's memory, like interceding angels pleading in her behalf. His unnerved hand could not take the dagger which the sorcerer presented to him. "The blow must be struck even now:" said the latter, "shouldst thou delay but an hour, she will lie at daybreak on thy bosom, sucking the warm life drops from thy heart."

"Horrible! most horrible!" faltered the trembling Walter, and turning away his face, he thrust the dagger into her bosom, exclaiming--"I curse thee for ever! -- and the cold blood gushed upon his hand. Opening her eyes once more, she cast a look of ghastly horror on her husband, and, in a hollow dying accent said--"Thou too art doomed to perdition."

"Lay now thy hand upon her corpse," said the sorcerer, "and swear the oath."

Walter did as commanded, saying, "Never will I think of her with love, never recall her to mind intentionally, and, should her image recur to my mind involuntarily, so will I exclaim to it: be thou accursed."

"Thou hast now done everything," returned the sorcerer; -- "restore her therefore to the earth, from which thou didst so foolishly recall her; and be sure to recollect thy oath: for, shouldst thou forget it but once, she would return, and thou wouldst be inevitably lost. Adieu—we see each other no more." Having uttered these words he quitted the apartment, and Walter also fled from this abode of horror, having first given direction that the corpse should be speedily interred.

Again did the terrific Brunhilda repose within her grave; but her image continually haunted Walter's imagination, so that his existence was one continued martyrdom, in which he continually struggled, to dismiss from his recollection the hideous phantoms of the past; yet, the stronger his effort to banish them, so much the more frequently and the more vividly did they return; as the night-wanderer, who is enticed by a fire-wisp into quagmire or bog, sinks the deeper into his damp grave the more he struggles to escape. His imagination seemed incapable of admitting any other image than that of Brunhilda: now he fancied he beheld her expiring, the blood streaming from her beautiful bosom: at others he saw the lovely bride of his youth, who reproached him with having disturbed the slumbers of the tomb; and to both he was compelled to utter the dreadful words, "I curse thee for ever." The terrible imprecation was constantly passing his lips; yet was he in incessant terror lest he should forget it, or dream of her without being able to repeat it, and then, on awaking, find himself in her arms. Else would he recall her expiring words, and, appalled at their terrific import, imagine that the doom of his perdition was irrecoverably passed. Whence should he fly from himself? or how erase from his brain these images and

forms of horror? In the din of combat, in the tumult of war and its incessant pour of victory to defeat; from the cry of anguish to the exultation of victory—in these he hoped to find at least the relief of distraction: but here too he was disappointed. The giant fang of apprehension now seized him who had never before known fear; each drop of blood that sprayed upon him seemed the cold blood that had gushed from Brunhilda's wound; each dying wretch that fell beside him looked like her, when expiring, she exclaimed, -- "Thou too art doomed to perdition"; so that the aspect of death seemed more full of dread to him than aught beside, and this unconquerable terror compelled him to abandon the battle-field. At length, after many a weary and fruitless wandering, he returned to his castle. Here all was deserted and silent, as if the sword, or a still more deadly pestilence had laid everything waste: for the few inhabitants that still remained, and even those servants who had once shewn themselves the most attached, now fled from him, as though he had been branded with the mark of Cain. With horror he perceived that, by uniting himself as he had done with the dead, he had cut himself off from the living, who refused to hold any intercourse with him. Often, when he stood on the battlements of his castle, and looked down upon desolate fields, he compared their present solitude with the lively activity they were wont to exhibit, under the strict but benevolent discipline of Swanhilda. He now felt that she alone could reconcile him to life, but durst he hope that one, whom he so deeply aggrieved, could pardon him, and receive him again? Impatience at length got the better of fear; he sought Swanhilda, and, with the deepest contrition, acknowledged his complicated guilt; embracing her knees as he beseeched her to pardon him, and to return to his desolate

castle, in order that it might again become the abode of contentment and peace. The pale form which she beheld at her feet, the shadow of the lately blooming youth, touched Swanhilda. "The folly," said she gently, "though it has caused me much sorrow, has never excited my resentment or my anger. But say, where are my children?" To this dreadful interrogation the agonized father could for a while frame no reply: at length he was obliged to confess the dreadful truth. "Then we are sundered for ever," returned Swanhilda; nor could all his tears or supplications prevail upon her to revoke the sentence she had given.

Stripped of his last earthly hope, bereft of his last consolation, and thereby rendered as poor as mortal can possibly be on this side of the grave. Walter returned homewards; when, as he was riding through the forest in the neighbourhood of his castle, absorbed in his gloomy meditations, the sudden sound of a horn roused him from his reverie. Shortly after he saw appear a female figure clad in black, and mounted on a steed of the same colour: her attire was like that of a huntress, but, instead of a falcon, she bore a raven in her hand; and she was attended by a gay troop of cavaliers and dames. The first salutations being passed, he found that she was proceeding the same road as himself; and, when she found that Walter's castle was close at hand, she requested that he would lodge her for that night, the evening being far advanced. Most willingly did he comply with this request, since the appearance of the beautiful stranger had struck him greatly; so wonderfully did she resemble Swanhilda, except that her locks were brown, and her eye dark and full of fire. With a sumptuous banquet did he entertain his guests, whose mirth and songs enlivened the lately silent halls. Three days did this revelry continue, and so exhilarating

did it prove to Walter that he seemed to have forgotten his sorrows and his fears; nor could he prevail upon himself to dismiss his visitors, dreading lest, on their departure, the castle would seem a hundred times more desolate than before hand his grief be proportionally increased. At his earnest request, the stranger consented to stay seven, and again another seven days. Without being requested, she took upon herself the superintendence of the household, which she regulated as discreetly and cheerfully as Swanhilda had been wont to do, so that the castle, which had so lately been the abode of melancholy and horror, became the residence of pleasure and festivity, and Walter's grief disappeared altogether in the midst of so much gaiety. Daily did his attachment to the fair unknown increase; he even made her his confidant; and, one evening as they were walking together apart from any of her train, he related to her his melancholy and frightful history. "My dear friend," returned she, as soon as he had finished his tale, "it ill beseems a man of thy discretion to afflict thyself on account of all this. Thou hast awakened the dead from the sleep of the grave and afterwards found, -- what might have been anticipated, that the dead possess no sympathy with life. What then? thou wilt not commit this error a second time.

Thou hast however murdered the being whom thou hadst thus recalled again to existence—but it was only in appearance, for thou couldst not deprive that of life which properly had none. Thou hast, too, lost a wife and two children: but at thy years such a loss is most easily repaired. There are beauties who will gladly share thy couch, and make thee again a father. But thou dreadst the reckoning of hereafter: -- go, open the graves and ask the sleepers there whether that hereafter disturbs them." In such manner would she

frequently exhort and cheer him, so that, in a short time, his melancholy entirely disappeared. He now ventured to declare to the unknown the passion with which she had inspired him, nor did she refuse him her hand. Within seven days afterwards the nuptials were celebrated, and the very foundations of the castle seemed to rock from the wild tumultuous uproar of unrestrained riot. The wine streamed in abundance; the goblets circled incessantly; intemperance reached its utmost bounds, while shouts of laughter almost resembling madness burst from the numerous train belonging to the unknown. At length Walter, heated with wine and love, conducted his bride into the nuptial chamber: but, oh! horror! scarcely had he clasped her in his arms ere she transformed herself into a monstrous serpent, which entwining him in its horrid folds, crushed him to death. Flames crackled on every side of the apartment; in a few minutes after, the whole castle was enveloped in a blaze that consumed it entirely: while, as the walls fell in with a tremendous crash, a voice exclaimed aloud—"Wake not the dead!"

THE END



NICOLE ATKINS

Mildred could not figure out how all the guys at the masquerade ball recognized her.



It doesn't get better than this.

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The PHANTOM RICKSHAW



Rudyard Kipling

"May no ill dreams disturb my rest,
Nor Powers of Darkness me molest."
—*Evening Hymn.*

One of the few advantages that India has over England is a certain great Knowability. After five years' service a man is directly or indirectly acquainted with the two or three hundred Civilians in his Province, all the Messes of ten or twelve Regiments and Batteries, and some fifteen hundred other people of the non-official castes. In ten years his knowledge should be doubled, and at the end of twenty he knows, or knows something about, almost every Englishman in the Empire, and may travel anywhere and everywhere without paying hotel-bills.

Globe-trotters who expect entertainment as a right, have, even within my memory, blunted this open-heartedness, but, none the less, to-day if you belong to the Inner Circle and are neither a bear nor a black sheep all houses are open to you and our small world is very kind and helpful.

Rickett of Kamartha stayed with Polder of Kumaon, some fifteen years ago. He meant to stay two nights only, but was knocked down by rheumatic fever, and for six weeks disorganized Polder's establishment, stopped Polder's work, and nearly died in Polder's bedroom. Polder behaves as though he had been placed under eternal obligation by Rickett, and yearly sends the little Ricketts a box of presents and toys. It is the same everywhere. The men who do not take the trouble to conceal from you their opinion that you are an incompetent ass, and the women who blacken your character and misunderstand your wife's amusements, will work themselves to the bone in your behalf if you fall sick or into serious trouble.[Pg 119]

Heatherlegh, the Doctor, kept, in addition to his regular practice, a hospital on his private account—an arrangement of loose-boxes for Incurables, his friends called it—but it was really a sort of fitting-up shed for craft that had been damaged by stress of weather. The weather in India is often sultry, and since the tale of bricks is a fixed quantity, and the only liberty allowed is permission to work overtime

and get no thanks, men occasionally break down and become as mixed as the metaphors in this sentence.

Heatherlegh is the nicest doctor that ever was, and his invariable prescription to all his patients is "lie low, go slow, and keep cool." He says that more men are killed by overwork than the importance of this world justifies. He maintains that overwork slew Pansay who died under his hands about three years ago. He has, of course, the right to speak authoritatively, and he laughs at my theory that there was a crack in Pansay's head and a little bit of the Dark World came through and pressed him to death. "Pansay went off the handle," says Heatherlegh, "after the stimulus of long leave at Home. He may or he may not have behaved like a blackguard to Mrs. Keith-Wessington. My notion is that the work of the Katabundi Settlement ran him off his legs, and that he took to brooding and making much of an ordinary P. & O. flirtation. He certainly was engaged to Miss Mannering, and she certainly broke off the engagement. Then he took a feverish chill and all that nonsense about ghosts developed itself. Overwork started his illness, kept it alight, and killed him, poor devil. Write him off to the System—one man to do the work of two-and-a-half men."

I do not believe this. I used to sit up with Pansay sometimes when Heatherlegh was called out to visit patients and I happened to be within claim. The man would make me most unhappy by describing in a low, even voice the procession of men, women, children, and devils that was always passing at the bottom of his bed. He had a sick man's command of language. When he recovered I suggested that he should write out the whole affair from beginning to end, knowing that ink might assist him to ease his mind. When little boys have learned a new bad word they [Pg 120]are never happy till they have chalked it up on a door. And this also is Literature.

He was in a high fever while he was writing, and the blood-and-thunder Magazine style he adopted did not calm him. Two months afterwards he was reported fit for duty, but, in spite of the fact that he was urgently needed to help

an undermanned Commission stagger through a deficit, he preferred to die; vowing at the last that he was hagridden. I secured his manuscript before he died, and this is his version of the affair, dated 1885:—

My doctor tells me that I need rest and change of air. It is not improbable that I shall get both ere long—rest that neither the red-coated orderly nor the mid-day gun can break, and change of air far beyond that which any homeward-bound steamer can give me. In the meantime I am resolved to stay where I am; and, in flat defiance of my doctor's orders, to take all the world into my confidence. You shall learn for yourselves the precise nature of my malady; and shall, too, judge for yourselves whether any man born of woman on this weary earth was ever so tormented as I.

Speaking now as a condemned criminal might speak ere the drop-bolts are drawn, my story, wild and hideously improbable as it may appear, demands at least attention. That it will ever receive credence I utterly disbelieve. Two months ago I should have scouted as mad or drunk the man who had dared tell me the like. Two months ago I was the happiest man in India. To-day, from Peshawar to the sea, there is no one more wretched. My doctor and I are the only two who know this. His explanation is that my brain, digestion and eyesight are all slightly affected; giving rise to my frequent and persistent "delusions." Delusions, indeed! I call him a fool; but he attends me still with the same unwearied smile, the same bland professional manner, the same neatly-trimmed red whiskers, till I begin to suspect that I am an ungrateful, evil-tempered invalid. But you shall judge for yourselves.

Three years ago it was my fortune—my great misfortune—to sail from Gravesend to Bombay, on return from [Pg 121]long leave, with one Agnes Keith-Wessington, wife of an officer on the Bombay side. It does not in the least concern you to know what manner of woman she was. Be content with the knowledge that, ere the voyage had ended, both she and I were desperately and unreasonably in love with one another. Heaven knows that I can make

the admission now without one particle of vanity. In matters of this sort there is always one who gives and another who accepts. From the first day of our ill-omened attachment, I was conscious that Agnes's passion was a stronger, a more dominant, and—if I may use the expression—a purer sentiment than mine. Whether she recognized the fact then, I do not know. Afterwards it was bitterly plain to both of us.

Arrived at Bombay in the spring of the year, we went our respective ways, to meet no more for the next three or four months, when my leave and her love took us both to Simla. There we spent the season together; and there my fire of straw burnt itself out to a pitiful end with the closing year. I attempt no excuse. I make no apology. Mrs. Wessington had given up much for my sake, and was prepared to give up all. From my own lips, in August, 1882, she learnt that I was sick of her presence, tired of her company, and weary of the sound of her voice. Ninety-nine women out of a hundred would have wearied of me as I wearied of them; seventy-five of that number would have promptly avenged themselves by active and obtrusive flirtation with other men. Mrs. Wessington was the hundredth. On her neither my openly-expressed aversion, nor the cutting brutalities with which I garnished our interviews had the least effect.

"Jack, darling!" was her one eternal cuckoo-cry, "I'm sure it's all a mistake—a hideous mistake; and we'll be good friends again some day. *Please* forgive me, Jack, dear."

I was the offender, and I knew it. That knowledge transformed my pity into passive endurance, and, eventually, into blind hate—the same instinct, I suppose, which prompts a man to savagely stamp on the spider he has but half killed. And with this hate in my bosom the season of 1882 came to an end.

Next year we met again at Simla—she with her monotonous [Pg 122]face and timid attempts at reconciliation, and I with loathing of her in every fiber of my frame. Several times I could not avoid meeting her alone; and on each occasion her words

were identically the same. Still the unreasoning wail that it was all a "mistake"; and still the hope of eventually "making friends." I might have seen, had I cared to look, that that hope only was keeping her alive. She grew more wan and thin month by month. You will agree with me, at least, that such conduct would have driven any one to despair. It was uncalled for, childish, unwomanly. I maintain that she was much to blame. And again, sometimes, in the black, fever-stricken night watches, I have begun to think that I might have been a little kinder to her. But that really is a "delusion." I could not have continued pretending to love her when I didn't; could I? It would have been unfair to us both.

Last year we met again—on the same terms as before. The same weary appeals, and the same curt answers from my lips. At least I would make her see how wholly wrong and hopeless were her attempts at resuming the old relationship. As the season wore on, we fell apart—that is to say, she found it difficult to meet me, for I had other and more absorbing interests to attend to. When I think it over quietly in my sick-room, the season of 1884 seems a confused nightmare wherein light and shade were fantastically intermingled—my courtship of little Kitty Mannering; my hopes, doubts and fears; our long rides together; my trembling avowal of attachment; her reply; and now and again a vision of a white face flitting by in the rickshaw with the black and white liveries I once watched for so earnestly; the wave of Mrs. Wessington's gloved hand; and, when she met me alone, which was but seldom, the irksome monotony of her appeal. I loved Kitty Mannering, honestly, heartily loved her, and with my love for her grew my hatred for Agnes. In August Kitty and I were engaged. The next day I met those accursed "magpie" *jhampanies* at the back of Jakko, and, moved by some passing sentiment of pity, stopped to tell Mrs. Wessington everything. She knew it already.

"So I hear you're engaged, Jack dear." Then, without a [Pg 123]moment's pause: "I'm sure it's all a mistake—a hideous mistake. We shall be as good

friends some day, Jack, as we ever were."

My answer might have made even a man wince. It cut the dying woman before me like the blow of a whip. "Please forgive me, Jack; I didn't mean to make you angry; but it's true, it's true!"

And Mrs. Wessington broke down completely. I turned away and left her to finish her journey in peace, feeling, but only for a moment or two, that I had been an unutterably mean hound. I looked back, and saw that she had turned her rickshaw with the idea, I suppose, of overtaking me.

The scene and its surroundings were photographed on my memory. The rain-swept sky (we were at the end of the wet weather), the sodden, dingy pines, the muddy road, and the black powder-riven cliffs formed a gloomy background against which the black and white liveries of the *jhampanies*, the yellow-paneled rickshaw and Mrs. Wessington's down-bowed golden head stood out clearly. She was holding her handkerchief in her left hand and was leaning back exhausted against the rickshaw cushions. I turned my horse up a bypath near the Sanjowlie Reservoir and literally ran away. Once I fancied I heard a faint call of "Jack!" This may have been imagination. I never stopped to verify it. Ten minutes later I came across Kitty on horseback; and, in the delight of a long ride with her, forgot all about the interview.

A week later Mrs. Wessington died, and the inexpressible burden of her existence was removed from my life. I went Plainsward perfectly happy. Before three months were over I had forgotten all about her, except that at times the discovery of some of her old letters reminded me unpleasantly of our bygone relationship. By January I had disinterred what was left of our correspondence from among my scattered belongings and had burnt it. At the beginning of April of this year, 1885, I was at Simla—semi-deserted Simla—once more, and was deep in lover's talks and walks with Kitty. It was decided that we should be married at the end of June. You will understand, therefore, that, loving Kitty as I did, I am not saying too much when I [Pg

124]pronounce myself to have been, at the time, the happiest man in India.

Fourteen delightful days passed almost before I noticed their flight. Then, aroused to the sense of what was proper among mortals circumstanced as we were, I pointed out to Kitty that an engagement-ring was the outward and visible sign of her dignity as an engaged girl; and that she must forthwith come to Hamilton's to be measured for one. Up to that moment, I give you my word, we had completely forgotten so trivial a matter. To Hamilton's we accordingly went on the 15th of April, 1885. Remember that—whatever my doctor may say to the contrary—I was then in perfect health, enjoying a well-balanced mind and an absolutely tranquil spirit. Kitty and I entered Hamilton's shop together, and there, regardless of the order of affairs, I measured Kitty's finger for the ring in the presence of the amused assistant. The ring was a sapphire with two diamonds. We then rode out down the slope that leads to the Combermere Bridge and Peliti's shop.

While my Waler was cautiously feeling his way over the loose shale, and Kitty was laughing and chattering at my side—while all Simla, that is to say as much of it as had then come from the Plains, was grouped round the Reading-room and Peliti's veranda—I was aware that some one, apparently at a vast distance, was calling me by my Christian name. It struck me that I had heard the voice before, but when and where I could not at once determine. In the short space it took to cover the road between the path from Hamilton's shop and the first plank of the Combermere Bridge I had thought over half-a-dozen people who might have committed such a solecism, and had eventually decided that it must have been some singing in my ears. Immediately opposite Peliti's shop my eye was arrested by the sight of four *jhampanies* in black and white livery, pulling a yellow-paneled, cheap, bazar 'rickshaw. In a moment my mind flew back to the previous season and Mrs. Wessington with a sense of irritation and disgust. Was it not enough that the woman was dead and done with, without her black and white servitors re-appearing to spoil the day's happiness? Whoever employed them

now I thought I would [Pg 125]call upon, and ask as a personal favor to change her *jhampanies'* livery. I would hire the men myself, and, if necessary, buy their coats from off their backs. It is impossible to say here what a flood of undesirable memories their presence evoked.

"Kitty," I cried, "there are poor Mrs. Wessington's *jhampanies* turned up again! I wonder who has them now?"

Kitty had known Mrs. Wessington slightly last season, and had always been interested in the sickly woman.

"What? Where?" she asked. "I can't see them anywhere."

Even as she spoke, her horse, swerving from a laden mule, threw himself directly in front of the advancing 'rickshaw. I had scarcely time to utter a word of warning when, to my unutterable horror, horse and rider passed *through* men and carriage as if they had been thin air.

"What's the matter?" cried Kitty; "what made you call out so foolishly, Jack? If I *am* engaged I don't want all creation to know about it. There was lots of space between the mule and the veranda; and, if you think I can't ride—There!"

Whereupon willful Kitty set off, her dainty little head in the air, at a hand-gallop in the direction of the Band-stand; fully expecting, as she herself afterwards told me, that I should follow her. What was the matter? Nothing, indeed. Either that I was mad or drunk, or that Simla was haunted with devils. I reined in my impatient cob, and turned round. The 'rickshaw had turned too, and now stood immediately facing me, near the left railing of the Combermere Bridge.

"Jack! Jack, darling." (There was no mistake about the words this time: they rang through my brain as if they had been shouted in my ear.) "It's some hideous mistake, I'm sure. *Please* forgive me, Jack, and let's be friends again."

The 'rickshaw-hood had fallen back, and inside, as I hope and daily pray for the death I dread by night, sat Mrs. Keith-Wessington, handkerchief in hand, and golden head bowed on her breast.

How long I stared motionless I do

not know. Finally, I was aroused by my groom taking the Waler's bridle and asking whether I was ill. I tumbled off my horse and dashed, half fainting, into Peliti's for a glass of cherry-brandy. There two or three couples were gathered round the coffee-tables discussing the gossip of the day. Their trivialities were more comforting to me just then than the consolations of religion could have been. I plunged into the midst of the conversation at once; chatted, laughed and jested with a face (when I caught a glimpse of it in a mirror) as white and drawn as that of a corpse. Three or four men noticed my condition; and, evidently setting it down to the results of over many pegs, charitably endeavored to draw me apart from the rest of the loungers. But I refused to be led away. I wanted the company of my kind—as a child rushes into the midst of the dinner-party after a fright in the dark. I must have talked for about ten minutes or so, though it seemed an eternity to me, when I heard Kitty's dear voice outside inquiring for me. In another minute she had entered the shop, prepared to roundly upbraid me for failing so signally in my duties. Something in my face stopped her.

"Why, Jack," she cried, "what *have* you been doing? What *has* happened? Are you ill?" Thus driven into a direct lie, I said that the sun had been a little too much for me. It was close upon five o'clock of a cloudy April afternoon, and the sun had been hidden all day. I saw my mistake as soon as the words were out of my mouth: attempted to recover it; blundered hopelessly and followed Kitty, in a regal rage, out of doors, amid the smiles of my acquaintances. I made some excuse (I have forgotten what) on the score of my feeling faint; and cantered away to my hotel, leaving Kitty to finish the ride by herself.

In my room I sat down and tried calmly to reason out the matter. Here was I, Theobald Jack Pansay, a well-educated Bengal Civilian in the year of grace 1885, presumably sane, certainly healthy, driven in terror from my sweetheart's side by the apparition of a woman who had been dead and buried eight months ago. These were facts that I could not blink. Nothing was further from my [Pg 127]thought than any

memory of Mrs. Wessington when Kitty and I left Hamilton's shop. Nothing was more utterly commonplace than the stretch of wall opposite Peliti's. It was broad daylight. The road was full of people; and yet here, look you, in defiance of every law of probability, in direct outrage of Nature's ordinance, there had appeared to me a face from the grave.

Kitty's Arab had gone *through* the 'rickshaw: so that my first hope that some woman marvelously like Mrs. Wessington had hired the carriage and the coolies with their old livery was lost. Again and again I went round this treadmill of thought; and again and again gave up baffled and in despair. The voice was as inexplicable as the apparition. I had originally some wild notion of confiding it all to Kitty; of begging her to marry me at once; and in her arms defying the ghostly occupant of the 'rickshaw. "After all," I argued, "the presence of the 'rickshaw is in itself enough to prove the existence of a spectral illusion. One may see ghosts of men and women, but surely never of coolies and carriages. The whole thing is absurd. Fancy the ghost of a hill-man!"

Next morning I sent a penitent note to Kitty, imploring her to overlook my strange conduct of the previous afternoon. My Divinity was still very wroth, and a personal apology was necessary. I explained, with a fluency born of night-long pondering over a falsehood, that I had been attacked with a sudden palpitation of the heart—the result of indigestion. This eminently practical solution had its effect; and Kitty and I rode out that afternoon with the shadow of my first lie dividing us.

Nothing would please her save a canter round Jakko. With my nerves still unstrung from the previous night I feebly protested against the notion, suggesting Observatory Hill, Jutogh, the Boileaugunge road—anything rather than the Jakko round. Kitty was angry and a little hurt, so I yielded from fear of provoking further misunderstanding, and we set out together towards Chota Simla. We walked a greater part of the way, and, according to our custom, cantered from a mile or so below the Convent to the stretch of level road by the Sanjowlie Reservoir. The wretched

[Pg 128]horses appeared to fly, and my heart beat quicker and quicker as we neared the crest of the ascent. My mind had been full of Mrs. Wessington all the afternoon; and every inch of the Jakko road bore witness to our old-time walks and talks. The boulders were full of it; the pines sang it aloud overhead; the rain-fed torrents giggled and chuckled unseen over the shameful story; and the wind in my ears chanted the iniquity aloud.

As a fitting climax, in the middle of the level men call the Ladies' Mile, the Horror was awaiting me. No other 'rickshaw was in sight—only the four black and white *jhampanies*, the yellow-paneled carriage, and the golden head of the woman within—all apparently just as I had left them eight months and one fortnight ago! For an instant I fancied that Kitty must see what I saw—we were so marvelously sympathetic in all things. Her next words undeceived me—"Not a soul in sight! Come along, Jack, and I'll race you to the Reservoir buildings!" Her wiry little Arab was off like a bird, my Waler following close behind, and in this order we dashed under the cliffs. Half a minute brought us within fifty yards of the 'rickshaw. I pulled my Waler and fell back a little. The 'rickshaw was directly in the middle of the road: and once more the Arab passed through it, my horse following. "Jack, Jack, dear! *Please* forgive me," rang with a wail in my ears, and, after an interval: "It's all a mistake, a hideous mistake!"

I spurred my horse like a man possessed. When I turned my head at the Reservoir works the black and white liveries were still waiting—patiently waiting—under the gray hillside, and the wind brought me a mocking echo of the words I had just heard. Kitty bantered me a good deal on my silence throughout the remainder of the ride. I had been talking up till then wildly and at random. To save my life I could not speak afterwards naturally, and from Sanjowlie to the Church wisely held my tongue.

I was to dine with the Mannerings that night and had barely time to canter home to dress. On the road to Elysium Hill I overheard two men talking together in the dusk—"It's a curious

thing," said one, "how completely all trace of it disappeared. You know my wife was insanely fond of [Pg 129]the woman (never could see anything in her myself) and wanted me to pick up her old 'rickshaw and coolies if they were to be got for love or money. Morbid sort of fancy I call it, but I've got to do what the *Memsahib* tells me. Would you believe that the man she hired it from tells me that all four of the men, they were brothers, died of cholera, on the way to Hardwár, poor devils; and the 'rickshaw has been broken up by the man himself. Told me he never used a dead *Memsahib's* 'rickshaw. Spoilt his luck. Queer notion, wasn't it? Fancy poor little Mrs. Wessington spoiling any one's luck except her own!" I laughed aloud at this point; and my laugh jarred on me as I uttered it. So there *were* ghosts of 'rickshaws after all, and ghostly employments in the other world! How much did Mrs. Wessington give her men? What were their hours? Where did they go?

And for visible answer to my last question I saw the infernal thing blocking my path in the twilight. The dead travel fast and by short-cuts unknown to ordinary coolies. I laughed aloud a second time and checked my laughter suddenly, for I was afraid I was going mad. Mad to a certain extent I must have been, for I recollect that I reined in my horse at the head of the 'rickshaw, and politely wished Mrs. Wessington "good evening." Her answer was one I knew only too well. I listened to the end; and replied that I had heard it all before, but should be delighted if she had anything further to say. Some malignant devil stronger than I must have entered into me that evening, for I have a dim recollection of talking the commonplaces of the day for five minutes to the thing in front of me.

"Mad as a hatter, poor devil—or drunk. Max, try and get him to come home."

Surely *that* was not Mrs. Wessington's voice! The two men had overheard me speaking to the empty air, and had returned to look after me. They were very kind and considerate, and from their words evidently gathered that I was extremely drunk. I thanked them confusedly and cantered away to

my hotel, there changed, and arrived at the Mannerings' ten minutes late. I pleaded the darkness of the night as an excuse; was rebuked by Kitty for my unlover-like tardiness; and sat down.[Pg 130]

The conversation had already become general; and, under cover of it, I was addressing some tender small talk to my sweetheart when I was aware that at the further end of the table a short red-whiskered man was describing with much broidery his encounter with a mad unknown that evening. A few sentences convinced me that he was repeating the incident of half an hour ago. In the middle of the story he looked round for applause, as professional story-tellers do, caught my eye, and straightway collapsed. There was a moment's awkward silence, and the red-whiskered man muttered something to the effect that he had "forgotten the rest"; thereby sacrificing a reputation as a good story-teller which he had built up for six seasons past. I blessed him from the bottom of my heart and—went on with my fish.

In the fullness of time that dinner came to an end; and with genuine regret I tore myself away from Kitty—as certain as I was of my own existence that It would be waiting for me outside the door. The red-whiskered man, who had been introduced to me as Dr. Heatherlegh of Simla, volunteered to bear me company as far as our roads lay together. I accepted his offer with gratitude.

My instinct had not deceived me. It lay in readiness in the Mall, and, in what seemed devilish mockery of our ways, with a lighted head-lamp. The red-whiskered man went to the point at once, in a manner that showed he had been thinking over it all dinner time.

"I say, Pansay, what the deuce was the matter with you this evening on the Elysium road?" The suddenness of the question wrenched an answer from me before I was aware.

"That!" said I, pointing to It.

"That may be either *D.T.* or eyes for aught I know. Now you don't liquor. I saw as much at dinner, so it can't be *D.T.* There's nothing whatever where you're pointing, though you're sweating

and trembling with fright like a scared pony. Therefore, I conclude that it's eyes. And I ought to understand all about them. Come along home with me. I'm on the Blessington lower road."

To my intense delight the 'rickshaw instead of waiting for us kept about twenty yards ahead—and this, too, whether we walked, trotted, or cantered. In the course of that long night ride I had told my companion almost as much as I have told you here.

"Well, you've spoilt one of the best tales I've ever laid tongue to," said he, "but I'll forgive you for the sake of what you've gone through. Now come home and do what I tell you; and when I've cured you, young man, let this be a lesson to you to steer clear of women and indigestible food till the day of your death."

The 'rickshaw kept steadily in front; and my red-whiskered friend seemed to derive great pleasure from my account of its exact whereabouts.

"Eyes, Pansay—all eyes, brain and stomach; and the greatest of these three is stomach. You've too much conceited brain, too little stomach, and thoroughly unhealthy eyes. Get your stomach straight and the rest follows. And all that's French for a liver pill. I'll take sole medical charge of you from this hour; for you're too interesting a phenomenon to be passed over."

By this time we were deep in the shadow of the Blessington lower road and the 'rickshaw came to a dead stop under a pine-clad, overhanging shale cliff. Instinctively I halted too, giving my reason. Heatherlegh rapped out an oath.

"Now, if you think I'm going to spend a cold night on the hillside for the sake of a stomach-*cum*-brain-*cum*-eye illusion. . . . Lord ha' mercy! What's that?"

There was a muffled report, a blinding smother of dust just in front of us, a crack, the noise of rent boughs, and about ten yards of the cliffside—pines, undergrowth, and all—slid down into the road below, completely blocking it up. The uprooted trees swayed and tottered for a moment like drunken giants in the gloom, and then fell prone among their fellows with a thunderous crash. Our two horses stood motionless

and sweating with fear. As soon as the rattle of falling earth and stone had subsided, my companion muttered: "Man, if we'd gone forward we should have been ten feet deep in our graves by now! 'There are more things in heaven and earth' . . . Come home, Pansay, and thank God. I want a drink badly."

We retraced our way over the Church Ridge, and I arrived at Dr. Heatherlegh's house shortly after midnight.

His attempts towards my cure commenced almost immediately, and for a week I never left his sight. Many a time in the course of that week did I bless the good fortune which had thrown me in contact with Simla's best and kindest doctor. Day by day my spirits grew lighter and more equable. Day by day, too, I became more and more inclined to fall in with Heatherlegh's "spectral illusion" theory, implicating eyes, brain, and stomach. I wrote to Kitty, telling her that a slight sprain caused by a fall from my horse kept me indoors for a few days; and that I should be recovered before she had time to regret my absence.

Heatherlegh's treatment was simple to a degree. It consisted of liver-pills, cold-water baths and strong exercise, taken in the dusk or at early dawn—for, as he sagely observed: "A man with a sprained ankle doesn't walk a dozen miles a day, and your young woman might be wondering if she saw you."

At the end of the week, after much examination of pupil and pulse and strict injunctions as to diet and pedestrianism, Heatherlegh dismissed me as brusquely as he had taken charge of me. Here is his parting benediction: "Man, I certify to your mental cure, and that's as much as to say I've cured most of your bodily ailments. Now, get your traps out of this as soon as you can; and be off to make love to Miss Kitty."

I was endeavoring to express my thanks for his kindness. He cut me short:

"Don't think I did this because I like you. I gather that you've behaved like a blackguard all through. But, all the same you're a phenomenon, and as queer a phenomenon as you are a blackguard. Now, go out and see if you can find the eyes-brain-and-stomach

business again. I'll give you a lakh for each time you see it."

Half an hour later I was in the Mannerings' drawing-room with Kitty—drunk with the intoxication of present happiness and the foreknowledge that I should never more be troubled with It's hideous presence. Strong in the sense of my new-found security, I proposed a ride at once; and, by preference, a canter round Jakko.

Never have I felt so well, so overladen with vitality and [Pg 133]mere animal spirits as I did on the afternoon of the 30th of April. Kitty was delighted at the change in my appearance, and complimented me on it in her delightfully frank and outspoken manner. We left the Mannerings' house together, laughing and talking, and cantered along the Chota Simla road as of old.

I was in haste to reach the Sanjowlie Reservoir and there make my assurance doubly sure. The horses did their best, but seemed all too slow to my impatient mind. Kitty was astonished at my boisterousness. "Why, Jack!" she cried at last, "you are behaving like a child! What are you doing?"

We were just below the Convent, and from sheer wantonness I was making my Waler plunge and curvet across the road as I tickled it with the loop of my riding-whip.

"Doing," I answered, "nothing, dear. That's just it. If you'd been doing nothing for a week except lie up, you'd be as riotous as I.

*'Singing and murmuring in your feastful mirth,
Joying to feel yourself alive;
Lord over nature, Lord of the visible Earth,
Lord of the senses five.'*

My quotation was hardly out of my lips before we had rounded the corner above the Convent; and a few yards further on could see across to Sanjowlie. In the center of the level road stood the black and white liveries, the yellow-paneled 'rickshaw and Mrs. Keith-Wessington. I pulled up, looked, rubbed my eyes, and, I believe, must have said something. The next thing I knew was that I was lying face downward on the road, with Kitty

kneeling above me in tears.

"Has it gone, child?" I gasped. Kitty only wept more bitterly.

"Has what gone? Jack dear: what does it all mean? There must be a mistake somewhere, Jack. A hideous mistake." Her last words brought me to my feet—mad—raving for the time being.

"Yes, there *is* a mistake somewhere." I repeated, "a hideous mistake. Come and look at it!"

I have an indistinct idea that I dragged Kitty by the wrist along the road up to where It stood, and implored her for pity's sake to speak to it; to tell It that we were betrothed! that neither Death nor Hell could break the tie between us; and Kitty only knows how much more to the same effect. Now and again I appealed passionately to the Terror in the 'rickshaw to bear witness to all I had said, and to release me from a torture that was killing me. As I talked I suppose I must have told Kitty of my old relations with Mrs. Wessington, for I saw her listen intently with white face and blazing eyes.

"Thank you, Mr. Pansay," she said, "that's *quite* enough. Bring my horse."

The grooms, impassive as Orientals always are, had come up with the recaptured horses; and as Kitty sprang into her saddle I caught hold of the bridle entreating her to hear me out and forgive. My answer was the cut of her riding-whip across my face from mouth to eye, and a word or two of farewell that even now I cannot write down. So I judged, and judged rightly, that Kitty knew all; and I staggered back to the side of the 'rickshaw. My face was cut and bleeding, and the blow of the riding-whip had raised a livid blue weal on it. I had no self-respect. Just then, Heatherlegh, who must have been following Kitty and me at a distance, cantered up.

"Doctor," I said, pointing to my face, "here's Miss Mannerings's signature to my order of dismissal and . . . I'll thank you for that lakh as soon as convenient."

Heatherlegh's face, even in my abject misery, moved me to laugh.

"I'll stake my professional reputation"—he began. "Don't be a fool,"

I whispered. "I've lost my life's happiness and you'd better take me home."

As I spoke the 'rickshaw was gone. Then I lost all knowledge of what was passing. The crest of Jakko seemed to heave and roll like the crest of a cloud and fall in upon me.

Seven days later (on the 7th of May, that is to say) I was aware that I was lying in Heatherlegh's room as weak as a little child. Heatherlegh was watching me intently from behind the papers on his writing table. His first words [Pg 135] were not very encouraging; but I was too far spent to be much moved by them.

"Here's Miss Kitty has sent back your letters. You corresponded a good deal, you young people. Here's a packet that looks like a ring, and a cheerful sort of a note from Mannerings Papa, which I've taken the liberty of reading and burning. The old gentleman's not pleased with you."

"And Kitty?" I asked dully.

"Rather more drawn than her father from what she says. By the same token you must have been letting out any number of queer reminiscences just before I met you. Says that a man who would have behaved to a woman as you did to Mrs. Wessington ought to kill himself out of sheer pity for his kind. She's a hot-headed little virago, your mash. Will have it too that you were suffering from *D.T.* when that row on the Jakko road turned up. Says she'll die before she ever speaks to you again."

I groaned and turned over on the other side.

"Now you've got your choice, my friend. This engagement has to be broken off; and the Mannerings don't want to be too hard on you. Was it broken through *D.T.* or epileptic fits? Sorry I can't offer you a better exchange unless you'd prefer hereditary insanity. Say the word and I'll tell 'em it's fits. All Simla knows about that scene on the Ladies' Mile. Come! I'll give you five minutes to think over it."

During those five minutes I believe that I explored thoroughly the lowest circles of the Inferno which it is permitted man to tread on earth. And at the same time I myself was watching myself faltering through the dark labyrinths of doubt, misery, and utter

despair. I wondered, as Heatherlegh in his chair might have wondered, which dreadful alternative I should adopt. Presently I heard myself answering in a voice that I hardly recognized:

"They're confoundedly particular about morality in these parts. Give 'em fits, Heatherlegh, and my love. Now let me sleep a bit longer."

Then my two selves joined, and it was only I (half crazed, devil-driven I) that tossed in my bed, tracing step by step the history of the past month.

"But I am in Simla," I kept repeating to myself. "I, Jack Pansay, am in Simla, and there are no ghosts here. It's unreasonable of that woman to pretend there are. Why couldn't Agnes have left me alone? I never did her any harm. It might just as well have been me as Agnes. Only I'd never have come back on purpose to kill *her*. Why can't I be left alone—left alone and happy?"

It was high noon when I first awoke: and the sun was low in the sky before I slept—slept as the tortured criminal sleeps on his rack, too worn to feel further pain.

Next day I could not leave my bed. Heatherlegh told me in the morning that he had received an answer from Mr. Mannering, and that, thanks to his (Heatherlegh's) friendly offices, the story of my affliction had traveled through the length and breadth of Simla, where I was on all sides much pitied.

"And that's rather more than you deserve," he concluded pleasantly, "though the Lord knows you've been going through a pretty severe mill. Never mind; we'll cure you yet, you perverse phenomenon."

I declined firmly to be cured. "You've been much too good to me already, old man," said I; "but I don't think I need trouble you further."

In my heart I knew that nothing Heatherlegh could do would lighten the burden that had been laid upon me.

With that knowledge came also a sense of hopeless, impotent rebellion against the unreasonableness of it all. There were scores of men no better than I whose punishments had at least been reserved for another world and I felt that it was bitterly, cruelly unfair that I alone should have been singled out for

so hideous a fate. This mood would in time give place to another where it seemed that the 'rickshaw and I were the only realities in a world of shadows; that Kitty was a ghost; that Mannering, Heatherlegh, and all the other men and women I knew were all ghosts and the great, gray hills themselves but vain shadows devised to torture me. From mood to mood I tossed backwards and forwards for seven weary days, my body growing daily stronger and stronger, until the bed-room looking-glass told me that I had returned to everyday life, and was as other men once more. Curiously enough, my face showed no signs of the struggle I had gone through. It was pale indeed, but as expressionless and commonplace as ever. I had expected some permanent alteration—visible evidence of the disease that was eating me away. I found nothing.

On the 15th of May I left Heatherlegh's house at eleven o'clock in the morning; and the instinct of the bachelor drove me to the Club. There I found that every man knew my story as told by Heatherlegh, and was, in clumsy fashion, abnormally kind and attentive. Nevertheless I recognized that for the rest of my natural life I should be among, but not of, my fellows; and I envied very bitterly indeed the laughing coolies on the Mall below. I lunched at the Club, and at four o'clock wandered aimlessly down the Mall in the vague hope of meeting Kitty. Close to the Band-stand the black and white liveries joined me; and I heard Mrs. Wessington's old appeal at my side. I had been expecting this ever since I came out; and was only surprised at her delay. The phantom 'rickshaw and I went side by side along the Chota Simla road in silence. Close to the bazaar, Kitty and a man on horseback overtook and passed us. For any sign she gave I might have been a dog in the road. She did not even pay me the compliment of quickening her pace; though the rainy afternoon had served for an excuse.

So Kitty and her companion, and I and my ghostly Light-o'-Love, crept round Jakko in couples. The road was streaming with water; the pines dripped like roof-pipes on the rocks below, and the air was full of fine, driving rain.

Two or three times I found myself saying to myself almost aloud: "I'm Jack Pansay on leave at Simla—at *Simla!* Everyday, ordinary Simla. I mustn't forget that—I mustn't forget that." Then I would try to recollect some of the gossip I had heard at the Club; the prices of So-and-So's horses—anything, in fact, that related to the work-a-day Anglo-Indian world I knew so well. I even repeated the multiplication-table rapidly to myself, to make quite sure that I was not taking leave of my senses. It gave me much comfort; and must have prevented my hearing Mrs. Wessington for a time.

Once more I wearily climbed the Convent slope and entered the level road. Here Kitty and the man started off at a canter, and I was left alone with Mrs. Wessington. "Agnes," said I, "will you put back your hood and tell me what it all means?" The hood dropped noiselessly and I was face to face with my dead and buried mistress. She was wearing the dress in which I had last seen her alive: carried the same tiny handkerchief in her right hand; and the same card-case in her left. (A woman eight months dead with a card-case!) I had to pin myself down to the multiplication-table, and to set both hands on the stone parapet of the road to assure myself that that at least was real.

"Agnes," I repeated, "for pity's sake tell me what it all means." Mrs. Wessington leant forward, with that odd, quick turn of the head I used to know so well, and spoke.

If my story had not already so madly overleaped the bounds of all human belief I should apologize to you now. As I know that no one—no, not even Kitty, for whom it is written as some sort of justification of my conduct—will believe me, I will go on. Mrs. Wessington spoke and I walked with her from the Sanjowlie road to the turning below the Commander-in-Chief's house as I might walk by the side of any living woman's 'rickshaw, deep in conversation. The second and most tormenting of my moods of sickness had suddenly laid hold upon me, and like the prince in Tennyson's poem, "I seemed to move amid a world of ghosts." There had been a garden-party at the

Commander-in-Chief's, and we two joined the crowd of homeward-bound folk. As I saw them then it seemed that *they* were the shadows—impalpable fantastic shadows—that divided for Mrs. Wessington's 'rickshaw to pass through. What we said during the course of that weird interview I cannot—indeed, I dare not—tell. Heatherlegh's comment would have been a short laugh and a remark that I had been "mashing a brain-eye-and-stomach chimera." It was a ghastly and yet in some indefinable way a marvelously dear experience. Could it be possible, I wondered, that I was in this life to woo a second time the woman I had killed by my own neglect and cruelty?

I met Kitty on the homeward road—a shadow among shadows.

If I were to describe all the incidents of the next fortnight in their order, my story would never come to an end; and your patience would be exhausted. Morning after morning and evening after evening the ghostly 'rickshaw and I used to wander through Simla together. Wherever I went, there the four black and white liveries followed me and bore me company to and from my hotel. At the theater I found them amid the crowd of yelling *jhampanies*; outside the club veranda, after a long evening of whist; at the birthday ball, waiting patiently for my reappearance; and in broad daylight when I went calling. Save that it cast no shadow, the 'rickshaw was in every respect as real to look upon as one of wood and iron. More than once, indeed, I have had to check myself from warning some hard-riding friend against cantering over it. More than once I have walked down the Mall deep in conversation with Mrs. Wessington to the unspeakable amazement of the passers-by.

Before I had been out and about a week I learnt that the "fit" theory had been discarded in favor of insanity. However, I made no change in my mode of life. I called, rode, and dined out as freely as ever. I had a passion for the society of my kind which I had never felt before; I hungered to be among the realities of life; and at the same time I felt vaguely unhappy when I had been separated too long from my ghostly

companion. It would be almost impossible to describe my varying moods from the 15th of May up to today.

The presence of the 'rickshaw filled me by turns with horror, blind fear, a dim sort of pleasure, and utter despair. I dared not leave Simla; and I knew that my stay there was killing me. I knew, moreover, that it was my destiny to die slowly and a little every day. My only anxiety was to get the penance over as quietly as might be. Alternately I hungered for a sight of Kitty and watched her outrageous flirtations with my successor—to speak more accurately, my successors—with amused interest. She was as much out of my life as I was out of hers. By day I wandered with Mrs. [Pg 140] Wessington almost content. By night I implored Heaven to let me return to the world as I used to know it. Above all these varying moods lay the sensation of dull, numbing wonder that the seen and the unseen should mingle so strangely on this earth to hound one poor soul to its grave.

August 27th.—Heatherlegh has been indefatigable in his attendance on me; and only yesterday told me that I ought to send in an application for sick-leave. An application to escape the company of a phantom! A request that the Government would graciously permit me to get rid of five ghosts and an airy 'rickshaw by going to England! Heatherlegh's proposition moved me to almost hysterical laughter. I told him that I should await the end quietly at Simla; and I am sure that the end is not far off. Believe me that I dread its advent more than any word can say; and I torture myself nightly with a thousand speculations as to the manner of my death.

Shall I die in my bed decently and as an English gentlemen should die; or, in one last walk on the Mall, will my soul be wrenched from me to take its place for ever and ever by the side of that ghastly phantasm? Shall I return to my old lost allegiance in the next world, or shall I meet Agnes loathing her and bound to her side through all eternity? Shall we two hover over the scene of our lives till the end of time? As the day of my death

draws nearer, the intense horror that all living flesh feels towards escaped spirits from beyond the grave grows more and more powerful. It is an awful thing to go down quick among the dead with scarcely one half of your life completed. It is a thousand times more awful to wait as I do in your midst, for I know not what unimaginable terror. Pity me, at least on the score of my "delusion," for I know you will never believe what I have written here. Yet as surely as ever a man was done to death by the Powers of Darkness I am that man.

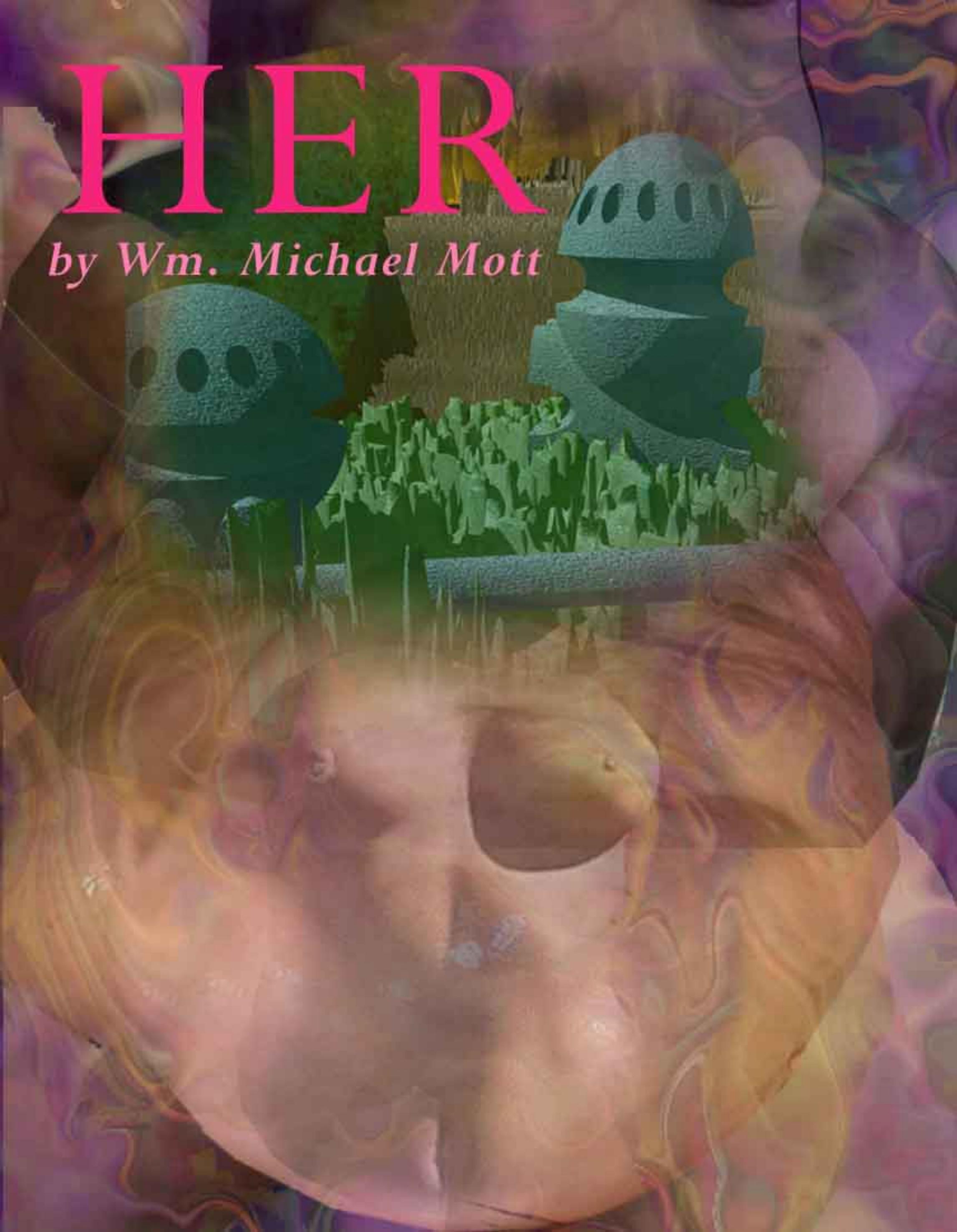
In justice, too, pity her. For as surely as ever woman was killed by man, I killed Mrs. Wessington. And the last portion of my punishment is even now upon me.

THE END



HER

by Wm. Michael Mott



(T. Monroe Peabody was first introduced to LCL Magazine readers in issue number 2, and was revisited in issue number 4 Trapped in a buried antediluvian city, he is the sole survivor of a doomed expedition. —Ed.)

Entry 3002, May/June 1922.

The weight of the darkness is the weight of the countless tons of rock above and around me.

It is an oppressive weight, a claustrophobic threat that nearly crushes one by implication alone. Yet it is the most jarring method I have at my disposal to snap my mind back to reality, to the facts of my circumstances and situation.

Occasionally, when I tear myself away from the non-corporeal realities in which I've lost myself for hours, days, perhaps weeks—I stagger away from the buried city, the sunken metropolis of eerie, artificial light, and into one of the side tunnels, into honest darkness, that I might relieve myself of the sense of unreality that has come to pervade my mind and threaten my sanity. The cool breeze from the depths, vaguely sulphurous yet somehow sweet, like baking bread, ruffles my hair and brings me back to my full senses, at least for a time.

This darkness, these cold stone walls, these tunnels leading down to depths as yet unguessed, awaken in me again the sense of who I am and where I am, of what has befallen me. It is then that I gradually recall that I am still T. Monroe Peabody, Professor of Archeology and Ancient Languages at the Pawnee Institute of North American Studies, and that I am buried alive in a pre-human or proto-human city of the damned.

Now that I have my senses back—but for how long, I have to wonder?—I will return to the softly

glowing chalcedony and granite city, the city that I've come to learn is named Arguaralla. How I came to know this I do not recall, but it came to me in one of the many immersive journeys I've made into the records of the vanished Ancients. Once back within the walls, I will carefully measure how much food and water I have left in the expeditionary supplies—perhaps enough for another six months if rationed carefully, but no more—and then I'll sit through the eternal twilight and put to paper the latest marvels I've witnessed, re-lived and experienced, by virtue of the reality-capturing rock-books of the ancient race that built this place.

I do not sleep anymore. My circadian rhythms are no longer disrupted and elongated; they are gone entirely. As near as I can ascertain, the unknown spans of time I spend, locked in the lives of men and women long dead for ages gone, or even from ages yet to come, have left me bereft of the need for sleep. They are like dreams, in a way, these immersions in an ancient record-keeping system; but they are like nightmares at times, and are more real, more vibrant, more intense than any event or experience I've ever had in the modern world above: the world of mid-1922, as near as I can calculate.

From a robust one-hundred and ninety pounds, I've dwindled to an estimated one-hundred and ten. Hours, often days without nourishment, locked within the grip of the mind-addicting "play-back stones" of the Atlans, have left me in a sorry state, physically speaking. It's a good thing that I have not yet had to defend myself against foes or predators in this silent, unnatural grave of a world, as I would be hard-pressed to put up a fight, now. The rock-books are the cause of my situation, of course; and only too late did I realize their addictive nature, the unnatural craving that has sprung into existence inside of me, for the exotic, extinct realities, the vibrant sensations of pleasure, love, rage, violence, vistas, that the records of the Ancients offer to a bookish, scholarly man such as myself.

To make matters worse, I have come to suspect that I am not alone.

Often when I snap out of the grip of some adventure in time, when I remove the cap-device from my head, I glimpse someone or something beside me, sense a presence, that is gone before I come back completely to my normal state of mind. Objects and supplies, all of which I have brought into the Dome of Records, have been moved, and I can not reach them from the seat in which I've been reclining; nothing is missing, but things are moved aside as if a small group has been moving about en masse among my things. A sweaty, sweet, somewhat yeasty scent meets my nostrils, lingering foully in the air, but quickly dissipates, and then I have to wonder if this is not an aftereffect of the technology that has been bombarding my brain with sensory illusions! Would that it were, but I know that it is not.

The Dome of Records itself is a virtual amphitheatre; the arching walls are inset with octagonal polygons of colored stone, each with an unknown symbol emblazoned on its face. This honeycomb-like structure is in actuality a vast library, and each of the fist-sized stones contains a lifetime or several lifetimes' worth of experiences, encoded somehow in the crystalline stone itself! Some narratives are presented as if from the perspective of a watcher; others are experienced in first-person fashion, in which the mind, the memories, the personality, the actions presented become those of the viewer—in this case, me.

Arranged around the chamber, facing the walls, are huge seats of a spongy material, designed in a reclined position; above each seat is a device of metal and stone, which slides down upon the head of whoever reclines in the seat. This headpiece, entirely of its own volition adjusts to the head of the wearer! It actually shrinks inward and clasps the skull; then transparent lenses of translucent stone slide into place before one's eyes! At this, the wall becomes a kaleidoscope of vibrant colors; if one then stares steadily at any

one spot of color or stone, there comes a shock of energy through the eyes, followed by a rushing sensation as if falling or speeding down a tunnel, and then...

...One is immersed in another time or place. Retaining one's personality or memory is nearly impossible, and after seconds or minutes, one's actual identity is forgotten entirely! I've relived the lives of hundreds upon hundreds of men and women, some human, others human-like yet of older, stranger species and races; I've lived, loved, fought, hated, striven and died thousands of times over, in kingdoms and empires that have long-since crumbled to dust, sunk beneath the crust of the Earth, or have been swallowed by the seas. And I've transcribed most of these relived extinctions in my journals, each one meticulously recorded just as it was experienced! Perhaps one day, when I'm long-dead, someone will find my bones and the journals that they protect, and these stories can be published for an incredulous world to ponder.

I am determined, also, to find out who or what has been creeping into my sanctum while I lie enthralled by the machines of the Ancients; apparently whatever it is is not overtly hostile, for I would be easy prey when in the sleep-like state of immersion. I barely take the time to eat and drink from my dwindling provisions, before I must go under and into those infinite worlds again—for there I have found something that I have never known in my studious and academic world, and it cannot be neglected, must be pursued, must be grasped, even if for only a short and illusory time, before I die of starvation or exhaustion!

I, T. Monroe Peabody, Professor Emeritus, have found Love.

Here, in dead Arguaralla, buried beneath thousands of feet of solid stone, I have found the love of a woman. I have found her, in fact, in the life-real visions of the stones; her face, her form changes, as do her name, her nationality, her language and beliefs—yet somehow

I know that she is the same person, the same personality, the same—soul! Never one for mysticism and scoffing at all non-empirical evidence, I still feel a connection to this feminine personality, as if I have, in fact, known her before—as if the lives in which I encounter her, find her, and love her, are my own past lives!

Perhaps I am going mad. Stark raving loony, down in the darkness, claiming the loves of other men as my own? And yet—

I feel that she knows me, too—as if, summoned from the very record-stones, she has been looking for me for an eternity down here in this Hades of the Intellect! For lately I've been encountering her more and more, and she has spoken cryptically, using the same phrases in a dozen different languages, of our destiny together, of the intertwining of our souls...

I was a red-handed raider in a land older than Sumer, and a city was sacked before us. I saw her cringing before our savagery, her long dark hair falling about her otherwise naked charms, as she fled the seraglio of some butchered, despotic king...and I took her over my broad barbarian shoulders and away, into the hills, and I made her my wife. Upon one tawny thigh she bore a tattoo of a scarab with wings spread in flight...

I crept through a city of the damned, where dog-headed things, walking upright, howled at bloody altars. A slim female form writhed upon a basalt altar wet with blood—and I screamed in anguish as the stone knife fell toward her breast, knowing that I would be too late, yet determined to plunge in and slay and slay, until I too joined her in death...

I stood with her clinging to me as we watched the island, from afar, sink into a boiling sea, and she wept on my chest. I brushed away her golden hair, looked into her sea-green eyes, and she said, in a voice like distant bells: "I will

come for you. I will always come. Wherever you go, in this life or the next, I will find you, or you will find me. The lands may sink beneath the waters, and the mountains turn over and hide their faces from the gods—but our love will always be, always..."

She placed a carved object in my hand, a beetle of bronze, ancestor to the scarabs of the yet-unborn Egyptians, and we watched as Aztlan-Dis sank beneath the magma-bloody waves...

Having fought off the northern reavers, I leaned on my great Scottish sword wearily and smiled as she came out of hiding and took me by my bloody arm, her lips eager for mine. Her eyes were blue and her hair red as blood, held back from her milky forehead by a silver circlet adorned with a parade of golden beetles... "We will always be together. We will always find each other, though we be separated by miles and years and lifetimes of pain and toil. You are mine and I am yours."

Such a love a modern man has surely never known. Perhaps I am delusional, self-deluded as it were, but if so, then so be it. I will block the entrance to this place to keep out the intruder, but I must eat, write, and then go once again into the recorded lifetimes, to find her, to be with her, again.

Entry 3003, May/June 1922.

Vines and ivy clung and resisted as I advanced. Ahead the facade of a decadent ruin loomed, choking into slow oblivion in the jungle. She was going to meet me here, and I would not be late, for her dark eyes, black tresses, golden skin were lures I could not resist—and the light that laughed behind those eyes, the light filled with love and joy and boldness, made the risk worthwhile. Let it be that I risked torture, execution, or both, to be with the daughter of the

emperor—I would die gladly for the nights I'd already spent with her in this most secret of meeting places!

I hacked free of the clinging lianas with my short, curved pinuti, and there she was, leaning saucily in the doorway, a golden goddess wearing only a thin robe of red silk, embroidered with beetles in flight. She loved the golden beetles of spring, to chase them as they flew in their mating-dance beneath the moon, to be caught and put in her hair....

As I reached to take her in my arms, something thumped me between my shoulders. Her eyes flew wide in horror and I followed her gaze downward, to my chest, and to the bronze arrowhead jutting from just below my heart...

She held me in her arms as death came down. Her face grew dim, a golden moon surrounded by the night of her hair, and she stroked my head, whispering: "Always, my love, always...I will find you. You will find me."

And thus I died.

The smell of my visitor or visitors was stronger, this last time. Even though I'd barred the door with the narrow stone rod provided for such a purpose, I found it shattered to fragments as if before a great weight, glass-sharp shards all over the inlaid lapis floor. Something had been here with me, and recently; the sweaty, musky odor is heavier than ever before, and lingers even as I write these words.

I made a quick examination of the huge Chamber of Records, finding nothing missing, but a tin of corned beef had been flattened like an insect, beneath some titanic tread. Following the smear of grease from this, I found that it terminated at a nearby viewing-seat next to the one I'm accustomed to using. There was a concentration of the odor about that seat, and when I reached out to touch it, the stone was still warm, as if someone or something had sat there, watching me while my

mind was out journeying through the past (or future, perhaps?).

I'm disturbed, but for some reason, I'm not frightened. Whatever it is, it apparently means me no harm, as it could easily have taken my life upon this occasion, and many prior ones. But now that I know for certain I'm not alone, what should I do? Obviously my visitor does not wish to be seen, but for some reason comes to watch me as I explore the records.

I'll eat a little extra from my rations and try and get my strength up, in case I need it. Maybe I'll put off looking at the records for a while, and concentrate on exploring more of the city, taking a miner's pick along for defensive purposes. I need to know who or what I'm dealing with; but I don't know how long I can resist the call of the rock-books—the vivid, throbbing intensities of the realities, and of *her*....

I'll climb into a higher gallery, hide and try to sleep. I don't know if I can, but I need to get back to some semblance of normality so that I might be prepared, mentally and physically. Afterward, I'll explore the city some more.

The thought suddenly occurs to me—could it be one of the other expedition members, driven insane and incapable of speech by deprivation, injury, or hardship? But how could one of the others have survived the cave-in, and if surviving, what has he been eating all these months? For I have all of the supplies, and can account for every ounce of them! And what human being would have the strength or bulk to shatter a rod of solid stone, by putting pressure on a solid stone door? It took all of my strength to push that door shut, and I had even worried at the time that I might not be able to pull it open again!

Now there are not only ancient mysteries here, but a new one as well, and it must be solved. I will not be able to continue my studies and writings or to die in peace, without knowing what form of life still lives down here in the

depths beneath the Grand Canyon. This too must be studied, and documented for future generations. Even if I die in the trying, I must find out.

Entry 3004, June 1922.

I calculate it has been nearly two weeks since I last used the record-reading helmet. I'm feeling stronger, eating a bit more, and have put on about ten or fifteen pounds. I'm even sleeping some, lightly, but sleeping.

The temptation to use the machines of the Ancients is great. Somehow, I've managed to resist it, but now when I sleep I see *her* running before me, running away, wearing a thousand forms and a thousand faces, calling me, calling me by a thousand names....

I moved all of the supplies to a high, narrow room above the main record-chamber, accessible only by a very narrow and steep staircase. Here the walls glow with a dim yellow light, and I've discovered that if I rub a crystal set into the wall, the light dims to near-total darkness. This has allowed me to simulate night-time conditions for purposes of sleeping, and as a result my rest has been genuine and deep. I'm slowly getting back to the old Peabody, and am ready to find and possibly confront my voyeur.

Since I haven't been perusing the records, I've had no more surreptitious visits, and the stairwell is probably too narrow for anything much larger or wider than my own emaciated frame to enter and use.

I'm taking my pickaxe and going to explore the city. If I don't return to finish this page, then I've met my doom at the hands of whatever shares this subterranean realm with me.

Entry 3005, June 1922.

Oh God. God above, help me!

I am definitely not alone. Nor am I insane.

I explored the city for hours, discovering both wonders and terrors, all stilled with the inactivity of ages. At one point I wandered near one of the tunnels leading down into endless blackness...

Something moved in there, lurching forward! *Something* huge, larger than a man, larger than a gorilla, something that had to squeeze its bulk through the wide tunnel as it came! I glimpsed tremendous rolls of flesh, massive limbs white as the belly of a blind cave-fish, trembling with an unnatural obesity! Whatever it is, it moves swiftly, so there must be an awesome musculature beneath all its bulk, to propel it in such rapid fashion!

Had it not been for its sheer girth slowing it down, it would have been on top of me before I realized anything was nearby! As it was, I ran as fast as I could, heading for my place of refuge, and I could hear—no, *feel*—the impact of a tremendous tread behind me!

Now here I sit in my elevated chamber, a virtual prisoner. I can hear the *thing* raging below, slamming and smashing about, and I can't help but sense that it feels...What? Insulted? Lonely? *Neglected*?

I need to ruminate on this a bit. There, I hear the sound of the thing retreating, it seems to be leaving... now all is silent below.

I'll try to sleep and deal with this latest development when next I awake. I am utterly, totally exhausted.

Entry 3006, June or July, 1922.

So many strange things, so many...

I finally gathered up the nerve to venture downstairs, pickaxe in hand. Nearly all of the viewing seats in the chamber have been smashed, flattened by some huge weight and fury. Only two seem to be in working order, but I dare not use either of them again lest I be taken unawares, smashed like that can of corned beef—

Thank God I had my provisions

and journals, my writing and the medical supplies, safe in my room above.

The seat I'd been using was left intact. Here is where I doubt my sanity again; for placed in that seat was a stone beetle carved of black onyx, almost identical to an Egyptian scarab.

What can it mean? *What the hell does it mean?*

Entry 3007, July 1922.

I've hit upon a strategy. I can not go on like this, living in terror. Whatever it is, it did not become hostile until I stopped using the viewer. The viewer is my source of truce, it must be! Why else did it leave the seat that I used intact? But why did it leave the other one intact as well?

It watched me for weeks, no, for months as I lay in the grip of the rock-book immersion, never harming me in any way. Apparently it needs something, is getting something, from my use of the ancient technology. But what? Is it trying to learn how to access the records itself? For it has to be a descendant of the intellectual titans, the perfectly-formed demigods who built this place, and who once ruled the world in ages past.

Who knows what strange changes of form might occur in a population hidden from the sun for millennia, bombarded by the unknown radiations of the more volatile elements in the planet's crust? What mutations of form, and of mind, might occur?

Whatever it is, I'm stuck with it as a companion, until my food runs out and I die. I want to know and record the truth, and it seems that the only way to know the truth is to placate it, to do what it wants, and to use the crystal recordings again. If it kills me as I dream, then at least, perhaps, I'll die happy, if I'm with *her* one last time...

I'll get in the chair and put the headpiece on. I have no other choice.

Entry 3008, July 1922.

I saw *her* again. She came to me in a guise more beautiful than any before, in a land so old that the stars were different, and two moons rode the sky.

We lived a full life together, roamed together, fought together. The world was young and hostile, filled with savage vitality, but so were we. Recorded decades passed while I sat in the chair, and when I woke, I knew that I had been in the grip of the ancient stones longer than I ever had before.

I also knew that, again, *I was not alone.*

I dared not look to the chair beside my own, some fifteen feet away. *I could not!* My veins ran cold with terror, I admit.

In my peripheral vision, a gigantic form lay upon that chair. Folds of flesh, massive rolls of cellulite, flowed down to the floor. Thighs like tree trunks splayed wide, and the headpiece still sat upon a massive, many-chinned head.

And I *knew*. God help me, I *knew*.

Slowly I turned to look, finally facing up to what I had expected all along. This gigantic humanoid *thing*, mass all a-quiver, mighty chest and breasts rising like mountains with its breathing...This thing was unmistakably, undeniably, abominably, *female*.

It is *her*.

She has found me, just as she promised, and I have found *her*.

We will share the lives recorded in the stones, whether truly ours or those of others long-dead, for as long as my health holds out. Then I will either starve, fling myself from some high place....

Or die beneath that mountain of flesh, my mind completely gone into gibbering madness.

Only time will tell.

A close-up photograph of a person's face, heavily decorated with white face paint. The person's eyes are painted black, and each black eye socket contains a single, small, bright red dot. The white paint is speckled with various colors, including pink, blue, and green. The person's mouth is also painted black, and they appear to be wearing a black mask or headpiece. The background is dark, making the white paint stand out.

the beckoning fair one

by Oliver Onions

THE THREE OR four "To Let" boards had stood within the low paling as long as the inhabitants of the little triangular "Square" could remember, and if they had ever been vertical it was a very long time ago.

They now overhung the palings each at its own angle, and resembled nothing so much as a row of wooden choppers, ever in the act of falling upon some passer-by, yet never cutting off a tenant for the old house from the stream of his fellows. Not that there was ever any great "stream" through the square; the stream passed a furlong and more away, beyond the intricacy of tenements and alleys and byways that had sprung up since the old house had been built, hemming it in completely; and probably the house itself was only suffered to stand pending the falling-in of a lease or two, when doubtless a clearance would be made of the whole neighbourhood.

It was of bloomy old red brick, and built into its walls were the crowns and clasped hands and other insignia of insurance companies long since defunct. The children of the secluded square had swung upon the low gate at the end of the entrance-alley until little more than the solid top bar of it remained, and the alley itself ran past boarded basement windows on which tramps had chalked their cryptic marks. The path was washed and worn uneven by the spilling of water from the eaves of the encroaching next house, and cats and dogs had made the approach their own. The chances of a tenant did not seem such as to warrant the keeping of the "To Let" boards in a state of legibility and repair, and as a matter of fact they were not so kept.

For six months Oleron had passed the old place twice a day or oftener, on his way from his lodgings to the room, ten minutes' walk away, he had taken to work in; and for six months no hatchet-like notice-board had fallen across his path. This might have been due to the fact that he usually took the other side of the square. But he chanced one morning to take the side that ran past the broken gate and the rain-worn entrance alley, and to pause before one

of the inclined boards. The board bore, besides the agent's name, the announcement, written apparently about the time of Oleron's own early youth, that the key was to be had at Number Six.

Now Oleron was already paying, for his separate bedroom and workroom, more than an author who, without private means, habitually disregards his public, can afford; and he was paying in addition a small rent for the storage of the greater part of his grandmother's furniture. Moreover, it invariably happened that the book he wished to read in bed was at his working-quarters half a mile or more away, while the note or letter he had sudden need of during the day was as likely as not to be in the pocket of another coat hanging behind his bedroom door. And there were other inconveniences in having a divided domicile. Therefore Oleron, brought suddenly up by the hatchet-like notice board, looked first down through some scanty privet-bushes at the boarded basement windows, then up at the blank and grimy windows of the first floor, and so up to the second floor and the flat stone coping of the leads. He stood for a minute thumbing his lean and shaven jaw; then, with another glance at the board, he walked slowly across the square to Number Six.

He knocked, and waited for two or three minutes, but, although the door stood open, received no answer. He was knocking again when a long-nosed man in shirt-sleeves appeared.

"I was asking a blessing on our food," he said in severe explanation.

Oleron asked if he might have the key of the old house; and the long-nosed man withdrew again.

Oleron waited for another five minutes on the step; then the man, appearing again and masticating some of the food of which he had spoken, announced that the key was lost.

"But you won't want it," he said. "The entrance door isn't closed, and a push 'll

open any of the others. I'm a agent for it, if you're thinking of taking it-- "

Oleron recrossed the square, descended the two steps at the broken gate, passed along the alley, and turned in at the old wide doorway. To the right, immediately within the door, steps descended to the roomy cellars, and the staircase before him had a carved rail, and was broad and handsome and filthy. Oleron ascended it, avoiding contact with the rail and wall, and stopped at the first landing. A door facing him had been boarded up, but he pushed at that on his right hand, and an insecure bolt or staple yielded. He entered the empty first floor.

He spent a quarter of an hour in the place, and then came out again. Without mounting higher, he descended and recrossed the square to the house of the man who had lost the key.

"Can you tell me how much the rent is?" he asked.

The man mentioned a figure, the comparative lowness of which seemed accounted for by the character of the neighbourhood and the abominable state of unrepair of the place.

"Would it be possible to rent a single floor?"

The long-nosed man did not know; they might...

"Who are they?"

The man gave Oleron the name of a firm of lawyers in Lincoln's Inn.

"You might mention my name--Barrett," he added.

Pressure of work prevented Oleron from going down to Lincoln's Inn that afternoon, but he went on the morrow, and was instantly offered the whole house as a purchase for fifty pounds down, the remainder of the purchase-money to remain on mortgage. It took him half an hour to disabuse the lawyer's mind of the idea that he wished anything 'more of the place than to rent

a single floor of it. This made certain hums and haws of a difference, and the lawyer was by no means certain that it lay within his power to do as Oleron suggested; but it was finally extracted from him that, provided the notice-boards were allowed to remain up, and that, provided it was agreed that in the event of the whole house letting, the arrangement should terminate automatically without further notice, something might be done. That the old place should suddenly let over his head seemed to Oleron the slightest of risks to take, and he promised a decision within a week. On the morrow he visited the house again, went through it from top to bottom, and then went home to his lodgings to take a bath.

He was immensely taken with that portion of the house he had already determined should be his own. Scraped clean and repainted, and with that old furniture of Oleron's grandmother's, it ought to be entirely charming. He went to the storage warehouse to refresh his memory of his half-forgotten belongings, and to take the measurements; and thence he went to a decorator's. He was very busy with his regular work, and could have wished that the notice-board had caught his attention either a few months earlier or else later in the year; but the quickest way would be to suspend work entirely until after his removal....

A fortnight later his first floor was painted throughout in a tender, eider-flower white, the paint was dry, and Oleron was in the middle of his installation. He was animated, delighted; and he rubbed his hands as he polished and made disposals of his grandmother's effects--the tall lattice-parted china cupboard with its Derby and Mason and Spode, the large folding Sheraton table, the long, low bookshelves (he had had two of them "copied"), the chairs, the Sheffield candlesticks, the riveted rose-bowls. These things he set against his newly painted eider-white walls--walls of wood panelled in the happiest proportions, and moulded and coffered to the low-seated window-recesses. in a mood of gaiety and rest that the builders of rooms no longer know. The ceilings

were lofty, and faintly painted with an old pattern of stars; even the tapering mouldings of his iron fireplace were as delicately designed as jewellery; and Oleron walked about rubbing his hands, frequently stopping for the mere pleasure of the glimpses from white room to white room

"Charming, charming!" he said to himself. "I wonder what Elsie Bengough will think of this!"

He bought a bolt and a Yale lock for his door, and shut off his quarters from the rest of the house. If he now wanted to read in bed, his book could be had for stepping into the next room. All the time, he thought how exceedingly lucky he was to get the place. He put up a hat-rack in the little square hall, and hung up his hats and caps and coats; and passers through the small triangular square late at night, looking up over the little serried row of wooden "To Let" hatchets, could see the light within Oleron's red blinds, or else the sudden darkening of one blind and the illumination of another, as Oleron, candlestick in hand, passed from room to room, making final settings of his furniture, or preparing to resume the work that his removal had interrupted.

ii

As far as the chief business of his life--his writing--was concerned, Paul Oleron treated the world a good deal better than he was treated by it; but he seldom took the trouble to strike a balance, or to compute how far, at forty-four years of age, he was behind his points on the handicap. To have done so wouldn't have altered matters, and it might have depressed Oleron. He had chosen his path, and was committed to it beyond possibility of withdrawal. Perhaps he had chosen it in the days when he had been easily swayed by some thing a little disinterested, a little generous, a little noble; and had he ever thought of questioning himself he would still have held to it that a life without nobility and generosity and disinterestedness was no life for him. Only quite recently, and rarely, had he even vaguely suspected that there was

more in it than this; but it was no good anticipating the day when, he supposed, he would reach that maximum point of his powers beyond which he must inevitably decline, and be left face to face with the question whether it would not have profited him better to have ruled his life by less exigent ideals.

In the meantime, his removal into the old house with the insurance marks built into its brick merely interrupted Romilly Bishop at the fifteenth chapter.

As this tall man with the lean, ascetic face moved about his new abode, arranging, changing, altering, hardly yet into his working-stride again, he gave the impression of almost spinster-like precision and nicety. For twenty years past, in a score of lodgings, garrets, flats, and rooms furnished and unfurnished, he had been accustomed to do many things for himself, and he had discovered that it saves time and temper to be methodical. He had arranged with the wife of the long-nosed Barrett, a stout Welsh woman with a falsetto voice, the Merionethshire accent of which long residence in London had not perceptibly modified, to come across the square each morning to prepare his breakfast, and also to "turn the place out" on Saturday mornings; and for the rest, he even welcomed a little housework as a relaxation-from the strain of writing.

His kitchen, together with the adjoining strip of an apartment into which a modern bath had been fitted, overlooked the alley at the side of the house; and at one end of it was a large closet with a door, and a square sliding hatch in the upper part of the door. This had been a powder-closet and through the hatch the elaborately dressed head had been thrust to receive the click and puff of the powder-pistol. Oleron puzzled a little over this closet; then, as its use occurred to him, he smiled faintly, a little moved, he knew not by what He would have to put it to a very different purpose from its original one; it would probably have to serve as his larder It was in this closet that he made a discovery. The back of it was shelved, and, rummaging on an upper shelf

that ran deeply into the wall, Oleron found a couple of mushroom-shaped old wooden wig-stands. He did not know how they had come to be there. Doubtless the painters had turned them up somewhere or other, and had put them there. But his five rooms, as a whole, were short of cupboard and closet-room; and it was only by the exercise of some ingenuity that he was able to find places for the bestowal of his household linen, his boxes, and his seldom-used but not-to-be-destroyed accumulation of papers.

It was in early spring that Oleron entered on his tenancy, and he was anxious to have Romilly ready for publication in the coming autumn. Nevertheless, he did not intend to force its production. Should it demand longer in the doing, so much the worse; he realised its importance, its crucial importance, in his artistic development, and it must have its own length and time. In the workroom he had recently left he had been making excellent progress; Romilly had begun, as the saying is, to speak and act of herself; and he did not doubt she would continue to do so the moment the distraction of his removal was over. This distraction was almost over; he told himself it was time he pulled himself together again; and on a March morning he went out, returned again with two great bunches of yellow daffodils, placed one bunch on his mantelpiece between the Sheffield sticks and the other on the table before him, and took out the half-completed manuscript of Romilly Bishop.

But before beginning work he went to a small rosewood cabinet and took from a drawer his cheque-book and pass book. He totted them up, and his monk-like face grew thoughtful. His installation had cost him more than he had intended it should, and his balance was rather less than fifty pounds, with no immediate prospect of more.

"Hm! I'd forgotten rugs and chintz curtains and so forth mounted up so," said Oleron. "But it would have been a pity to spoil the place for the want of ten pounds or so Well, Romilly simply

must be out for the autumn, that's all. So here goes-"

He drew his papers towards him.

But he worked badly; or, rather, he did not work at all. The square outside had its own noises, frequent and new, and Oleron could only hope that he would speedily become accustomed to these. First came hawkers, with their carts and cries; at midday the children, returning from school, trooped into the square and swung on Oleron's gate; and when the children had departed again for afternoon school, an itinerant musician with a mandoline posted himself beneath Oleron's window and began to strum. This was a not unpleasant distraction, and Oleron, pushing up his window, threw the man a penny. Then he returned to his table again. ..

But it was no good. He came to himself, at long intervals, to find that he had been looking about his room and wondering how he had formerly been furnished--whether a settee in buttercup or petunia satin had stood under the farther window, whether from the centre moulding of the light lofty ceiling had depended a glimmering crystal chandelier, or where the tambour-frame or the picquet-table had stood, ... No, it was no good; he had far better be frankly doing nothing than getting fruitlessly tired; and he decided that he would take a walk, but, chancing to sit down for a moment, dozed in his chair instead.

"This won't do," he yawned when he awoke at half-past four in the afternoon; "I must do better than this tomorrow--"

And he felt so deliciously lazy that for some minutes he even contemplated the breach of an appointment he had for the evening.

The next morning he sat down to work without even permitting himself to answer one of his three letters--two of them tradesmen's accounts, the third a note from Miss Bengough, forwarded from his old address. It was a jolly day of white and blue, with a gay noisy wind

and a subtle turn in the colour of growing things; and over and over again, once or twice a minute, his room became suddenly light and then subdued again, as the shining white clouds robed north-eastwards over the square. The soft fitful illumination was reflected in the polished surface of the table and even in the footworn old floor; and the morning noises had begun again.

Oleron made a pattern of dots on the paper before him, and then broke off to move the jar of daffodils exactly opposite the centre of a creamy panel. Then he wrote a sentence that ran continuously for a couple of lines, after which it broke off into notes and jottings. For a time he succeeded in persuading himself that in making these memoranda he was really working; then he rose and began to pace his room. As he did so, he was struck by an idea. It was that the place might possibly be a little better for more positive colour. It was, perhaps, a thought too pale-mild and sweet as a kind old face, but a little devitalised, even wan Yes, decidedly it would bear a robuster note--more and richer flowers, and possibly some warm and gay stuff for cushions for the window-seats

"Of course, I really can't afford it," he muttered, as he went for a two-foot and began to measure the width of the window recesses

In stooping to measure a recess, his attitude suddenly changed to one of interest and attention. Presently he rose again, rubbing his hands with gentle glee.

"Oho, oho!" he said. "These look to me very much like window-boxes, nailed up. We must look into this! Yes, those are boxes, or I'm . . . oho, this is an adventure!"

On that wall of his sitting-room there were two windows (the third was in another corner), and, beyond the open bedroom door, on the same wall, was another. The seats of all had been painted, repainted, and painted again; and Oleron's investigating finger had barely detected the old nailheads

beneath the paint. Under the ledge over which he stooped an old keyhole also had been puttied up. Oleron took out his penknife.

He worked carefully for five minutes, and then went into the kitchen for a hammer and chisel. Driving the chisel cautiously under the seat, he started the whole lid slightly. Again using the penknife, he cut along the hinged edge and outward along the ends; and then he fetched a wedge and a wooden mallet.

"Now for our little mystery-----" he said.

The sound of the mallet on the wedge seemed, in that sweet and pale apartment, somehow a little brutal--nay, even shocking. The panelling rang and rattled and vibrated to the blows like a sounding-board. The whole house seemed to echo; from the roomy cellarage to the garrets above a flock of echoes seemed to awake; and the sound got a little on Oleron's nerves. All at once he paused, fetched a duster, and muffled the mallet When the edge was sufficiently raised he put his fingers under it and lifted. The paint flaked and starred a little; the rusty old nails squeaked and grunted; and the lid came up, laying open the box beneath. Oleron looked into it. Save for a couple of inches of scurf and mould and old cobwebs it was empty.

"No treasure there," said Oleron, a little amused that he should have fancied there might have been. "Romilly will still have to be out by the autumn. Let's have a look at the others."

He turned to the second window.

The raising of the two remaining seats occupied him until well into the afternoon. That of the bedroom like the first, was empty; but from the second seat of his sitting-room he drew out something yielding and folded and furred over an inch thick with dust. He carried the object into the kitchen, and having swept it over a bucket, took a duster to it.

It was some sort of a large bag, of an ancient frieze-like material, and when unfolded it occupied the greater part of the small kitchen floor. In shape it was an irregular, a very irregular, triangle, and it had a couple of wide flaps, with the remains of straps and buckles. The patch that had been uppermost in the folding was of a faded yellowish brown; but the rest of it was of shades of crimson that varied according to the exposure of the parts of it.

"Now whatever can that have been?" Oleron mused as he stood surveying it "I give it up. Whatever it is, it's settled my work for to-day, I'm afraid-----"

He folded the object up carelessly and thrust it into a corner of the kitchen; then, taking pans and brushes and an old knife, he returned to the sitting-room and began to scrape and to wash and to line with paper his newly discovered receptacles. When he had finished, he put his spare boots and books and papers into them; and he closed the lids again, amused with his little adventure, but also a little anxious for the hour to come when he should settle fairly down to his work again.

III

It piqued Oleron a little that his friend, Miss Bengough, should dismiss with a glance the place he himself had found so singularly winning. Indeed she scarcely lifted her eyes to it. But then she had always been more or less like that--a little indifferent to the graces of life, careless of appearances, and perhaps a shade more herself when she ate biscuits from a paper bag than when she dined with greater observance of the convenances. She was an unattached journalist of thirty-four, large, showy, fair as butter, pink as a dog-rose, reminding one of a florist's picked specimen bloom, and given to sudden and ample movements and moist and explosive utterances. She "pulled a better living out of the pool" (as she expressed it) than Oleron did; and by cunningly disguised puffs of drapers and haberdashers she "pulled" also the greater part of her very varied wardrobe. She left small whirlwinds of

air behind her when she moved, in which her veils and scarves fluttered and spun.

Oleron heard the flurry of her skirts on his staircase and her single loud knock at his door when he had been a month in his new abode. Her garments brought in the outer air, and she flung a bundle of ladies' journals down on a chair.

"Don't knock off for me," she said across a mouthful of large-headed hatpins as she removed her hat and veil. "I didn't know whether you were straight yet, so I've brought some sandwiches for lunch. You've got coffee, I suppose? --No, don't get up--I'll find the kitchen-----"

"Oh, that's all right, I'll clear these things away. To tell the truth, I'm rather glad to be interrupted," said Oleron.

He gathered his work together and put it away. She was already in the kitchen; he heard the running of water into the kettle. He joined her, and ten minutes later followed her back to the sitting-room with the coffee and sandwiches on a tray. They sat down, with the tray on a small table between them.

"Well, what do you think of the new place?" Oleron asked as she poured out coffee.

"Hm! ... Anybody'd think you were going to get married, Paul."

He laughed.

"Oh no. But it's an improvement on some of them, isn't it?"

"Is it? I suppose it is; I don't know. I liked the last place, in spite of the black ceiling and no watertap. How's Romilly?" Oleron thumbed his chin.

"Hm! I'm rather ashamed to tell you. The fact is, I've not got on very well with it. But it will be all right on the night, as you used to say."

"Stuck?"

"Rather stuck."

"Got any of it you care to read to me? .
.."

Oleron had long been in the habit of reading portions of his work to Miss Bengough occasionally. Her comments were always quick and practical, sometimes directly useful, sometimes indirectly suggestive. She, in return for his confidence, always kept all mention of her own work sedulously from him. His, she said, was "real work"; hers merely filled space, not always even grammatically.

"I'm afraid there isn't," Oleron replied, still meditatively dry-shaving his chin. Then he added, with a little burst of candour, "The fact is, Elsie, I've not written--not actually written--very much more of it--any more of it, in fact. But, of course, that doesn't mean I haven't progressed. I've progressed, in one sense, rather alarmingly. I'm now thinking of reconstructing the whole thing."

Miss Bengough gave a gasp. "Reconstructing!"

"Making Romilly herself a different type of woman. Somehow, I've begun to feel that I'm not getting the most out of her. As she stands, I've certainly lost interest in her to some extent."

"But--but---" Miss Bengough protested, "you had her so real, so living, Paul!"

Oleron smiled faintly. He had been quite prepared for Miss Bengough's disapproval. He wasn't surprised that she liked Romilly as she at present existed; she would. Whether she realised it or not, there was much of herself in his fictitious creation. Naturally Romilly would seem "real," "living," to her.

"But are you really serious, Paul?" Miss Bengough asked presently, with a round-eyed stare.

"Quite serious."

"You're really going to scrap those fifteen chapters?"

"I didn't exactly say that."

"That fine, rich love-scene?"

"I should only do it reluctantly, and for the sake of something I thought better."

"And that beautiful, beautiful description of Romilly on the shore?"

"It wouldn't necessarily be wasted," he said a little uneasily.

But Miss Bengough made a large and windy gesture, and then let him have it.

"Really, you are too trying!" she broke out. "I do wish sometimes you'd remember you're human, and live in a world! You know I'd be the last to wish you to lower your standard one inch, but it wouldn't be lowering it to bring it within human comprehension. Oh, you're sometimes altogether too godlike! . . . Why, it would be a wicked, criminal waste of your powers to destroy those fifteen chapters! Look at it reasonably, now. You've been working for nearly twenty years; you've now got what you've been working for almost within your grasp; your affairs are at a most critical stage (oh, don't tell me; I know you're about at the end of your money); and here you are, deliberately proposing to withdraw a thing that will probably make your name, and to substitute for it something that ten to one nobody on earth will ever want to read--and small blame to them! Really, you try my patience!"

Oleron had shaken his head slowly as she had talked. It was an old story between them. The noisy, able, practical journalist was an admirable friend--up to a certain point; beyond that . . . well, each of us knows that point beyond which we stand alone. Elsie Bengough sometimes said that had she had one-tenth part of Oleron's genius there were few things she could not have done--thus making that genius a quantitatively divisible thing, a sort of ingredient, to be added to or to subtracted from in the admixture of his work. That it was a qualitative thing, essential, indivisible, informing, passed her comprehension. Their spirits parted company at that

point. Oleron knew it. She did not appear to know it.

"Yes, yes, yes," he said a little wearily, by-and-by, "practically you're quite right, entirely right, and I haven't a word to say. If I could only turn Romilly over to you you'd make an enormous success of her. But that can't be, and I, for my part, am seriously doubting whether she's worth my while. You know what that means."

"What does it mean?" she demanded bluntly.

"Well," he said, smiling wanly, "what does it mean when you're convinced a thing isn't worth doing? You simply don't do it."

Miss Bengough's eyes swept the ceiling for assistance against this impossible man.

"What utter rubbish!" she broke out at last. "Why, when I saw you last you were simply oozing Romilly; you were turning her off at the rate of four chapters a week; if you hadn't moved you'd have had her three-parts done by now. What on earth possessed you to move right in the middle of your most important work?"

Oleron tried to put her off with a recital of inconveniences, but she wouldn't have it. Perhaps in her heart she partly suspected the reason. He was simply mortally weary of the narrow circumstances of his life. He had had twenty years of it--twenty years of garrets and roof-chambers and dingy flats and shabby lodgings, and he was tired of dinginess and shabbiness. The reward was as far off as ever--or if it was not, he no longer cared at once he would have cared to put out his hand and take it. It is all very well to tell a man who is at the point of exhaustion that only another effort is required of him; if he cannot make it he is as far off as ever...

"Anyway," Oleron summed up, "I'm happier here than I've been for a long time. That's some sort of a justification."

"And doing no work," said Miss Bengough pointedly.

At that a trifling petulance that had been gathering in Oleron came to a head.

"And why should I do nothing but work?" he demanded. "How much happier am I for it? I don't say I don't love my work--when it's done; but I hate doing it. Sometimes it's an intolerable burden that I simply long to be rid of. Once in many weeks it has a moment, one moment, of glow and thrill for me; I remember the days when it was all glow and thrill; and now I'm forty-four, and it's becoming drudgery. Nobody wants it; I'm ceasing to want it myself; and if any ordinary sensible man were to ask me whether I didn't think I was a fool to go on, I think I should agree that I was."

Miss Bengough's comely pink face was serious.

"But you knew all that, many, many years ago, Paul--and still you chose it," she said in a low voice.

"Well, and how should I have known?" he demanded. "I didn't know. I was told so. My heart, if you like, told me so, and I thought I knew. Youth always thinks it knows; then one day it discovers that it is nearly fifty----"

"Forty-four, Paul----"

"--forty-four, then--and it finds that the glamour isn't in front, but behind. Yes, I knew and chose, if that's knowing and choosing . . . but it's a costly choice we're called on to make when we're young!"

Miss Bengough's eyes were on the floor. Without moving them she said, "You're not regretting it, Paul?"

"Am I not?" he took her up. "Upon my word, I've lately thought I am! What do I get in return for it all?"

"You know what you get," she replied.

He might have known from her tone what else he could have had for the

holding up of a finger--herself. She knew, but could not tell him, that he could have done no better thing for himself. Had he, any time these ten years, asked her to marry him, she would have replied quietly, "Very well; when?" He had never thought of it

"Yours is the real work," she continued quietly. "Without you we jackals couldn't exist. You and a few like you hold everything upon your shoulders."

For a minute there was a silence. Then it occurred to Oleron that this was common vulgar grumbling. It was not his habit. Suddenly he rose and began to stack cups and plates on the tray.

"Sorry you catch me like this, Elsie," he said, with a little laugh "No, I'll take them out; then we'll go for a walk, if you like...."

He carried out the tray, and then began to show Miss Bengough round his flat. She made few comments. In the kitchen she asked what an old faded square of reddish frieze was, that Miss Barrett used as a cushion for her wooden chair.

"That? I should be glad if you could tell me what it is," Oleron replied as he unfolded the bag and related the story of its finding in the window-seat.

"I think I know what it is," said Miss Bengough. "It's been used to wrap up a harp before putting it in its case."

"By Jove, that's probably just what it was," said Oleron, "I could make neither head nor tale of it...."

They finished the tour of the flat, and returned to the sitting-room.

"And who lives in the rest of the house?" Miss Bengough asked.

"I dare say a tramp sleeps in the cellar occasionally. Nobody else."

"Hm! . . . Well, I'll tell you what I think of it, if you like."

"I should like."

"You'll never work here."

"Oh?" said Oleron quickly. "Why not?"

"You'll never finish Romilly here. Why, I don't know, but you won't. I know it. You'll have to leave before you get on with that book."

He mused a moment, and then said:

"Isn't that a little---prejudiced, Elsie?"

"Perfectly ridiculous. As an argument it hasn't a leg to stand on. But there it is," she replied, her mouth once more full of the large-headed hat pins.

"I can only hope you're entirely wrong," he said, "for I shall be in a serious mess if Romilly isn't out in the autumn."

IV

As Oleron sat by his fire that evening, pondering Miss Bengough's prognostication that difficulties awaited him in his work, he came to the conclusion that it would have been far better had she kept her beliefs to herself. No man does a thing better for having his confidence damped at the outset, and to speak of difficulties is in a sense to make them. Speech itself becomes a deterrent act, to which other discouragements accrete until the very event of which warning is given is as likely as not to come to pass. He hardly confounded her. An influence hostile to the completion of Romilly had been born.

And in some illogical, dogmatic way women seem to have, she had attached this antagonistic influence to his new abode. Was ever anything so absurd! "You'll never finish Romilly." He moved his chair to look round the room that smiled, positively smile, in the firelight. He too smiled, as if pity was to be entertained for a maligned apartment. Even that slight lack of robust colour he had remarked was not noticeable in the soft glow. The drawn chintz curtains---they had a flowered and trellised pattern, with baskets and oaten pipes---fell in long quiet folds to the window-seats; the rows of bindings in old bookcases took the light richly; the last

trace of sallowness had gone with the daylight; and, if the truth must be told, it had been Elsie himself who had seemed a little out of the picture.

That reflection struck him a little, and presently he returned to it. Yes, the room had, quite accidentally, done Miss Bengough a disservice that afternoon. It ad, in some subtle but unmistakable way, paced hr, marked a contrast of qualities. Assuming for the sake of argument the slightly ridiculous proposition that the room in which Oleron saw was characterised by a certain sparsity and lack of vigour; so much the worse for Miss Bengough; she certainly erred on the side of redundancy and c-general muchness. And if one must contrast abstract qualities, Oleron inclined to the austere in taste. . . .

Yes, here Oleron had made a distinct discovery; he wondered he had not made it before. He picture Miss Bengough again as she had appeared that afternoon--large, showy, moistly pink, with that quality of the prize bloom exuding, as it were from here; and instantly she suffered in his thought. He even recognised now that he had noticed something odd at the time, and that unconsciously his attitude, even while he had been there, had been one of criticism. The mechanism of her was a little obvious; her melting humidity was the result of analysable processes; and behind her there had seem to lurk some dim shape emblematic of mrtality. He had never, during the ten years of their intimacy, dreamed for a moment of asking her to mrry him; none the less, he now felt for the first time a thankfulness that he had not done so . . .

Then, suddenly and swiftly, his face flamed that he should be thinking thus of his friend. What! Elsie Bengough, with whom he had spent weeks and weeks of afternoons--she, the good chum, on whose help he would have counted had all the rest of the world failed him--she, whose loyalty to him would not, he knew, swerve as long as there was breath in her--Elsie to be even in thought dissected thus! He was an ingrate and a cad . . .

Had she been there in that moment he would have abased himself before her.

For ten minutes and more he sat, still gazing into the fire, with that humiliating red fading slowly from his cheeks. All was still within and without, save for a tiny musical tinkling that came from his kitchen--the dripping of water from an imperfectly turned-off tap into the vessel beneath it. Mechanically he began to beat with his fingers to the faintly heard falling of the drops; the tiny regular movement seemed to hasten that shameful withdrawal from his face. He grew cool once ore; ad when he resumed his meditation he was all unconscious that he took it up again at the same point. . . .

it was not only her florid superfluity of build that he had approached in the attitude of criticism; he was conscious also of the wide differences between her mind and his own. He felt no thankfulness that up to a certain point their natures had ever run companionably side by side; he was now full of questions beyond that point. Their intellects diverged; there was no denying it; and, looking back, he was inclined to doubt whether there had been any real coincidence. True, he had read his writings to her and she had appeared to speak comprehendingly and to the point; but what can a man do who, having assumed that another sees s he does, is suddenly brought up sharp by something that falsifies and discredits all that had gone before? He doubted all now. . . . It did for a moment occur to them that the man who demands of a friend more than can be given to him is in danger of losing that friend, but he put the thought aside.

Again he ceased to think, that again moved his finger to the distant dripping of the tap. . .

And now (he resumed by-and-by), if these things were true of Elsie Bengough, they were also true of the creation of which she was the prototype--Romilly Bishop. And since he could say f Romilly what for very she he could not say of Elsie, he gave his thoughts rein.

He did so in that smiling, fire-lighted room, to the accompaniment of the faintly heard tap.

There was no longer any doubt about it; he hated the central character of his novel. Even as he had described her physically she overpowered the senses; she was coarse-fibered, over-coloured, rank. It became true the moment he formulated his thought; Gulliver had described the Brobdingnagian maids-of-honour thus: and mentally and spiritually she corresponded--was unsensitive, limited, common. The model (he closed his eyes for a moment)--the model stuck out through fifteen vulgar and blatant chapters to such a pitch that, without seeing the reason, he had been unable to begin the sixteenth. He marvelled that it had only just dawned upon him.

And this was to have been his Beatrice, his vision! As Elsie she was to have gone into the furnace of his art, and she was to have come out the Woman all men desire! Her thoughts were to have been culled from his own finest, her form from his dearest dreams, and her setting wherever he could find one fit for her worth. He had brooded long before making the attempt; then one day he had felt her stir within him as a mother feels a quickening, and he had begun to write; and so he had added chapter to chapter....

And those fifteen sodden chapters were what he had produced!

Again he sat, softly moving his finger. .

..

Then he bestirred himself.

She must go, all fifteen chapters of her. That was settled. For what was to take her place in his mind was a blank; but one thing at a time; a man is not excused from taking the wrong course because the right one is not immediately revealed to him. Better would come if it was to come; in the meantime-----

He rose, fetched the fifteen chapters, and read them over before he should drop them in the fire.

But instead of putting them in the fire he let them fall from his hand. He became conscious of the dripping of the tap again. It had a tinkling gamut of four or five notes, on which it tang irregular changes, and it was foolishly sweet and dulcimer-like. In his mind Oleron could see the gathering of each drop, its little tremble on the lip of the tap, and the tiny percussion of its fall "Plink--plunk," minimised almost to inaudibility. Following the lowest note there seemed to be a brief phrase, irregularly repeated; and presently Oleron found himself waiting for the recurrence of this phrase. It was quite pretty....

But it did not conduce to wakefulness, and Oleron dozed over his fire.

When e awoke again the fire had burned low and the flames of the candles were licking the rims of the Sheffield sticks. Sluggishly he rose, yawned, went his nightly round of door-locks, and window-fastenings, and passed into his bedroom. Soon, he slept soundly.

But a curious little sequel followed on the morrow. Mrs. Barrett usually tapped, not at his door, but at the wooden wall beyond which lay Oleron's bed; and then Oleron rose, put on his dressing gown, and admitted her. He was not conscious that as he did so that morning he hummed an air; but Mrs. Barrett lingered wit her hand on the doorknob and her face a little averted and smiling.

"De-ar me!" her soft falsetto rose. "But that will be a very O-ald tune, Mr. Oleron! I will not have heard it this forty years!"

"What tune?" Oleron asked.

"The tune, indeed, that you was humming, sir."

Oleron had his thumb in the flap of a letter. It remained there. "I was humming? . . . Sing it, Mrs. Barrett."

Mrs. Barrett prut-prutted.

"I have no voice for singing, Mr. Oleron; it was Ann Pugh was the singer of our family; but the tune will be very o-ald, and it is called, The Beckoning Fair One."

"Try to sin it," said Oleron, his thumb still in the envelope; and Mrs. Barrett, with much dimpling and confusion, hummed the air.

"They do say it was sung to a harp, Mr. Oleron, and it will be very o-ald," she concluded.

"And I was singing that?"

"Indeed you was. I would not be very likely to tell you lies."

With a "Very well--let me have breakfast," Oleron opened his letter; but the trifling circumstance struck hi as more odd than he would have admitted to himself. The phrase he hd hummed had been that which he had associated with the falling from the tap on the evening before."

V

Even more curious than that the commonplace dripping of an ordinary water-tap should have tallied so closely with an actually existing air was another result it had, namely, that it awakened, or seemed to awaken, in Oleron an abnormal sensitiveness to other noises of the old house. It has been remarked that the silence obtains its fullest and most impressive quality when it is broken by some minute sound; and, truth to tell, the place was never still. Perhaps the mildness of the spring air operated on its torpid old timbers; perhaps Oleron s fires caused it to stretch its own anatomy; and certainly a whole world of insect life bored and burrowed in its baulks and joists. At any rate Oleron had only so it quiet in his chair and to wait for a minute or two in order to become aware of such a change ion the auditory scale as comes upon a man who, conceiving the mid-summer woods to be motionless and still, all at once finds his ear sharpened to the crepitation of a myriad insects.

And he smiled to think of man's arbitrary distinction between that which has life and that which has not. Here, quite apart from such recognisable sounds as the scampering of mice, the falling of plaster behind his panelling, and the popping of purses or coffins from his fire, was a whole house talking to him had he but known his language. Beams settled with a tired sigh into their old mortices; creatures ticked in the walls; joints cracked, boards complained; with no palpable stirring of the air window-sashes changed their position with a soft knock in their frames. And whether the place had life in this sense or not, it had at all events a winsome personality. It needed but an hour of musing for Oleron to conceive the idea tat, as his own body stood in friendly relation to his soul, so, by an extension and an attenuation, his habituation might fantastically be supposed to stand in some relation to himself. He even amused himself with the far-fetched fancy that he might so identify himself with the place that some future tenant, taking possession, might regard it as in a sense haunted. It would be rather a joke if he, a perfectly harmless author, with nothing on his mind worse than a novel he had discovered he must begin again, should turn out to be laying the foundation of a future ghost! . . .

In proportion, as he felt this growing attachment to the fabric of his abode, Elsie Bengough, from being merely unattracted, began to show a dislike of the place that was more and more marked. And she did not scruple to speak of her aversion.

"It doesn't belong to to-day at all, and for you especially it's bad," she said with decision. "You're only too ready to let go your hold on actual things and to slip into apathy; you ought to be in a place with concrete floors and patent has-meter and a tradesman' lift. Nd it would do you all the good in the world if you had a job that made you scramble and rub elbows with your fellow-men. Now, if I could get you a job, for, say, two or three days a week, one that would allow you heaps of time for your proper work--would you take it?"

Somehow, Oleron resented a little being diagnosed like this. He thanked Miss Bengough, but without a smile.

"Thank you, but I don't think so. After all each of us has his own life to live," he could not refrain from adding.

"His own life to live! . . . How long is it since you were out, Paul?"

"About two hours."

"I don't mean to buy stamps or to post a letter. How long is it since you had anything like a stretch?"

"Oh, some little time perhaps. I don't know."

"Since I was here last?"

"I haven't been out much."

"And has Romilly progressed much better for your being cooped up?"

"I think she has. I'm laying the foundations of her. I shall begin the actual writing presently."

It seemed as if Miss Bengough had forgotten their tussle about the first Romilly. She frowned, turned half away, and then quickly turned again.

"Ah! . . . So you've still got that ridiculous idea in your head?"

"If you mean," said Oleron slowly, "that I've discarded the only Romilly, and am at work on a new one, you're right. I have still got that idea in my head." Something uncordial in his tone struck her; but she was a fighter. His own absurd sensitiveness hardened her. She gave a "Pshaw!" of impatience.

"Where is the old one?" she demanded abruptly.

"Why?" said Oleron.

"I want to see it. I want to show some of it to you. I want, if you're not wool-gathering entirely, to bring you back to your senses."

This time it was he who turned his back. But when he turned round again he spoke more gently.

"It's no good, Elsie. I'm responsible for the way I go, and you must allow me to go it--even if it should seem wrong to you. Believe me, I am giving thought to it. . . . The manuscript? I was on the point of burning it, but I didn't. It's in that window-seat, if you must see it."

Miss Bengough crossed quickly to the window-seat, and lifted the lid. Suddenly she gave a little exclamation, and put the back of her hand to her mouth. She spoke over her shoulder:

"You ought to knock these nails in, Paul," she said.

He strode to her side.

"What? What is it? What's the matter?" he asked. "I did knock them in--or rather, pulled them out."

"You left enough to scratch with," she replied, showing her hand. From the upper wrist to the knuckle of the little finger a welling red wound showed.

"Good--Gracious!" Oleron ejaculated. . . . "Here, come to the bathroom and bathe it quickly----"

He hurried her to the bathroom, turned on warm water, and bathed and cleansed the bad gash. Then, still holding the hand, he turned cold water on it, uttering broken phases of astonishment and concern.

"Good Lord, how did that happen! As far as I knew I'd . . . is this water too cold? Does that hurt? I can't imagine how on earth . . . there; that'll do----"

"No--one moment longer--I can bear it," she murmured, her eyes closed.

Presently he led her back to the sitting-room and bound the hand in one of his handkerchiefs; but his face did not lose its expression of perplexity. He had spent half a day in opening and making serviceable the three window-boxes, and

he could not conceive how he had come to leave an inch and a half of rusty nail standing in the wood. He himself had opened the lids of each of them a dozen times and had not noticed any nail; but there it was . . .

"It shall come out now, at 11 events," he muttered, as he went for a pair of pincers. And he made no mistake about it that time

Elsie Bengough had sunk into a chair, and her face was rather white; but in her hand was the manuscript of Romilly. She had not finished with Romilly yet. Presently she returned to the charge.

"Oh, Paul, it will be the greatest mistake you ever, ever made if you do not publish this!" she said.

He hung his head, genuinely distressed. He couldn't get that incident of the nail out of his head, and Romilly occupied a second place in his thoughts for the moment. But still she insisted; and when presently he spoke it was almost as if he asked her pardon for something.

"What can I say, Elsie? I can only hope that when you see the new version, you'll see how right I am. And if in spite of all you don't like her, well . . ." he made hopeless gesture. "Don't you see that I must be guided by my own lights?"

She was silent.

"Come, Elsie," he said gently. "We've got along well so far; don't let us split on this."

The last words had hardly passed his lips before he regretted them. She had been nursing her injured hand, with her eyes once more closed; but her lips and lids quivered simultaneously. Her voice shook as she spoke.

"I can't help saying it, Paul, but you are so greatly changed."

"Hush, Elsie, he murmured soothingly; you've had a shock; rest for a while. How could I change?"

"I don't know, but you are. You've not been yourself ever since you came here. I wish you'd never seen the place. It's stopped your work, it's making you into a person I hardly know, and it's made me horribly anxious about you. . . . Oh, how my hand is beginning to throb!"

"Poor child!" he murmured. "Will you let me take you to a doctor and have it properly dressed?"

"No--I shall be all right presently--I'll keep it raised----"

She put her elbow on the back of the chair, and the bandaged hand rested lightly on his shoulder.

At that thought an entirely new anxiety stirred suddenly within him. Hundreds of times previously, on their jaunts and excursions, she had slipped her hand within his arm as she might have slipped it into the arm of a brother, and he had accepted the little affectionate gesture as a brother might have accepted it. But now, for the first time, there rushed into his mind a hundred startling questions. Her eyes were still closed, and her head had fallen pathetically back; and there was a lost and ineffable smile on her parted lips. The truth broke in upon him. Good God! . . . And he had never divined it!

And stranger than all was that, now that he did see that she was lost in love of him, there came to him, not sorrow and humility and abasement, but something else that he struggled in vain against--something entirely strange and new, that, had he analyzed it, he would have found to be petulance and irritation and resentment and ungentleness. The sudden selfish prompting mastered him before he was aware. He all but gave it word. What was she doing there at all? Why was she not getting on with her own work? Why was she here interfering with his? Who had given her this guardianship over him that lately she had put forward so assertively?--"changed?" It was she, not himself, who had changed. . . .

But by the time she had opened her eyes again he had overcome his resentment

sufficiently to speak gently, albeit with reserve.

"I wish you would let me take you to a doctor."

She rose.

"No thank you, Paul," she said. "I'll go now. If I need a dressing I'll get one; take the other hand, please. Good-bye---"

He did not attempt to detain her. He walked with her to the foot of the stairs. Half-way along the narrow alley she turned.

"It would be a long way to come if you happened not to be in," she said; "I'll send you a post card the next time."

At the gate she turned again.

"Leave here, Paul," she said, with a mournful look. "Everything's wrong with this house."

Then she was gone.

Oleron returned to his room. He crossed straight to the window-box. He opened the lid and stood long looking at it. Then he closed it again and turned away.

"That's rather frightening," he muttered. "It's simply not possible that I should not have removed that nail..."

VI

Oleron knew very well what Elsie had meant when she had said that her next visit would be preceded by a postcard. She, too, had realised that at last, at last he knew--knew, and didn't want her. It gave him a miserable, pitiful pang, therefore, when she came again within a week, knocking at the door unannounced. She spoke from the landing; she did not intend to stay, she said; and he had to press her before she would so much as enter.

Her excuse for calling was that she had heard of an inquiry for short stories that he might be wise to follow up. He

thanked her. Then, her business over, she seemed anxious to get away again. Oleron did not seek to detain her; even he sw through the pretext of the stories; and he accompanied her down the stairs.

But Elsie Bengough had no luck whatever in that house. A second accident befell her. Half-way down the staircase there was a sharp sound of splintering wood, and she checked a loud cry. Oleron knew the woodwork to be old, but he himself had ascended and descended frequently enough without mishap...

Elsie had put her foot through one of the stairs.

He sprang to her side in alarm.

"Oh, I say! My poor girl!"

She laughed hysterically.

"It's my weight--I know I'm getting fat--"

"Keep still--let me clear those splinters away," he muttered between his teeth.

She continued to laugh and sob that it was her weight--she was getting fat--

He thrust downwards at the broken boards. The extrication was no easy matter, and her torn boot shows him how badly the foot and ankle within it must be abraded.

"Good God--good God!" he muttered over and over again.

"I shall be too heavy for anything soon," she sobbed and laughed.

But she refused to reascend and to examine her hurt.

"No, let me go quickly--let me go quickly," she repeated.

"But it's a frightful gash!"

"No--not so bad--let me get away quickly--I'm--I'm not wanted."

At her words, that she was not wanted, his head dropped as if she had given him a buffet.

"Elsie!" he choked, brokenly and shocked.

But she too made a quick gesture, as if she put something violently aside.

"Oh, Paul, not that--not you--of course I do mean that too in a sense--oh, you know what I mean! . . . But if the other can't be, spare me this now! I--I wouldn't have come, but--but oh, I did, I did try to keep away!"

It was intolerable, heartbreaking; but what could he do--what could he say? He did not love her. . . .

"Let me go--I'm not wanted--let me take away what's left of me--"

"Dear Elsie--you are very dear to me--"

But again she made the gesture, as of putting something violently aside.

"No, not that--not anything less--don't offer me anything less--leave me a little pride--"

"Let me get my hat and coat--let me take you to a doctor," he muttered.

But she refused. She refused even the support of his arm. She gave another unsteady laugh.

"I'm sorry I broke your stairs, Paul. . . . You will go and see about the short stories, won't you?"

He groaned.

"Then if you won't see a doctor, will you go across the square and let Mrs. Barrett look at you? Look, there's Barrett passing now--"

The long-nosed Barrett was looking curiously down the alley, but as Oleron was about to call him he made off with our a word. Elsie seemed anxious for nothing so much as to be clear of the place, and finally promised to go

straight to a doctor, but insisted on going alone.

"Good-bye," she said.

And Oleron watched her until she was past the hatchet-like "To Let" boards, as if he feared that even they might fall upon her and maim her.

That night Oleron did not dine. He had far too much on his mind. He walked from room to room of his flat, as if he could have walked way from Elsie Bengough's haunting cry that still rang in his ears. "I'm not wanted--don't offer me anything less--let me take away what's left of me-----"

Oh, if he could have persuaded himself that he loved her!

He walked until twilight fell, then, without lighting candles, he stirred up the fire and flung himself into a chair.

Poor, poor Elsie!

But even while his heart ached for her, it was out of the question. If only he had known! If only he had used common observation! But those walks, those sisterly takings of the arm--what a fool he had been! . . . Well, it was too late now. It was she, not he, who must now act--act by keeping away. He would help her all he could. He himself would not sit in her presence. If she came, he would hurry her out again as fast as he could. . . . Poor, poor Elsie!

His room grew dark; the fire burned dead; and he continued to it, wincing from time to time as a fresh tortured phrase rang in his ears.

Then suddenly, he knew not why, he found himself anxious for her in a new sense--uneasy about her personal safety. A horrible fancy that even then he might be looking over an embankment down into dark water, that she might even now be glancing up at the hook on the door, took him. Women had been known to do these things! . . . Then there would be an inquest, and he himself would be called upon to identify her, and would be asked how she had come by an

ill-healed wound on the hand and a bad abrasion of the ankle. Barrett would say that he had seen her leaving his house. . .

Then he recognised that his thoughts were morbid. By an effort of will he put them aside, and sat for awhile listening to the faint creakings and tickings and rappings within his panelling. . . .

If only he could have married her...But he couldn't. Her face had risen before him again as he had seen it on the stairs, drawn with pain and ugly and swollen with tears. Ugly--yes, positively blubbered; if tears were women's weapons, as they were said to be, such tears were weapons turning against themselves . . . suicide again . . .

Then all at once he found himself attentively considering her two accidents.

Extraordinary, they had been, both of them. He could not have left that old nail standing in the wood; why, he had fetched tools specially from the kitchen; and he was convinced that the step that had broken beneath her weight had been as sound as the others. It was inexplicable, if these things could happen, anything could happen. There was not a beam nor a jamb in the place that might not fall without warning, not a plank that might not crash inwards, not a nail that might not become a dagger. The whole place was full of life even now; as he sat there in the dark he heard its crowds of noises as if the house had been one great microphone. . . .

Only half conscious that he did so, he had been sitting for some time identifying these noises, attributing to each crack or creak or knock its material cause; but there was one noise which, again not fully conscious of the omission, he had not sought to account for. It had last come some minutes ago; it came again now--a sort of soft sweeping rustle that seemed to hold an almost inaudible minute crackling. For half a minute or so it had Oleron's attention; then his heavy thoughts were of Elsie Bengough again.

He was nearer to loving her in that moment than he had ever been. He thought how to some men their loved ones were but the dearer for those poor mortal blemishes that tell us we are but sojourners on earth, with a common fate not far distant that makes it hardly worth while to do anything but love for the time remaining. Strangling sobs, blearing tears, bodies buffeted by sickness, hearts and mind callous and hard with the rubs of the world--how little love there would be were these things a barrier to love! In that sense he did love Elsie Bengough. What her happiness had never moved in him her sorrow almost awoke. . . .

Suddenly his meditation went. His ear had once more become conscious of that soft and repeated noise--the long sweep with the almost inaudible crackle in it. Again and again it came, with a curious insistence and urgency. It quickened a little as he became increasingly attentive. . . . it seemed to Oleron that it grew louder. . . .

All at once he started bolt upright in his chair, tense and listening. The silky rustle came agin; he was trying to attach it to something. . . .

The next moment he had leapt to his feet, unnerved and terrified. His chair hung poised for a moment, and then went over, setting the fire-irons clattering as it fell. There was only one noise in the world like that which had caused him to spring thus to his feet. . . .

The next time it came Oleron felt behind him at the empty air with his hand, and backed slowly until he found himself against the wall.

"God in Heaven!" The ejaculation broke from Oleron's lips. The sound had ceased.

The next moment he had given a high cry.

"What is it? What's there? Who's there?"

A sound of scuttling caused his knees to bend under him for a moment; but that, he knew, was a mouse. That was not

something that his stomach turned sick and his mind reeled to entertain. That other sound, the like of which was not in the world, had now entirely ceased; and again he called. . . .

He called and continued to call; and then another terror, a terror of the sound of his own voice, seized him. He did not dare to call again. His shaking hand went to his pocket for a match, but he found none. He thought there might be matches on the mantelpiece-----

He worked his way to the mantelpiece round a little recess, without for a moment leaving the wall. Then his hand encountered the mantelpiece, and groped along it. A box of matches fell to the hearth. He could just see them in the firelight, but his hand could not pick them up until he had cornered them inside the fender.

Then he rose and struck a light.

The room was as usual. He struck a second match. A candle stood on the table. He lighted it, and the flame sank for a moment and then burned up clear. Again he looked round.

There was nothing.

There was nothing; but there had been something, and might still be something. Formerly, Oleron had smiled at the fantastic thought that, by a merging and interplay of identities between himself and his beautiful room, he might be preparing a ghost for the future; it had not occurred to him that there might have been a similar merging and coalescence in the past. Yet with this staggering impossibility he was now face to face. Something did persist in the house; it had a tenant other than himself; and that tenant, whatsoever or whosoever, had appalled Oleron's soul by producing the sound of a woman brushing her hair.

vii

Without quite knowing how he came to be there Oleron found himself striding over the loose board he had temporarily placed on the step broken by Miss Bengough. He was hatless, and

descending the stairs. Not until later did there return to him a hazy memory that he had left the candle burning on the table, had opened the door no wider than was necessary to allow the passage of his body, and had sidled out, closing the door softly behind him. At the foot of the stairs another shock awaited him. Something dashed with a flurry up from the disused cellars and disappeared out of the door. It was only a cat, but Oleron gave a childish sob.

He passed out of the gate, and stood for a moment under the "To Let" boards, plucking foolishly at his lip and looking up at the glimmer of light behind one of his red blinds. Then, still looking over his shoulder, he moved stumblingly up the square. There was a small public-house round the corner; Oleron had never entered it; but he entered it now, and put down a shilling that missed the counter by inches.

"B---b---bran--brandy," he said, and then stooped to look for the shilling.

He had the little sawdusted bar to himself; what company there was--carters and labourers and the small tradesmen of the neighbourhood--was gathered in the farther compartment, beyond the space where the white-haired landlady moved among her taps and bottles. Oleron sat down on a hardwood settee with a perforated seat, drank half his brandy, and then, thinking he might as well drink it as spill it, finished it.

Then he fell to wondering which of the men whose voices he heard across the public-house would undertake the removal of his effects on the morrow.

In the meantime he ordered more brandy.

For he did not intend to go back to that room where he had left the candle burning. Oh no! He couldn't have faced even the entry and the staircase with the broken step --certainly not that pith-white, fascinating room. He would go back for the present to his old arrangement, of work-room and separate sleeping-quarters; he would go to his old landlady at once--presently--

when he had finished his brandy --and see if she could put him up for the night. His glass was empty now

He rose, had it refilled, and sat down again.

And if anybody asked his reason for removing again? Oh, he had reason enough--reason enough! Nails that put themselves back into wood again and gashed people's hands, steps that broke when you trod on them, and women who came into a man's place and brushed their hair in the dark, were reasons enough! He was querulous and injured about it all. He had taken the place for himself, not for invisible women to brush their hair in; that lawyer fellow in Lincoln's Inn should be told so, too, before many hours were out; it was outrageous, letting people in for agreement like that!

A cut-glass partition divided the compartment where Oleron sat from the space where the white-haired landlady moved; but it stopped seven or eight inches above the level of the counter. There was no partition at the further bar. Presently Oleron, raising his eyes, saw that faces were watching him through the aperture. The faces disappeared when he looked at them.

He moved to a corner where he could not be seen from the other bar; but this brought him into line with the white-haired landlady.

She knew him by sight--had doubtless seen him passing and repassing; and presently she made a remark on the weather. Oleron did not know what he replied, but it sufficed to call forth the further remark that the winter had been a bad one for influenza, but that the spring weather seemed to be coming at last Even this slight contact with the commonplace steadied Oleron a little; an idle, nascent wonder whether the landlady brushed her hair every night, and, if so, whether it gave out those little electric cracklings, was shut down with a snap; and Oleron was better

With his next glass of brandy he was all for going back to his flat. Not go

back? Indeed, he would go back! They should very soon see whether he was to be turned out of his place like that! He began to wonder why he was doing the rather unusual thing he was doing at that moment, unusual for him--sitting hatless, drinking brandy, in a public-house. Suppose he were to tell the white-haired landlady all about it--to tell her that a caller had scratched her hand on a nail, had later had the bad luck to put her foot through a rotten stair, and that he himself, in an old house full of squeaks and creaks and whispers, had heard a minute noise and had bolted from it in fright--what would she think of him? That he was mad, of course Pshaw! The real truth of the matter was that he hadn't been doing enough work to occupy him. He had been dreaming his days away, filling his head with a lot of moonshine about a new Romilly (as if the old one was not good enough), and now he was surprised that the devil should enter an empty head!

Yes, he would go back. He would take a walk in the air first--he hadn't walked enough lately--and then he would take himself in hand, settle the hash of that sixteenth chapter of Romilly (fancy, he had actually been fool enough to think of destroying fifteen chapters !) and thenceforward he would remember that he had obligations to his fellow men and work to do in the world. There was the matter in a nutshell.

He finished his brandy and went out.

He had walked for some time before any other bearing of the matter than that on himself occurred to him. At first, the fresh air had increased the heady effect of the brandy he had drunk; but afterwards his mind grew clearer than it had been since morning. And the clearer it grew, the less final did his boastful self-assurances become, and the firmer his conviction that, when all explanations had been made, there remained something that could not be explained. His hysteria of an hour before had passed; he grew steadily calmer; but the disquieting conviction remained. A deep fear took possession of him. It was a fear for Elsie.

For something in his place was inimical to her safety. Of themselves, her two accidents might not have persuaded him of this; but she herself had said it. "I'm not wanted here " And she had declared that there was something wrong with the place. She had seen it before he had. Well and good. One thing stood out clearly: namely, that if this was so, she must be kept away for quite another reason than that had so confounded and humiliated Oleron. Luckily she had expressed her intention of staying away; she must be held to that intention. He must see to it.

And he must see to it all the more that he now saw his first example, never to set foot in the place again, was absurd. People did not do that kind of thing. With Elsie made secure, he could not with any respect to himself suffer himself to be turned out by a shadow, nor even by a danger merely because it was a danger. He had to live somewhere, and he would live there. He must return.

He mastered the faint chill of fear that came with the decision, and turned in his walk abruptly. Should fear grow on him again he would, perhaps, take one more glass of brandy

But by the time he reached the short street that led to the square he was too late for more brandy. The little public house was still lighted, but closed, and one or two men were standing talking on the kerb. Oleron noticed that a sudden silence fell on them as he passed, and he noticed further that the long-nosed Barrett, whom he passed a little lower down, did not return his good-night. He turned in at the broken gate, hesitated merely an instant in the alley, and then mounted his stairs again.

Only an inch of candle remained in the Sheffield stick, and Oleron did not light another one. Deliberately he forced himself to take it up and to make the tour of his five rooms before retiring. It was as he returned from the kitchen across his little hall that he noticed that a letter lay on the floor. He carried it into his sitting-room, and glanced at the envelope before opening it.

It was unstamped, and had been put into the door by hand. Its handwriting was clumsy, and it ran from beginning to end without comma or period. Oleron read the first line, turned to the signature, and then finished the letter.

It was from the man Barrett, and it informed Oleron that he, Barrett, would be obliged if Mr. Oleron would make other arrangements for the preparing of his breakfasts and the cleaning-out of his place. The sting lay in the tail, that is to say, the postscript- This consisted of a text of Scripture. It embodied an allusion that could only be to Elsie Bengough

A seldom-seen frown had cut deeply into Oleron's brow. So! That was it! Very well; they would see about that on the morrow For the rest, this seemed merely another reason why Elsie should keep away ...

Then his suppressed rage broke out.. ..

The foul-minded lot! The devil himself could not have given a leer at anything that had ever passed between Paul Oleron and Elsie Bengough, yet this nosing rascal must be prying and talking! ...

Oleron crumpled the paper up, held it, in, the candle flame, and then ground the ashes under his heel.

One useful purpose, however, the letter had served: it had created in Oleron a wrathful blaze that effectually banished pale shadows. Nevertheless, one other puzzling circumstance was to close the day. As he undressed, he chanced to glance at his bed. The coverlets bore an impress as if somebody had lain on them. Oleron could not remember that he himself had lain down during the day--off-hand, he would have said that certainly he had not; but after all he could not be positive. His indignation for Elsie, acting possibly with the residue of the brandy in him, excluded all other considerations; and he put out his candle, lay down, and passed immediately into a deep and dreamless sleep, which, in the

absence of Mrs. Barrett's morning call, lasted almost once round the clock.

VIII

To the man who pays heed to that voice within him which warns him that twilight and danger are settling over his soul, terror is apt to appear an absolute thing, against which his heart must be safeguarded in a twink unless there is to take place an alteration in the whole range and scale of his nature. Mercifully, he has never far to look for safeguards. Of the immediate and small and common and momentary things of life, of usages and observances and modes and conventions, he builds up fortifications against the powers of darkness. He is even content that, not terror only, but joy also, should for working purposes be placed in the category of the absolute things; and the last treason he will commit will be that breaking down of terms and limits that strikes, not at one man, but at the welfare of the souls of all.

In his own person, Oleron began to commit this treason. He began to commit it by admitting the inexplicable and horrible to an increasing familiarity. He did it insensibly, unconsciously, by a neglect of the things that he now regarded it as an impertinence in Elsie Bengough to have prescribed. Two months before, the words "a haunted house," applied to his lovely bemusing dwelling, would have chilled his marrow; now, his scale of sensation becoming depressed, he could ask "Haunted by what?" and remain unconscious that horror, when it can be proved to be relative, by so much loses its proper quality. He was setting aside the landmarks. Mists and confusion had begun to enwrap him.

And he was conscious of nothing so much as of a voracious inquisitiveness. He wanted to know. He was resolved to know. Nothing but the knowledge would satisfy him; and craftily he cast about for means whereby he might attain it.

He might have spared his craft. The matter was the easiest imaginable. As in

time past he had known, in his writing, moments when his thoughts had seemed to rise of themselves and to embody themselves in words not to be altered after wards, so now the question he put himself seemed to be answered even in the moment of their asking. There was exhilaration in the swift, easy processes. He had known no such joy in his own power since the days when his writing had been a daily freshness and a delight to him. It was almost as if the course he must pursue was being dictated to him.

And the first thing he must do, of course, was to define the problem. He defined it in terms of mathematics. Granted that he had not the place to himself; granted that the old house had inexpressibly caught and engaged his spirit; granted that, by virtue of the common denominator of the place, this unknown co-tenant stood in some relation to himself: what next? Clearly, the nature of the other numerator must be ascertained.

And how? Ordinarily this would not have seemed simple, but to Oleron it was now pellucidly clear. The key, of course, lay in his half-written novel--or rather, in both Romillys, the I old and the proposed new one.

A little while before Oleron would have thought himself mad to have embraced such an opinion; now he accepted the dizzying hypothesis without a quiver.

He began to examine the first and second Romillys.

From the moment of his doing so the thing advanced by leaps and bounds. Swiftly he reviewed the history of the Romilly of the fifteen chapters. He remembered clearly now that he had found her insufficient on the very first morning on which he had sat down to work in his new place. Other instances of his aversion leaped up to confirm his obscure investigation. There had come the night when he had hardly forborne to throw the whole thing into the fire; and the next morning he had begun the planning of the new Romilly. It had been on that morning that Mrs. Barrett, overhearing him humming a brief

phrase that the dripping of a tap the night before had suggested, had informed him that he was singing some air he had never in his life heard before, called "The Beckoning Fair One."

The Beckoning Fair One! . . .

With scarcely a pause in thought he, continued:

The first Romilly having been definitely thrown over, second had instantly fastened herself upon him, clamoring for birth in his brain. He even fancied now, looking back, that there had been something like passion, hate almost, in the supplanting, and that more than once a stray thought given to his discarded creation had--(it was astonishing how credible Oleron found the almost unthinkable idea)---had offended the supplanter.

Yet that a malignancy almost homicidal should be extended to his fiction's poor mortal prototype...

In spite of his inuring to a scale in which the horrible was now a thing to be fingered and turned this way and that, a "Good God!" broke from Oleron.

This intrusion of the first Romilly's prototype into his thought again was a factor that for the moment brought his inquiry into the nature of his problem to a termination; the mere thought of Elsie was fatal to anything abstract. For another thing, he could not yet think of that letter of Barrett's, nor of a little scene that had followed it, without a mounting of colour and a quick contraction of the brow. For, wisely or not, he had had that argument out at once. Striding across the square on the following morning, he had bearded Barrett on his own doorstep. Coming back again a few minutes later, he had been strongly of opinion that he had only made matters worse. The man had been vagueness itself. He had not been able to be either challenged or brow beaten into anything more definite than a muttered farrago in which the words "Certain things . . . Mrs. Barrett respectable house . . . if the cap fits . . .

proceedings that shall be nameless," had been constantly repeated.

"Not that I make any charge----" he had concluded.

"Charge!" Oleron had cried.

"I 'ave my idears of things, as I don't doubt you 'ave yours---"

"Ideas--mine!" Oleron had cried wrathfully, immediately dropping his voice as heads had appeared at windows of the square. "Look you here, my man; you've an unwholesome mind, which probably you can't help, but a tongue which you. can help, and shall! If there is a breath of this repeated . . ."

"I'll not be talked to on my own doorstep like this by anybody, . . ." Barrett had blustered....

"You shall, and I'm doing it . . ."

"Don't you forget there's a Gawd above all, Who 'as said..."

"You're a low scandalmonger! . . ."

And so forth, continuing badly what was already badly begun. Oleron had returned wrathfully to his own house, and thenceforward, looking out of his windows, had seen Barrett's face at odd times, lifting blinds or peering round curtains, as if he sought to put himself in possession of Heaven knew what evidence, in case it should be required of him.

The unfortunate occurrence made certain minor differences in Oleron's domestic arrangements. Barrett's tongue, he gathered, had already been busy; he was looked at askance by the dwellers of the square; and he judged it better, until he should be able to obtain other help, to make his purchases of provisions a little farther afield rather than at the small shops of the immediate neighbourhood. For the rest, housekeeping was no new thing to him, and he would resume his old bachelor habits

Besides, he was deep in certain rather abstruse investigations, in which it was better that he should not be disturbed.

He was looking out of his window one midday rather tired, not very well, and glad that it was not very likely he would have to stir out of doors, when he saw Elsie Bengough crossing the square towards his house. The weather had broken; it was a raw and gusty day; and she had to force her way against the wind that set her ample skirts bellying about her opulent figure and her veil spinning and streaming behind her.

Oleron acted swiftly and instinctively. Seizing his hat, he sprang to the door and descended the stairs at a run. A sort of panic had seized him. She must be prevented from setting foot in the place. As he ran along the alley he was conscious that his eyes went up to the caves as if something drew them. He did not know that a slate might not accident ally fall

He met her at the gate, and spoke with curious volubleness.

"This is really too bad, Elsie! Just as I'm urgently called away! I'm afraid it can't be helped though, and that you'll have to think me an inhospitable beast." He poured it out just as it came into his head.

She asked if he was going to town.

"Yes, yes--to town," he replied. "I've got to call on--on Chambers. You know Chambers, don't you? No, I remember you don't; a big man you once saw me with. . . I ought to have gone yesterday, and--" this he felt to be a brilliant effort--" and he's going out of town this afternoon. To Brighton. I had a letter from him this morning."

He took her arm and led her up the square. She had to remind him that his way to town lay in the other direction.

"Of course--how stupid of me I" he said, with a little loud laugh. "I'm so used to going the other way with you--of course; it's the other way to the bus. Will

you come along with me? I am so awfully sorry it's happened like this

They took the street to the bus terminus.

This time Elsie bore no signs of having gone through interior struggles. If she detected anything unusual in his manner she made' no comment, and he, seeing her calm, began to talk less recklessly through silences. By the time they reached the bus terminus, nobody, seeing the pallid-faced man without an overcoat and the large ample skirted girl at his side, would have supposed that one of them was ready to sink on his knees for thankfulness that he had, as he believed, saved the other from a wildly unthinkable danger.

They mounted to the top of the bus, Oleron protesting that he should not miss his overcoat, and that he found the day, if anything, rather oppressively hot. They sat down on a front seat.

Now that this meeting was forced upon him, he had something else to say that would make demands upon his tact. It had been on his mind for some time, and was, indeed, peculiarly difficult to put. He revolved it for some minutes, and then, remembering the success of his story of a sudden call to town, cut the knot of his difficulty with another lie.

"I'm thinking of going away for a little while, Elsie," he said.

She merely said, "Oh?"

"Somewhere for a change. I need a change. I think I shall go to-morrow, or the day after. Yes, to-morrow, I think."

"Yes," she replied.

"I don't quite know how long I shall be," he continued. "I shall have to let you know when I am back."

"Yes, let me know," she replied in an even tone.

The tone was, for her, suspiciously even. He was a little uneasy.

"You don't ask me where I'm going," he said, with a little cumbrous effort to rally her.

She was looking straight before her, past the bus-driver.

"I know," she said.

He was startled. "How, you know?"

"You're not going anywhere," she replied.

He found not a word to say. It was a minute or so before she continued, in the same controlled voice she had employed from the start.

"You're not going anywhere. You weren't going out this morning. You only came out because I appeared; don't behave as if we were strangers, Paul."

A flush of pink had mounted to his cheeks. He noticed that the wind had given her the pink of early rhubarb. Still he found nothing to say.

"Of course, you ought to go away," she continued. "I don't know whether you look at yourself often in the glass, but you're rather noticeable. Several people have turned to look at you this morning. So, of course, you ought to go away. But you won't, and I know why."

He shivered, coughed a little, and then broke silence.

"Then if you know, there's no use in continuing this discussion" he said curtly.

"Not for me, perhaps, but there is for you," she replied. "Shall I tell you what I know?"

"No," he said in a voice slightly raised.

"No?" she asked, her round eyes earnestly on him.

"No." Again he was getting out of patience with her; again he was conscious of the strain. Her devotion and fidelity and love plagued him; she was only humiliating both herself and him. It would have been bad enough had

he ever, by word or deed, given her cause for thus fastening herself on him ...but....there; that was the worst of that kind of life for a woman. Women such as she, businesswomen, in and out of offices all the time, always, whether they realised it or not, made comradeship a cover for something else. They accepted the unconventional status, came and went freely, as men did, were honestly taken by men at their own valuation--and then it turned out to be the other thing after all, and they went and fell in love. No wonder there was gossip in shops and squares and public houses! In a sense the gossipers were in the right of it. Independent, yet not efficient; with some of womanhood's graces forgone, and yet with all the woman's hunger and need; half sophisticated, yet not wise; Oleron was tired of it all

And it was time he told her so.

"I suppose," he said tremblingly, looking down between his knees, "I suppose the real trouble is in the life women who earn their own living are obliged to lead."

He could not tell in what sense she took the lame generality; she merely replied, "I suppose so."

"It can't be helped," he continued, "but you do sacrifice a good deal."

She agreed: a good deal; and then she added after a moment, "What, for instance?"

"You may or may not be gradually attaining a new status, but you're in a false position to-day."

It was very likely, she said; she hadn't thought of it much in that light-----

"And," he continued desperately, "you're bound to suffer. Your most innocent acts are misunderstood; motives you never dreamed of are attributed to you; and in the end it comes to"--he hesitated a moment and then took the plunge,--"to the sidelong look and the leer."

She took his meaning with perfect ease. She merely shivered a little as she pronounced the name.

"Barrett?"

His silence told her the rest.

Anything further that was to be said must come from her. It came as the bus stopped at a stage and fresh passengers mounted the stairs.

"You'd better get down here and go back, Paul," she said. "I understand perfectly--perfectly. It isn't Barrett. You'd be able to deal with Barrett. It's merely convenient for you to say it's Barrett. I know what it is . . . but you said I wasn't to tell you that. Very well. But before you go let me tell you why I came up this morning."

In a dull tone he asked her why. Again she looked straight before her as she replied:

"I came to force your hand. Things couldn't go on as they have been going, you know; and now that's all over."

"All over," he repeated stupidly.

"All over. I want you now to consider yourself, as far as I'm concerned, perfectly free. I make only one reservation."

He hardly had the spirit to ask her what that was.

"If I merely need you," she said, "please don't give that a thought; that's nothing; I shan't come near for that. But," she dropped her voice, "if you're in need of me, Paul--I shall know if you are, and you will be--then I shall come at no matter what cost. You understand that?"

He could only groan.

"So that's understood," she concluded. "And I think all. Now go back. I should advise you to walk back, for you're shivering--good-bye--"

She gave him a cold hand, and he descended. He turned on the on the edge

of the kerb as the bus started again. For the first time in all the years he had known her she parted from him with no smile and no wave of her long arm.

IX

He stood on the kerb plunged in misery, looking after her as long as she remained in sight; but almost instantly with her disappearance he felt the heaviness lift a little from his spirit. She had given him his liberty; true, there was a sense in which he had never parted with it, but now was no time for splitting hairs; he was free to act, and all was clear ahead. Swiftly the sense of lightness grew on him: it became a positive rejoicing in his liberty; and before he was half-way home he had decided what must be done next.

The vicar of the parish in which his dwelling was situated lived within ten minutes of the square. To his house Oleron turned his steps. It was necessary that he should have all the information he could get about this old house with the insurance marks and the sloping "To Let" boards, and the vicar was the person most likely to be able to furnish it. This last preliminary out of the way, and--aha! Oleron chuckled --things might be expected to happen!

But he gained less information than he had hoped for. The house, the vicar said, was old--but there needed no vicar to tell Oleron that; it was reputed (Oleron pricked up his-ears) to be haunted--but there were few old houses about which some such rumour did not circulate among ignorant; and the deplorable lack of Faith of the modern world, the vicar thought, did not tend to dissipate these superstitions. For the rest, his manner was the soothing manner of one who prefers not to make statements without knowing how they will be taken by his hearer. Oleron smiled as he perceived this.

"You may leave my nerves out of the question," he said. "How long has the place been empty?"

"A dozen years, I should say," the vicar replied.

"And the last tenant--did you know him--or her?" Oleron was conscious of a tingling of his nerves as he offered the vicar the alternative of sex.

"Him," said the vicar. "A man. If I remember rightly, his name was Madley an artist. He was a great recluse; seldom went out of place, and "--the vicar hesitated and then broke into a little gush of candour--" and since you appear to have come for this information, and since it is better that the truth should be told than that garbled versions should get about, I don't mind saying that this man Madley died there, under somewhat unusual circumstances. It was ascertained at the post-mortem that there was not a particle of food in his stomach, although he was found to be not without money. And his frame was simply worn out. Suicide was spoken of, but you'll agree with me that deliberate starvation is, to say the least, an uncommon form of suicide. An open verdict was returned."

"Ah!" said Oleron. . . . "Does there happen to be any comprehensive history of this parish?"

"No; partial ones only. I myself am not guiltless of having made a number of notes on its purely ecclesiastical history, its registers and so forth, which I shall be happy to show you if you would care to see them; but it is a large parish, I have only one curate, and my leisure, as you will readily understand . . ."

The extent of the parish and the scantiness of the vicar's leisure occupied the remainder of the interview, and Oleron thanked the vicar, took his leave, and walked slowly home.

He walked slowly for a reason, twice turning away from the house within a stone's-throw of the gate and taking another turn of twenty minutes or so. He had a very ticklish piece of work now before him; it required the greatest mental concentration; it was nothing less than to bring his mind, if he might, into such a state of unpreoccupation and receptivity that he should see the place as he had seen it on that morning when,

his removal accomplished, he had sat down to begin the sixteenth chapter of the first Romilly.

For, could he recapture that first impression, he now hoped for far more from it. Formerly, he had carried no end of mental lumber. Before the influence of the place had been able to find him out at all, it had had the inertia of those dreary chapters to overcome. No results had shown. The process had been one of slow saturation, charging, filling up to a brim. But now he was light, unburdened, rid at last both of that Romilly and of her prototype. Now for the new unknown, coy, jealous, bewitching, Beckoning Fair! . . .

At half-past two of the afternoon he put his key into the Yale lock, entered, and closed the door behind him . . .

His fantastic attempt was instantly and astonishingly successful. He could have shouted with triumph as he entered the room; it was as if he had escaped into it. Once more, as in the days when his writing had had a daily freshness and wonder and promise for him, he was conscious of that new ease and mastery and exhilaration and release. The air of the place seemed to hold more oxygen; as if his own specific gravity had changed, his very tread seemed less ponderable. The flowers in the bowls, the fair proportions of the meadowsweet-coloured panels and mouldings, the polished floor, and the lofty and faintly tarred ceiling, fairly laughed their welcome. Oleron actually laughed back, and spoke aloud.

"Oh, you're pretty, pretty!" he flattered it.

Then he lay down on his couch.

He spent that afternoon as a convalescent who expected a dear visitor might have spent it--in a delicious vacancy, smiling now and then as if in sleep, and ever lifting drowsy and contented eyes to his alluring surroundings. He lay thus until darkness came, and with darkness, the nocturnal noises of the old house....

But if he waited for any specific happening, he waited in vain.

He waited similarly in vain on the morrow, maintaining, though with less ease, that sensitised-late-like condition of his mind. Nothing occurred to give it an impression. Whatever it was which he so patiently wooed, it seemed to be both shy and exacting...

And then on the third day he thought he understood. A look of gentle drollery and cunning came into his eyes, and he chuckled.

"Oho, oho! . . . Well, if the wind sits in that quarter we must see what else there is to be done. What is there, now? . . . No, I won't send for Elsie; we don't need a wheel to break the butterfly on; we won't go to those lengths, my butterfly...."

He was standing musing, thumbing his lean jaw, looking aslant; suddenly he crossed to his hall, took down his hat, and went out.

"My lady is coquettish, is she? Well, we'll see what a little neglect will do," he chuckled as he went down the stairs.

He sought a railway station, got into a train, and spent the rest of the day in the country. Oh, yes: Oleron thought he was the one to deal with Fair Ones who beckoned, and invited, and then took refuge in shyness and hanging back!

He did not return until after eleven that night.

" I Now, my Fair Beckoner!" he murmured as he walked along the alley and felt in his pocket for his keys. . . .

Inside his flat, he was perfectly composed, perfectly deliberate, exceedingly careful not to give himself away. As if to intimate that he intended to retire immediately, he lighted only a single candle; and as he set out with it on his nightly round he affected to yawn. He went first into his kitchen. There was a full moon, and a lozenge of moonlight, almost peacock-blue by contrast with his candle-frame, lay on the floor. The

window was uncurtained, and he could see the reflection of the candle, and, faintly, that of his own face, as he moved about. The door of the powder-closet stood a little ajar, and he closed it before sitting down to remove his boots on the chair with the cushion made of the folded harp-bag. From the kitchen he passed to the bathroom. There, another slant of blue moonlight cut the windowsill and lay across the pipes on the wall. He visited his seldom-used study, and stood for a moment gazing at the silvered roofs across the square. Then, walking straight through his sitting-room, his stockinged feet making no noise, he entered the bedroom and put the candle on the chest of drawers. His face all this time wore no expression save that of tiredness. He had never been wiler nor more alert.

His small bedroom fireplace was opposite the chest of drawers on which the mirror stood, and his bed and the window occupied the remaining sides of the room. Oleron drew down his blind, took off his coat, he then stooped to get his slippers from under the bed.

He could have given no reason for the conviction, but that the manifestation that for two days had been withheld was close at hand he never for an instant doubted. Nor, though he could not form the faintest guess of the shape it might take, did he experience fear. Startling or surprising it might be; he was prepared for that; but that was all; his scale of sensation had become depressed. His hand moved this way and that under the bed in search of his slippers. . . .

But for all his caution and method and preparedness, his heart all at once gave a leap and a pause that was almost horrid. His hand had found the slippers, but he was still on his knees; save for the circumstance he would have fallen. The bed was a low one; the groping for the slippers accounted for the turn of his head to one side; and he was careful to keep the attitude until he had partly recovered his self-possession. When presently he rose there was a drop of blood on his lower lip where he had caught at it with his teeth, and his watch had jerked out of the pocket of his

waistcoat and was dangling at the end of its short leather guard. . .

Then, before the watch had ceased its little oscillation, he was himself again.

In the middle of the mantelpiece there stood a picture, a portrait of his grandmother; he placed himself before this picture, so that he could see in the glass of it the steady flame of the candle that burned behind him on the chest of drawers. He could see also in the picture-glass the little glancings of light from the bevels and facets of the objects about the mirror and candle. But he could see more. These tinglings and reflections and re-reflections did not change their position; but there was one gleam that had motion. It was fainter than the rest, and it moved up and down through the air. It was the reflection of the candle on Oleron's black vulcanite comb, and each of its downward movements was accompanied by a silky and crackling rustle.

Oleron, watching what went on in the glass of his grandmother's portrait, continued to play his part. He felt for his dangling watch and began slowly to wind it up. Then, for a moment ceasing to watch, he began to empty his trousers pockets and to place methodically in a little row on the mantelpiece the pennies and halfpennies he took from them. The sweeping, minutely electric noise filled the whole bedroom, and had Oleron altered his point of observation he could have brought the dim gleam of the moving comb so into position that it would almost have outlined his grandmother's head.

Any other head of which it might have been following the outline was invisible.

Oleron finished the emptying of his pockets; then, under cover of another simulated yawn, not so much summoning his resolution as overmastered by an exorbitant curiosity, he swung suddenly round. That which was being combed was still not to be seen, but the comb did not stop. It had altered its angle a little, and had moved a little to the left. It was passing, in fairly regular sweeps, from a point

rather more than five feet from the ground, in a direction roughly vertical, to another point a few inches below the level of the chest of drawers.

Oleron continued to act to admiration. He walked to his little washstand in the corner, poured out water, and began to wash his hands. He removed his waistcoat, and continued the preparations for bed. The combing did not cease, and he stood for a moment in thought. Again his eyes twinkled. The next was very cunning----

"Hm! . . . I think I'll read for a quarter of an hour," he said aloud. . . .

He passed out of the room.

He was away a couple of minutes; when he returned again the room was suddenly quiet. He glanced at the chest of drawers; the comb lay still, between the collar he had removed and a pair of gloves. Without hesitation Oleron put out his hand and picked it up. It was an ordinary eighteen-penny comb, taken from a card in a chemist's shop, of a substance of a definite specific gravity, and no more capable of rebellion against the Laws by which it existed than are the worlds that keep their orbits through the void. Oleron put it down again; then he glanced at the bundle of papers he held in his hand. What he had gone to fetch had been the fifteen chapters of the original Romilly.

"Hm!" he muttered as he threw the manuscript into a chair. . . . "As I thought. . . . She's just blindly, ragingly, murderously jealous."

On the night after that, and on the following night, and for many nights and days, so many that he began to be uncertain about the count of them, Oleron, courting, cajoling, neglecting, threatening, beseeching, eaten out with unappeased curiosity and regardless that his life was becoming one consuming passion and desire, continued his search for the unknown co-numerator of his abode.

As time went on, it came to pass that few except the postman mounted Oleron's stairs; and since men who do not write letters receive few, even the postman's tread became so infrequent that it was not heard more than once or twice a week. There came a letter from Oleron's publishers, asking when they might expect to receive the manuscript of his new book; he delayed for some days to answer it, and finally forgot it. A second letter came, which he also failed to answer. He received no third.

The weather grew bright and warm. The privet bushes among the chopper-like notice-boards flowered, and in the streets where Oleron did his shopping the baskets of flower-women lined the kerbs. Oleron purchased flowers daily; his room clamoured for flowers, fresh and continually renewed; and Oleron did not stint its demands. Nevertheless, the necessity for going out to buy them began to irk him more and more, and it was with a greater and ever greater sense of relief that he returned home again. He began to be conscious that again his scale of sensation had suffered a subtle change--a change that was not restoration to its former capacity, but an extension and enlarging that once more included terror. It admitted it in an entirely new form. *Lux orco, tenebr' Jovi*. The name of this terror was agoraphobia. Oleron had begun to dread air and space and the horror that might pounce upon the unguarded back.

Presently he so contrived it that his food and flowers were delivered daily at his door. He rubbed his hands when he had hit upon this expedient. That was better! Now he could please himself whether he went out or not....

Quickly he was confirmed in his choice. It became his pleasure to remain immured.

But he was not happy--or, if he was, his happiness took an extraordinary turn. he fretted discontentedly, could sometimes have wept for mere weakness and misery; and yet he was dimly conscious that he would not have exchanged his sadness for all the noisy mirth of the world outside. And

speaking of noise: noise, much noise, now caused him the acutest discomfort. It was hardly more to be endured than that new-born fear that kept him, on the increasingly rare occasions when he did go out, sidling close to walls and feeling friendly rails with his hand. He moved from room to room softly and in slippers, and sometimes stood for any seconds closing a door so gently that not a sound broke the stillness that was in itself a delight. Sunday now became an intolerable day to him, for, since the coming of the fine weather, there had begun to assemble in the square under his windows each Sunday morning certain members of the sect to which the long-nosed Barrett adhered. These came with a great drum and large brass-bellied instruments; men and women uplifted anguished voices, struggling with their God; and Barrett himself, with upraised face and closed eyes and working brows, prayed that the sound of his voice might penetrate the ears of all unbelievers--as it certainly did Oleron's. One day, in the middle of one of these rhapsodies, Oleron sprang to his blind and pulled it down, and heard as he did so, his own name made the object of a fresh torrent of outpouring.

And sometimes, but not as expecting a reply, Oleron stood still and called softly. Once or twice he called "Romilly!" and then waited; but more often his whispering did not take the shape of a name.

There was one spot in particular of his abode that he began to haunt with increasing persistency. This was just within the opening of his bedroom door. He had discovered one day that by opening every door in his place (always excepting the outer one, which he only opened unwillingly) and by placing himself on this particular spot, he could actually see to a greater or less extent into each of his five rooms without changing his position. He could see the whole of his sitting-room, all of his bedroom except the part hidden by the open door, and glimpses of his kitchen, bathroom, and of his rarely used study. He was often in this place, breathless and with his finger on his lip. One day, as he stood there, he suddenly found

himself wondering whether this Madley, of whom the vicar had spoken, had ever discovered the strategic importance of the bedroom entry.

Light, moreover, now caused him greater disquietude than did darkness. Direct sunlight, of which, as the sun passed daily round the house, each of his rooms had now its share, was like a flame in his brain; and even diffused light was a dull and numbing ache. He began, at successive hours of the day, one after another, to lower his crimson blinds. He made short and daring excursions in order to do this but he was ever careful to leave his retreat open, in case he should have sudden need of it. Presently this lowering of the blinds had become a daily methodical exercise, and his rooms, when he had been his round, had the blood-red half-light of a photographer's dark-room.

One day, as he drew down the blind of his little study and backed in good order out of the room again, he broke into a soft laugh.

"That bilks Mr. Barrett!" he said; and the baffling of Barrett continued to afford him mirth for an hour.

But on another day, soon after, he had a fright that left him trembling also for an hour. He had seized the cord to darken the window over the seat in which he had found the harp-bag, and was standing with his back well protected in the embrasure, when he thought he saw the tail of a black-and-white check skirt disappear round the corner of the house. He could not be sure--had he run to the window of the other wall, which was blinded, the skirt must have been already past--but he was almost sure that it was Elsie. He listened in an agony of suspense for her tread on the stairs. . . .

"By Jove, but that would have compromised me horribly!" he muttered. . . .

And he continued to mutter from time to time, "Horribly compromising . . . no woman would stand that . . . not any

kind of woman . . . oh, compromising in the extreme!"

Yet he was not happy. He could not have assigned the cause of the fits of quiet weeping which took him sometimes; they came and went, like the fitful illumination of the clouds that travelled over the square; and perhaps, after all, if he was not happy, he was not unhappy. Before he could be unhappy something must have been withdrawn, and nothing had been granted. He was waiting for that granting, in that flower-laden, frightfully enticing apartment of his, with the pith-white walls tinged and subdued by the crimson blinds to a blood-like gloom.

He paid no heed to it that his stock of money was running perilously low, nor that he had ceased to work. Ceased to work? He had not ceased to work. They knew very little about it who supposed that Oleron had ceased to work! He was in truth only now beginning to work. He was preparing such a work . . . such a work . . . such a Mistress was a-making in the gestation of his Art . . . let him but get this period of probation and poignant waiting over and men should see. . . . How should men know her, this Fair One of Oleron's, until Oleron himself knew her? Lovely radiant creations are not thrown off like How-d'ye-do's. The men to whom it is committed to father them must weep wretched tears, as Oleron did, must swell with vain presumptions hopes, as Oleron did, must pursue, as Oleron pursued, the capricious, fair, mocking, slippery, eager Spirit that, ever eluding, ever sees to it that the chase does not slacken. Let Oleron but hunt this Huntress a little longer . . . he would have her sparkling and panting in his arms yet. . . . Oh no; they were very far from the truth who supposed that Oleron had ceased to work!

And if all else was falling away from Oleron, gladly he was letting it go. So do we all when our Fair Ones beckon. Quite at the beginning we wink, and promise ourselves that we will put Her Ladyship through her paces, neglect her for a day, turn her own jealous wiles against her, flout and ignore her when

she comes home wheedling; perhaps there lurks within us all the time a heartless sprite who is never fooled; but in the end all falls away. She beckons, beckons, and all goes. . . .

And so Oleron kept his strategic post within the frame of his bedroom door, and watched, and waited, and smiled, with his finger on his lips. . . . It was his duteous service, his worship, his troth-plighting, all that he had ever known of Love. And when he found himself, as he now and then did, hating the dead man Madley, and wishing that he had never lived, he felt that that, too, was an acceptable service. . . .

But, as he thus prepared himself, as it were, for a Marriage, and moped and chafed more and more that the Bride made no sign, he made a discovery that he ought to have made weeks before.

It was through a thought of the dead Madley that he made it. Since that night when he had thought in his greenness that a little studied neglect would bring the lovely Beckoner to her knees, and had made use of her own jealousy to banish her, he had not set eyes on those fifteen discarded chapters of Romilly. he had thrown them back into the window-seat, forgotten their very existence. But his own jealousy of Madley put him in mind of hrs of her jilted rival of flesh and blood, and he remembered them. . . . Fool that he had been! Had he, then, expected his Desire to manifest herself while there still existed the evidence of his divide allegiance? What, and she with a passion so fierce and centered that it had not hesitated at the destruction, twice attempted, of her rival? Fool that he had been! . . .

But if that was all the pledge and sacrifice she required she should have it--ah, yes, and quickly!

He took the manuscript from the window-seat, and brought it to the fire.

He kept the fire always burning now the warmth brought out the last vestige of odour of the flowers with which his room was banked. He did not know what time it was; long since he had

allowed his clock to run down--it had seemed a foolish measure of time in regard to the stupendous things that were happening to Oleron; but he knew it was late. He took the Romilly manuscript and knelt before the fire.

But he had not finished removing the fastening that held the sheets together before he suddenly gave a start, turned his head over his shoulder, and listened intently. The sound he had heard had not bee loud--it had been, indeed, no more than a tap, twice or thrice repeated--but it had filled Oleron with alarm. His face grew dark as it came again.

He heard a voice outside on the landing.

"Paul! . . . Paul! . . ."

It was Elsie's voice.

"Paul! . . . I know you're in . . . I want to see you. . . ."

He cursed her under his breath, but kept perfectly still. He did not intend to admit her.

"Paul! . . . You're in trouble. . . . I believe you're in danger . . . at least come to the door! . . ."

Oleron smothered a low laugh. It somehow amused him that she, in such danger herself, should talk to him of his danger! . . . Well, if she was, serve her right; she knew, or said she knew, all about it. . . .

"Paul! . . . Paul! . . ."

"Paul! . . . Paul! . . ." He mimicked her under his breath.

"Oh, Paul, it's horrible! . . ."

Horrible, was it? thought Oleron. Then let her get away. . . .

"I only want to help you, Paul. . . . I didn't promise not to come if you needed me. . . ."

He was impervious to the pitiful sob that interrupted the low cry. The devil

take the woman! Should he shout to her to go away and not come back? No: let her cal and knock and sob. She had a gift for sobbing; she mustn't think her sobs would move him. They irritated him, so that he set his teeth and shook his fist at her, but that was all. Let her sob.

"Paul! . . . Paul! . . ."

With his teeth hard set, he dropped the first page of Romilly into the fire. Then he began to drop the rest in, sheet by sheet.

For many minutes the calling behind his door continued; then suddenly it ceased. He heard the sound of feet slowly descending the stairs. He listened for the noise of a fall or a cry or the crash of a piece of the handrail of the upper landing; but none of these things came. She was spared. Apparently her rival suffered her to crawl abject and beaten away. Oleron heard the passing of her steps under his window; then she was gone.

He dropped the last page into the fire, and then, with a low laugh rose. He looked fondly round his room.

"Lucky to get away like that," he remarked. "She wouldn't have got away if I'd given her as much as a word or a look! What devils these women are! . . . But no; I oughtn't to say that; one of em showed forbearance. . . ."

Who showed forbearance? And what was forborne? Ah, Oleron knew! . . . Contempt, no doubt, had been at the bottom of it, but that didn't matter: the pestering creature had been allowed to go unharmed. Yes, she was lucky; Oleron hoped she knew it. . . .

And now, now, now for his reward!

Oleron crossed the room. All his door were open; his eyes shone as he placed himself within that of his bedroom.

Fool that he had been, not to think of destroying the manuscript sooner! . . .

How, in a houseful of shadows, should he know his own Shadow? How, in a houseful of noises, distinguish the summons he felt to be at hand? Ah, trust him! He would know! The place was full of a jugglery of dim lights. The blind at his elbow that allowed the light of a street lamp to struggle vaguely through--the glimpse of greeny blue moonlight seen through the distant kitchen door--the sulky glow of the fire under the black ashes of the burnt manuscript--the glimmering of the tulips and the moon-daisies and narcissi in the bowls and jugs and jars--these did not so trick and bewilder his eyes that he would not know his Own! It was he, not she, who had been delaying the shadowy Bridal; he hung his head for a moment in mute acknowledgment; then he bent his eyes on the deceiving, puzzling gloom again. He would have called her name had he known it--but not he would not ask her to share even a name with the other. . . .

His own face, within the frame of the door, glimmered white as the narcissi in the darkness. . . .

A shadow, light as fleece, seemed to take shape in the kitchen (the time had been when Oleron would have said that a cloud had passed over the unseen moon). The low illumination on the blind at his elbow grew dimmer (the time had been when Oleron would have concluded that the lamplight going his rounds had turned low the flame of the lamp). The fire settled, letting down the black and charred papers; a flower fell from a bowl, and lay indistinct upon the floor; all was still; and then a stray draught moved through the old house, passing before Oleron's face. . . .

Suddenly, inclining his head, he withdrew a little from the door-jamb. The wandering draught caused the door to move a little on its hinges. Oleron trembled violently, stood for a moment longer, and then, putting his hand out to the knob, softly drew the door to, sat down on the nearest chair, and waited, as a man might await the calling of his name that should summon him to some weighty, high and privy Audience. . . .

One knows not whether there can be human compassion for an'mia of the soul. When the pitch of Life is dropped, and the spirit is so put over and reversed that that only is horrible which before was sweet and worldly and of the day, the human relation disappears. The sane soul turns appalled away, lest not merely itself, but sanity should suffer. We are not gods. We cannot drive out devils. We must see selfishly to it that devils do not enter into ourselves.

And this we must do even though Love so transfuse us that e may well deem our nature to be half divine. We shall but speak of honour and duty in vain. The letter dropped within the dark door will lie unregarded, or, if regarded for a brief instant between two unspeakable lapses, left and forgotten again. The telegram will be undelivered, nor will the whistling messenger (wislier guided than he knows to whistle) be conscious as he walks away of the drawn blind that is pushed aside an inch by a finger and then fearfully replaced again. No: let the miserable wrestle with his own shadows; let him, if indeed he be so mad, clip and strain and enfold and couch the succubus; but let him do so in a house into which not an air of Heaven penetrates, nor a bright finger of the sun pierces the filthy twilight. The lost must remain lost. Humanity has other business to attend to.

For the handwriting of the two letters that Oleron, stealing noiselessly one June day into his kitchen to rid his sitting-room of an armful of fetid and decaying flowers, had seen on the floor within his door, had had no more meaning for him than if it had belonged to some dim and far-away dream. And at the beating of the telegraph-boy upon the door, within a few feet of the bed where he lay, he had gnashed his teeth and stopped his ears. He had pictured the lad standing there, just beyond his partition, among packets of provisions and bundles of dead and dying flowers. For his outer landing was littered with these. Oleron had feared to open his door to take them in. After a week, the errand lads had reported that there must

be some mistake about the order, and had left no more. Inside, in the red twilight, the old flowers turned brown and fell and decayed where they lay.

Gradually his power was draining away. The Abomination fastened on Oleron's power. The steady sapping sometimes left him for many hours of prostration gazing vacantly up at his red-tinged ceiling, idly suffering such fancies as came of themselves to have their way with him. Even the strongest of his memories had no more than a precarious hold upon his attention. Sometimes a flitting half-memory, of a novel to be written, a novel it was important that he could write, tantalised him for a space before vanishing again; and sometimes whole novels, perfect, splendid, established to endure, rose magically before him. And sometimes the memories were absurdly remote and trivial, of garrets he had inhabited and lodgings that had sheltered him, and so forth. Oleron had known a great deal about such things in his time, but all that was now past. He had at last found a place which he did not intend to leave until they fetched him out--a place that some might have thought a little on the green-sick side, that others might have considered to be a little too redolent of long-dead and morbid things for a living man to be mewed up in, but ah, so irresistible, with such an authority of its own, with such an associate of its own, and a place of such delights when once a man has ceased to struggle against its inexorable will! A novel? Somebody ought to write a novel about a place like that! There must be lots to write about in a place like that if one could but get to the bottom of it! It had probably already been painted, by a man called Madley who had lived there. . . . but Oleron had not known this Madley--had a strong feeling that he wouldn't have liked him--would rather he had lived somewhere else--really couldn't stand the fellow--hated him, Madley, in fact. (Aha! That was a joke!) He seriously doubted whether the man had led the life he ought; Oleron was in two minds sometimes whether he wouldn't tell that long-nosed guardian of the public morals across the way about him; but probably he knew, and had made his

praying hullabaloo for him also. That was his line. Why, Oleron himself had had a dust-up with him about something or other . . . some girl of other . . . Elsie Bengough her name was, he remembered. . . .

Oleron had moments of deep uneasiness about this Elsie Bengough. Or rather, he was not so much uneasy about her as restless about the things she did. Chief of those was the way in which she persisted in thrusting herself into his thoughts; and, whenever he was quick enough, he sent her packing the moment she made her appearance there, the truth was that she was not merely a bore; she had always been that; it had now come to the pitch when her very presence in his fancy was inimical to the full enjoyment of certain experiences. . . . She had no tact; really ought to have known that people are not at home to the thoughts of everybody all the time; ought in mere politeness to have allowed him certain seasons quite to himself; and was monstrously ignorant of things if she did not know, as she appeared not to know, that there were certain special hours when a man's veins ran with fire and daring and power, in which . . . well, in which he had a reasonable right to treat folk as he had treated that prying Barrett--to shut them out completely. . . . But no, up she popped: the thought of her, and ruined all. Bright towering fabrics, by the side of which even those perfect, magical novels of which he dreamed were dun and grey, vanished utterly at her intrusion. It was as if at the threshold of some golden portal prepared for Oleron a pit should suddenly gape, as if a bat-like shadow should turn the growing dawn to mirk and darkness again. . . . Therefore, Oleron strove to stifle even the nascent thought of her.

Nevertheless, there came an occasion on which this woman Bengough absolutely refused to be suppressed. Oleron could not have told exactly when this happened; he only knew by the glimmer of the street lamp on his blind that it was some time during the night, and that for some time she had not presented herself.

He had no warning, none, of her coming; she had just come---was there. Strive as he would, he could not shake off the thought of her nor the image of her face. She haunted him.

But for her to come at that moment of all moments! . . . Really, it was past belief! How she could endure it, Oleron could not conceive! Actually, to look on, as it were, at the triumph of a Rival. . . . Good God! It was monstrous! tact--reticence--he had never credited her with an overwhelming amount of either; but he had never attributed mere--oh, there was no word for it! Monstrous--monstrous! Did she intend thenceforward. . . . Good God! To look on! . . .

Oleron felt the blood rush up to the roots of his hair with anger against her.

"Damnation take her!" he choked. . . .

But the next moment his heat and resentment had changed to a cold sweat of cowering fear. Panic-stricken, he strove to comprehend what he had done. For though he knew not what, he knew he had done something, something fatal, irreparable, blasting. Anger he had felt, but not this blaze of ire that suddenly flooded the twilight of his consciousness with a white infernal light. That appalling flash was not his--not his that open rift of bright and searing Hell--not his, not his! His hand been the hand of a child, preparing a puny blow; but what was this other horrific hand that was drawn back to strike in the same place? Had he set that in motion? Had he provided the spark that had touched off the whole accumulated power of that formidable and relentless place? He did not know. He only knew that that poor igniting particle in himself was blown out, that----- Oh, impossible!--a clinging kiss (how else to express it?) had changed on his very lips to a gnashing and a removal, and that for very pity of the awful odds he must cry out to her against whom he had lately raged to guard herself . . . guard herself. . . .

"Look out!" he shrieked aloud. . . .

The revulsion was instant. As if a cold slow billow had broken over him, he came to find that he was lying in his bed, that the mist and horror that had for so long enwrapped him had departed, that he was Paul Oleron, and that he was sick, naked, helpless, and unutterably abandoned and alone. His faculties, though weak, answered at last to his calls upon them; and he knew that it must have been a hideous nightmare that had left him sweating and shaking thus.

Yes, he was himself, Paul Oleron, tired novelist, already past the summit of his best work, and slipping downhill again empty-handed from it all. He had struck short in his life's aim. He had tried too much, had over-estimated his strength, and was a failure, a failure. . . .

It all came to him in the single word, enwrapped and complete; it needed no sequential thought; he was a failure. He had missed. . . .

And he had missed not one happiness, but two. He had missed the ease of this world, which men love, and he had missed also that other shining prize for which men forgo ease, the snatching and holding and triumphant bearing up aloft of which is the only justification of the mad adventurer who hazards the enterprise. And there was no second attempt. Fate has no morrow. Oleron's morrow must be to sit down to a profitless, ill-done, unrequited work again, and so on the morrow after that, and the morrow after that, and as many morrows as there might be. . . .

He lay there, weakly yet sanely considering it. . . .

And since the whole attempt had failed, it was hardly worth while to consider whether a little might not be saved from the general wreck. No good would ever come of that half-finished novel. He had intended that it should appear in the autumn; was under contract that it should appear; no matter; it was better to pay forfeit to his publishers than to waste what days were left. He was spent; age was not far off; and paths of

wisdom and sadness were the properest for the remainder of the journey. . . .

If only he had chosen the wife, the child, the faithful friend at the fireside, and let them follow an ignis fatuus that list! . . .

In the meantime it began to puzzle him exceedingly why he should be so weak, that his room should smell so overpoweringly of decaying vegetable matter, and that his hand, chancing to stray to his face in the darkness, should encounter a beard.

"Most extraordinary!" he began to mutter to himself. "Have I been ill? M I ill now? And if so, why have they left me alone? . . . Extraordinary! . . ."

He thought he heard a sound from the kitchen or bathroom. He rose a little on his pillow, and listened. . . . Ah! He was not alone, then! It certainly would have been extraordinary if they had left him ill and alone--- Alone? Oh no. He would be looked after. He wouldn't be left, ill, to shift for himself. If everybody else had forsaken him, he could trust Elsie Bengough, the dearest chum he had, for that . . . bless her faithful heart!

But suddenly a short, stifled, spluttering cry rang sharply out:

"Paul!"

It came from the kitchen.

And in the same moment it flashed upon Oleron, he knew not how, that two, three, five, he knew not how many minutes before, another sound, unmarked at the time but suddenly transfixing his attention now, had striven to reach his intelligence. This sound had been the slight touch of metal on metal-- just such a sound as Oleron made when he put his key into the lock.

"Hallo! . . . ho's that?" he called sharply from his bed.

He had no answer.

He called again. "Hallo! . . . Who's there? . . . Who is it?"

This time he was sure he heard noises, soft and heavy, in the kitchen.

"This is a queer thing altogether," he muttered. "By Jove, I'm as weak as a kitten too, . . . Hallo, there! Somebody called, didn't they? . . . Elsie! Is that you? . . ."

Then he began to knock with his hand on the wall at the side of his bed.

"Elsie! . . . Elsie! . . . You called, didn't you? . . . Please come here, whoever it is! . . ."

There was a sound as of a closing door, and then silence. Oleron began to get rather alarmed.

"It may be a nurse," he muttered; "Elsie'd have to get me a nurse, of course. She'd sit with me as long as she could spare the time, brave lass, and she'd get a nurse for the rest. . . . But it was awfully like her voice. . . . Elsie, or whoever it is! . . . I can't make this out at all. I must go and see what's the matter. . . ."

He put one leg out of bed. Feeling its feebleness, he reached with his hand for the additional support of the wall. . . .

But before putting out the other leg he stopped and considered, picking at his new-found beard. He was suddenly wondering whether he dared go into the kitchen. It was such a frightfully long way; no man knew what horror might not leap and huddle on his shoulders if he went so far; when a man has an overmastering impulse to get back into bed he ought to take heed of the warning and obey it. Besides, why should he go? What was there to go for? If it was that Bengough creature again, let her look after herself; Oleron was not going to have things cramp themselves on his defenseless back for the sake of such a spoilsport as she! . . . If she was in, let her let herself out again, and the sooner the better for her! Oleron simply couldn't be bothered. He had his work to do. On the morrow, he must set about the writing of a novel with a heroine so winsome, capricious, adorable, jealous, wicked, beautiful, inflaming, and

altogether evil, that men should stand amazed. She was coming over him now; he knew by the alteration of the very air of the room when she was near him; and that soft thrill of bliss that had begun to stir in him never came unless she was beckoning, beckoning. . . .

He let go the wall and fell back into bed again as--oh, unthinkable!--the other half of that kiss that a gnash had interrupted was placed (how else convey it?) on his lips, robbing him of very breath. . . .

XII

In the bright June sunlight a crowd filled the square, and looked up at the windows of the old house with the antique insurance marks in its walls of red brick and the agents' notice-boards hanging like wooden choppers over the paling. Two constables stood at the broken gate of the narrow entrance-alley, keeping folk back. The women kept to the outskirts of the throng, moving now and then as if to see the drawn red blinds of the old house from a new angle, and talking in whispers. The children were in the houses, behind closed doors.

A long-nosed man had a little group about him, and he was telling some story over and over again; and another man, little and fat and wide-eyed, sought to capture the long-nosed man's audience with some relation in which a key figured.

". . . and it was revealed to me that there'd been something that very afternoon," the long-nosed man was saying. "I was standing there, where Constable Saunders is--or rather, I was passing about my business, when they came out. There was no deceiving me, oh, no deceiving me! I saw her face. . . ."

"What was it like, Mr. Barrett?" a man asked.

"It was like hers whom our Lord said to, Woman, doth any man accuse thee?--white as paper, and no mistake! Don't tell me! . . . And so I walks straight across to Mrs. Barrett, and Jane, I says,

this must stop, and stop at once; we are commanded to avoid evil,' I says, and it must come to an end now; let him get help elsewhere.' And she says to me, John,' she says, it's four-and-sixpence a week'--them was her words. Jane," I says, if it was forty-six thousand pounds it should top' . . . and from that day to this she hasn't set foot inside that gate."

There was a short silence: then,

"Did Mrs. Barrett ever . . . see anythink, like?" somebody vaguely inquired.

Barrett turned austere on the speaker.

"What Mrs. Barrett saw and Mrs. Barrett didn't see shall not pas these lips; even as it is written, keep thy tongue from speaking evil," he said.

Another man spoke.

"He was pretty near canned up in the Wagon and Horses that night, weren't he, Jim?"

"Yes, e hadn't half copped it. . . ."

"Not standing treat much, neither; he was in the bar, all on his own. . . ."

"So e was; we talked about it. . . ."

The fat, scared-eyed man made another attempt.

"She got the key off of me--she had the number of it--she came into my shop of a Tuesday evening. . . ."

Nobody heeded him.

"Shut your heads," a heavy labourer commented gruffly, "she hasn't been found yet. Ere's the inspectors; we shall know more in a bit."

Two inspectors had come up and were talking to the constables who guarded the gate. The little fat man ran eagerly forward, saying that she had bought the key of him. "I remember the number, because of it's being three one's and three three's--111333!" he explained excitedly.

An inspector put him aside.

"Nobody's been in?" he asked of one of the constables.

"No, sir."

"Then you, Brackley, come with us; you, Smith, keep the gate. There's a squad on its way."

The two inspectors and the constable passed down the alley and entered the house. They mounted the wide carved staircase.

"This don't look as if he'd been out much lately," one of the inspectors uttered as he kicked aside a litter of dead leaves and papers that lay outside Oleron's door. "I don't think we need knock--break a pane, Brackley."

The door had two glazed panels; there was a sound of shattered glass; and Brackley put his hand through the hole his elbow had made and drew back the latch.

"Faugh!" . . . choked one of the inspectors as they entered. "Let some light and air in, quick. It stinks like a hearse-----"

The assembly out in the square saw the red blinds go up and the windows of the old house flung open.

"That's better," said one of the inspectors, putting his head out of a window and drawing a deep breath. . . . "That seems to be the bedroom in there; will you go in, Simms, while I go over the rest? . . ."

They had drawn up the bedroom blind also, and the waxy-white, emaciated man on the bed had made a blinker of his hand against the torturing flood of brightness. Nor could he believe that his hearing was not playing tricks with him, for there were two policemen in his room, bending over him and asking where "she" was. He shook his head.

"This woman Bengough . . . goes by the name of Miss Elsie Bengough . . . d'ye hear? Where is she? . . . No good,

Brackley; get him up; be careful with him; I'll just shove my head out of the window, I think. . . ."

The other inspector had been through Oleron's study and had found nothing, and was now in the kitchen, kicking aside an ankle-deep mass of vegetable refuse that cumbered the floor. The kitchen window had no blind, and was overshadowed by the blank end of the house across the alley. The kitchen appeared to be empty.

But the inspector, kicking aside the dead flowers, noticed that a shuffling trick that was not of his making had been swept to a cupboard in the corner. In the upper part of the door of the cupboard was a square panel that looked as if it slid on runners. The door itself was closed.

The inspector advanced, put out his hand to the little knob, and slid the hatch along the groove.

Then he took an involuntary step back again.

Framed in the aperture, and falling forward a little before it jammed again in its frame, was something that resembled a large lumpy pudding, done up in a pudding-bag of faded brown, red frieze.

"Ah!" said the inspector.

To close the hatch again he would have had to thrust that pudding back with his hand; and somehow he did not quite like the idea of touching it. Instead, he turned the handle of the cupboard itself. There was weight behind it, so much weight that, after opening the door three and four inches and peering inside, he had to put his shoulder to it in order to close it again. In closing it he left sticking out, a few inches from the floor, a triangle of black and white check skirt.

He went into the small hall.

"All right!" he called.

They had got Oleron into his clothes. He still used his hands as blinkers, and

his brain was very confused. A number of things were happening that he couldn't understand. He couldn't understand the extraordinary mess of dead flowers there seemed to be everywhere; he couldn't understand why there should be police officers in his room; he couldn't understand why one of these should be sent for a four-wheeler and a stretcher; and he couldn't understand what heavy article they seemed to be moving about in the kitchen--his kitchen. . . .

"What's the matter?" he muttered sleepily. . . .

Then he heard a murmur in the square, and the stopping of a four-wheeler outside. A police officer was at his elbow again, and Oleron wondered why, when he whispered something to him, he should run off a string of words---something about "used in evidence against you." They had lifted him to his feet, and were assisting him towards the door. . . .

No, Oleron couldn't understand it at all.

They got him down the stairs and along the alley. Oleron was aware of confused angry shoutings; he gathered that a number of people wanted to lynch somebody or other. Then his attention became fixed on a little fat frightened-eyed man who appeared to be making a statement that an officer was taking down in a notebook.

"I'd seen her with him . . . they was often together . . . she came into my shop and said it was for him . . . I thought it was all right . . . 111333 the number was," the man was saying.

The people seemed to be very angry; many police were keeping them back; but one of the inspectors had a voice that Oleron thought quite kind and friendly. He was telling somebody to get somebody else into the cab before something or other was brought out; and Oleron noticed that a four-wheeler was drawn up at the gate. It appeared that it was himself who was to be put into it; and as they lifted him up he saw that the inspector tried to stand between

him and something that stood behind the cab, but was not quick enough to prevent Oleron seeing that this something was a hooded stretcher. The angry voices sounded like sea; something hard, like a stone, hit the back of the cab; and the inspector followed Oleron in and stood with his back to the window nearer the side where the people were. The door they had put Oleron in at remained open, apparently till the other inspector should come; and through the opening Oleron had a glimpse of the hatchet-like "To Let" boards among the privet-tree. One of them said that the key was at Number Six....

Suddenly the raging of voices was hushed. Along the entrance-alley shuffling steps were heard, and the other inspector appeared at the cab door.

"Right away," he said to the driver.

He entered, fastened the door after him, and blocked up the second window with his back. Between the two inspectors Oleron slept peacefully. The cab moved down the square, the other vehicle went up the hill. The mortuary lay that way.

THE END

Choices

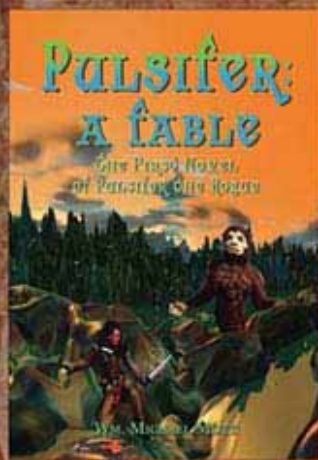


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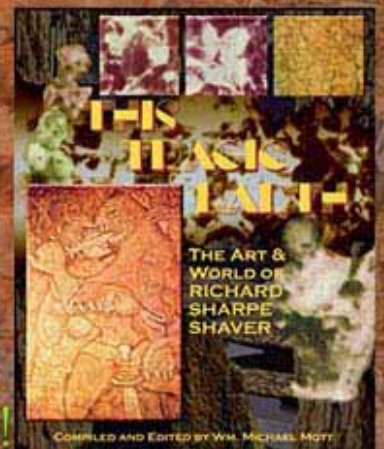
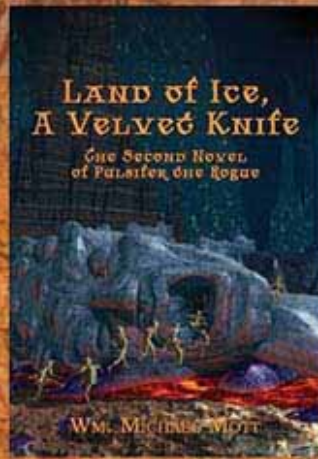
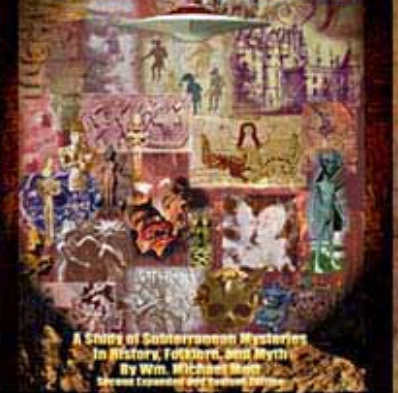
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A Very Special Preview

METAMORPHOSIS

A central collage of images. At the top, the word 'METAMORPHOSIS' is written in large, blue, glowing letters. Below it, a woman's profile in a dark dress and hat is on the left. In the center, a woman's face is shown in a high-contrast, black and white style, holding a pocket watch. To the right of her face is a glowing red planet. Below her face are two smaller faces: a man's face on the left and a woman's face on the right. On the far right, a large, ornate temple or palace structure is visible, illuminated with blue light rays.

The WONDER of the WORLDS Trilogy

From the imagination of SESH HERI

*Presented to You
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IS IT TRUE?

In 1893, the world we know today emerged through a single event known as the Chicago World's Fair.

What is today a common shopping mall, with stores as big as museum exhibition halls, and entertainment complexes and amusement attractions, was first realized by the designers and builders of that single year-long event. Touted as the first time people saw a city illuminated artificially, the 1893 Chicago World's Fair was experienced by one in four Americans and many thousands of people who visited from around the world. Few knew that this new 'city' would become the model for social engineering that it has become, for as much as the enormous retail complex is a reflection of prosperity of capitalism, it is now also the modern equivalent of ancient Rome's bread and circuses, used to lull a once mighty population into a more manageable herd.

And that was simply the beginning of a century of secrets and lies.

In 1893, there existed the technology to provide energy to every home and industry on the planet for simply the cost of the apparatus that supplied it. It is a fact that J P Morgan rejected Nikola Tesla's revolutionary technology merely because he could not meter it, and thus was born the ultimate corruption in energy supply we are burdened with today. In 1893, the technology to render the combustion engine obsolete was suppressed and ignored, especially to the benefit of the oil industry. America and the entire world were denied a future far greater than even the much-touted Twentieth Century ever saw come to fruition, all for the benefit of the personal profit of an elite and its marriage to politics, using our great virtues of personal liberty and free market enterprise against us.

The management of information has followed much the same course. Over the past 115 years, information as power and product is a concept that has exponentially expanded its influence in the management of the masses. America and the world have seen the rise of the age of specialists, encouraging people to take the word of a pedigreed expert speaking through controlled channels such as media and academia, primarily to discourage personal investigation and thought.

What promise the 1893 Chicago World's Fair may have shown some people then has sadly not been fulfilled. Why?

Because there is something going on you don't know about.

It hides in plain sight and also in corners you assume are well-lit by a technology you are deceptively led to believe is far more encompassing than it actually is. Even as you or someone you know angrily scoffs at this revelation, those who know the truth laugh at you. They know the true history of this world. They know the true history of the Twentieth Century. They also know what is in store for you and your children. And they delight in your self-assured ignorance as you continue marching to the tune their band plays. But there are always some among us who see the truth. There are always a few who think for themselves and see with their own eyes.

MARK TWAIN, America's most famous author, went to Chicago for the great 1893 World's Fair.

He never did attend the fair and those eleven days are missing from his diary.

NIKOLA TESLA demonstrated astonishing technology that is ignored to this day.

He also held patents for technology that would have allowed air and space travel decades before Kitty Hawk and NASA.

HARRY HOUDINI attended the fair on his path to fame as a great escape artist.

Houdini is now understood to have been an undercover federal agent later in life.

Evidence suggests he was murdered over his investigation into a dark secret camouflaged as a corrupt parlor trick racket.

What is going on that these three men may have known?

What happened during those eleven days in 1893 when Mark Twain claims he was too ill to see anyone?

Why was Twain really rescued from bankruptcy

and was a condition to not publicly acknowledge Tesla part of the deal?

What really happened that spring of 1893 that remains secret to this day?

An Excerpt from WONDER OF THE WORLDS By Sesh Heri:

Breaking his usual routine, Tesla had knocked off work early on the evening preceding the fire, had dined at Delmonicos, and then had retired to his rooms at the Hotel Gerlach. Around 10:00 A.M. the next morning, Tesla arrived in the neighborhood of his laboratory and found it a smoking ruin. His other employees, some fifteen in number, had arrived earlier, but none of them, including Kolman Czito, could bear to call Tesla to tell him the awful news.

Tesla staggered around the edges of the rubble with tears in his eyes trying to see if anything could be salvaged. A newspaper reporter from *The New York Times* followed behind Tesla, trying to interview him. Tesla climbed into the smoking ruins of the building and the reporter decided at that point that he had gathered enough facts to write his story. Two firemen went in after Tesla to drag him back out of the collapsed building. The firemen got him back out on to the street and Tesla sat down on the curb and stared down at the pavement. Everything he had was gone, all his equipment and everything from his World's Fair exhibit. None of it was insured.

While Tesla sat there on the curb trying to absorb this disaster, he gradually took notice of a shadow that fell upon the pavement only a few inches from his feet. At first he ignored it. The shadow did not move. In another minute or so Tesla realized that it was the shadow of someone's hat. Another minute passed and Tesla noted that the shadow had not moved, not by so much as one-quarter of one inch, no, not so much as by one sixteenth of one inch. Tesla looked up.

It was the man in the silk hat-- the man whom Tesla had encountered in Paris years ago. He was standing perfectly still looking down upon Tesla as if he had been standing there waiting since the beginning of time and could go on standing there waiting patiently and serenely until that day far into the future when time itself decided to end. Tesla's eyes slowly took in the whole height and breadth of the man in the silk hat. The man was dressed exactly as he had been in Paris years ago. In fact, the man appeared to be exactly the same as he was when Tesla had last seen him. Not only was his apparel unchanged, but his face had not aged one instant. It seemed to Tesla that the man in the silk hat was not a part of time as Tesla understood it.

"May I offer my condolences," the man in the silk hat said.

Tesla inclined his head.

The man in the silk hat looked at the smoking ruins, and said, "And they said, Go to, let us build a city and a tower. And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.' Would you care to accompany me, Mr. Tesla?"

Tesla looked up beyond the ropes and the barricades set up by the fire department and saw a carriage waiting across the street. It was the same carriage that had carried the man in the silk hat away into the streets of

Paris. Like the man, the carriage, too, remained unchanged. The brass plate with the number "44" was still mounted upon its door.

"I..." Tesla found he could not speak. He shook his head.

"Come," the man in the silk hat said, extending his hand.

"Come with me."

Tesla rose to his feet and looked at the man in the silk hat.

"Is all this your doing?" Tesla asked.

"Yes, Mr. Tesla," the man in the silk hat said, "you know it is."

Tesla stood looking at the man in the silk hat, feeling a mounting, suddenly uncontrollable rage.

"Your heart lies in one of the pans of the balance, Mr. Tesla," the man in the silk hat said, "and what may we find to fill the wants of the other? My own destruction? And that would accomplish-- what? Ah, you see the point. My destruction would weigh more than your heart. You would have to place something in the pan along with your heart if you would tip and level the balance. And what could be of such a weight that it would level the pans and leave neither wanting? Perhaps your soul? Are you prepared to place your soul beside your heart in the pan of the balance? Come, Mr. Tesla. Come with me. Come let us see if you and I can level the pans of the balance."

The man in the silk hat held his right hand out to Tesla and swept his left hand up and back toward the waiting carriage.

Tesla looked back at his ruined laboratory, and then turned and walked with the man in the silk hat across the street.

The man in the silk hat opened the door of the carriage, put his foot upon its step, and went up through the door. Tesla remained standing outside on the street.

"Please, Mr. Tesla," the man in the silk hat said from inside, "we have much to discuss."

Tesla got into the carriage and sat across from the man in the silk hat who closed the door. The carriage started off up the street.

"There has been much discussion concerning you of late," the man in the silk hat said. "Much discussion here in the city-- and elsewhere. Some of us in the Order believe that you have failed us and that your time has passed. And some of our operatives here in New York and in London believe that the best way to bring your time to an end is with your death. And some of those now seek to act upon their belief before the Order has made its final determination. While there would be consequences to such unauthorized advances, it is possible that your life could be in real danger, hence my warning to you now. It is best that you go into hiding until passions cool in certain quarters."

Tesla sat looking at the man in the silk hat who seemed so quiet and serene. Finally Tesla asked, "Why? Why have you destroyed my laboratory?"

"Why?" the man in the silk hat asked in return. "You know the answer to that, Mr. Tesla, only you are afraid to face it. We have destroyed your laboratory because the things you were doing in it overstepped the bounds established by the Order of the Flaming Sword, the Order which has monitored your work, supported your work, secretly protected and promoted your work at every turn, the Order which nurtured your growth and development from your infancy until now, the

Order which arranged for your birth, the Order which gave you your very life-- the Order which has the power to take your life away from you now."

"You are a monstrous liar," Tesla said. "You and your people have had nothing to do with my work. I have done it all myself."

"Did you create yourself, Mr. Tesla? Did you create yourself? No, it is we of the Order who prepared the ground, tilled the soil, and planted the seed. And the seed called out to the ether for your soul, and your soul was compelled to answer the call, for the call was your destiny. Yes, you have worked; for the seed puts forth its shoots, and it branches, and buds, and blooms, and bears fruit. And we of the Order have pronounced that fruit good-- until now. Mr. Tesla, do you believe your birth was an accident-- a mere chance collision of mindless particles in a dead universe? Or could there be a plan and purpose in your coming to this world? We of the Order are the Keepers of Human Destiny. To us has been granted the power over Life and Death and Knowledge. Who determines the course of human events? The average man who gropes weakly in the darkness of his own ignorance for his food and shelter? No, such average men look to their leaders to guide their way. Most men here in America take vain pride in their ability to choose their leaders. But in reality their leaders are chosen for them. A few believe that the great financial powers choose the ones who shall be presidents and kings. But who determines which ones shall wield the golden scepter of Money? We do, Mr. Tesla. It is we of the Order of the Flaming Sword who place men such as J.P. Morgan upon the Money Throne. And it is through them that we create the presidents and kings, the philosophers and artists, the generals and, yes, the inventors. Have you climbed to the top of the Statue of Liberty? You have. And you have noticed that through the windows cut in her crown that you can look out upon-- what? You look out upon nothing, Mr. Tesla, or as close to nothing as one can get in New York Harbor-- the dreary rooftops of Brooklyn. Have you ever wondered why the Statue faces Brooklyn and not southward to the mouth of the harbor-- southward as it should if it is to function as a symbol of welcome as it has been claimed to do? You have wondered. And you know. You know it has been positioned so that the central axis of its body and face lies at a right angle to a line of compression stress that passes north to south through the land upon which its foundations are set. And you know why the builders oriented the statue this way. But you have not considered the surrounding landscape: to the north, the so-called 'Cleopatra's Needle' in Central Park, and, to the west in New Jersey, Edison's laboratory, and, a little further to the north, the birthplace of Grover Cleveland, the United States president who dedicated the Statue of Liberty. I ask you, Mr. Tesla, to study these three sites upon the landscape and search out their relationship to the Statue of Liberty. Study the shapes of the land masses and the surrounding bodies of water. You will find these three sites all lie on lines of land stress which converge upon the Statue of Liberty. When you study these things out, you will begin to see the work of the Order of the Flaming Sword. It is we who planned the Industrial Age and brought it magically to fruition with the talisman of the Statue of Liberty Enlightening the World-- the great goddess of knowledge, life, and

literacy known in all ages by different names: Persephone, Semiramis, Shekinah, Sufkhit-Abut. And you, Mr. Tesla, have been an important part of our work; you have been essential to the Industrial Age. It was through you that we would introduce the system of alternating electrical current transmission-- the one system that would allow the universal parceling and distribution of electrical power. Oh yes, there are many who say that if you hadn't invented AC, someone else soon would have. Not in a thousand years, not in ten thousand years would such a system have been developed, unless some extraordinary individual came forth to illuminate the dark world. And from whence comes such extraordinary individuals? From we of the Order, the viticulturists of human destiny. But now, Mr. Tesla, now you have taken upon yourself further developments. You are seeking to develop electrical systems in which power can be distributed but in which it cannot be metered or parceled-- electrical systems that operate not upon the limited material resources of this planet, but which draw their power directly from the ether. This we cannot allow. In this you have overstepped your bounds. In this you will be stopped."

"I will fight you," Tesla said. "I will fight you as I fought the Martian King."

"Kel**Kbf**hera?" the man in the silk hat asked, smiling in amusement. "He was a petty tyrant which we created. Yes, you fought him, as we knew you would. And you prevailed, as we knew you would. Kel's methods were clumsy and overt. Ours are neither. Think twice, Mr. Tesla, think thrice. Think long and hard before you decide to oppose us. We cannot be vanquished. But we can allow negotiations. It is possible that we may allow you to continue your work on etheric energies-- on our terms. We may allow you to continue your developments in secret to ultimately serve our purposes, but we cannot allow the commercialization of the ether. There, the Order draws its Flaming Sword and commands: 'No further shalt thou go!'"

"I will fight you," Tesla said. "I will fight you, I will fight you."

"Of course you will fight us, Mr. Tesla. There can be no other way. Don't you recall what I told you in Paris? Without conflict nothing can manifest, nothing can stand? Without conflict, what would come of our relationship? Conflict is the bond which holds us together. You shall remain in conflict with us, just as all your predecessors did: Hept-Supht of Atlantis, Parmenides of Greece, Galileo of Italy, Sir Issac Newton of England, and you, Mr. Tesla, you of the world, you whom we have created, a wonder of both Earth and Mars-- a wonder of the worlds!"

Tesla had noticed that all the while as the man in the silk hat had been speaking, a faint, grayish-white nimbus of light had emanated from his person. That light now seemed to be coming from a point on the man's head, directly above the man's eyebrows in the center of his forehead. The rays of grayish light began to turn in a circle very slowly, and then gather speed to turn rapidly clockwise, and then reverse and spin counterclockwise. Back and forth the light spun, as if a ghostly Fourth of July fireworks were pinned to the forehead of the man in the silk hat. The rays of the pinwheel extended outward and penetrated Tesla's forehead and entered through Tesla's skull and into his brain,

and Tesla could feel the pinwheel of light passing through to his inner ear like a rotating gravitational field upsetting his balance.

"I know, Mr. Tesla. You have questions. Questions you will not ask-- questions that I cannot now fully answer. But I have something that can lead you to the answers you now need to know."

The man in the silk hat once again brought out a book. At first glance Tesla thought it was a Bible, for it was bound in black leather. But it was not a Bible.

"The black book," the man in the silk hat said. "Take it. Go ahead, Mr. Tesla, it has been prepared just for you."

Tesla took the book, but did not open it.

"Yes," the man in the silk hat said, "you will read it later. You will read it. And you will then understand all that you face. You have read the green book. You know its contents. You know it deals with what has been. The black book deals with what will be-- the next two centuries of this world-- the coming age of blackening, of Nigredo, the Black Crow which announces the coming of Rain-- as in the days of Noah. But this time it shall rain fire. Three wars shall be fought-- three wars so great that they shall engulf the world in fire and blood and death, and then shall come the Great Horror: the powers of the heavens shall be shaken. What shall be your part in all this, Mr. Tesla? That is a question you must decide. Someday you will know the truth to that question, and when you do, you will receive the final book-- the red book, the book of fulfillment. But that day is far off for you now. Take the black book and read it. And when we of the Order take the black book away from you, you will know that you are safe and that the following day you can come out of hiding."

Tesla looked down at the black book. The moment he did, the spinning, crawling sensation inside his head ceased. He looked back up to the man in the silk hat, and the grayish rays of light still spun around the man and reached into Tesla's head making him dizzy.

"I will fight you with everything I have in me," Tesla said.

"I cannot ask anything more of you than that," the man in the silk hat said. "Fight us as you would fight a dream, a nightmare; for we are your dreams and your nightmares; we are your loftiest ideals and your basest sins; we are your good and we are your evil. We of the Order of the Flaming Sword are the makers of destinies, Mr. Tesla, the makers of worlds without end! Are you beginning to glimpse the truth now? Are you beginning to understand? Life itself is only a dream-- a vision of Mind. All is dream-- all the people you have ever known-- all men and women and children everywhere, those who have lived before you, those who live now, those yet unborn. All is a dream, God, man, the world, the sun and moon and the wilderness of planets and stars-- a dream, all a dream. Nothing exists but you! And you are not you-- you have no body, no blood, no bones, you are not material atoms, but a thought! What you call your 'self' is but a mask through which your real self peers. I myself have no existence. I am just another mask through which you gaze. I-- and everyone you have ever known-- we are all masks, personalities and places, moments called 'time.' All masks, all dreams of your imagination!"

The spinning arms of white light surrounding the man in the silk hat had become a funnel of light. Tesla now witnessed a thing that almost defies description and belief: the man in the silk hat began to change shape, and began to turn into someone else. He became the midwife who had assisted the doctor at Tesla's birth. The midwife then shifted in shape to become the doctor that had delivered Tesla. The doctor shifted his shape to then become Tesla's mother, and then, in succession, his father, his brother, his sister. Tesla's sister then proceeded to transform into other people, each transformation occurring at an increasingly rapid rate so that the people appearing before him could be seen only in elusive flashes. Tesla realized that he was seeing every single person he had ever encountered in his life and in the exact order in which he had encountered them. Before him flashed the faces of Thomas Edison, George Westinghouse, Kolman Czito, Grover Cleveland-- and, yes, even me! Everyone Tesla had ever met or seen in the world during his whole life now flashed before him. And as all these people flashed by, Tesla heard the voice of the man in the silk hat saying:

"Already I am passing away, to be replaced with more masks! More veils! More darkened glass!"

Then the flashing, which had become almost unbearable, ceased and Tesla was confronted with an exact double of himself sitting in the carriage where a moment before the man in the silk hat had been sitting. Then an even more curious, almost indescribable experience came upon Tesla: he was, at the same instant, looking out of both his own pair of eyes and the eyes of his double! No, not just looking out-- Tesla *was* his own double, existing in two places at the same time-- and he was looking back and forth simultaneously at himself as he occupied these two different places. Tesla heard the voice of the man in the silk hat speak again:

"In this flashing, illusory moment, while slumbering Mind wakes ever so slightly, remember! Remember! Who am I? I am *you*! And you are me! And all is One! One Thought! One Existence! One Dream! Dream other dreams-- and better!"

Suddenly Tesla found himself standing alone at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge. The man in the silk hat and his carriage had instantly disappeared. Tesla looked down and saw that he was still holding the black book that the man in the silk hat had given him. He looked around. A few people approached, but paid no attention to him; they behaved as if he had been standing there all along. Tesla looked up and down the street. There was no sign anywhere of the man in the silk hat or the carriage in which they had been riding, but Tesla could see the plume of smoke from his ruined laboratory still rising up above the rooftops of lower Manhattan.

Then from out of nowhere Tesla heard the voice of the man in the silk hat saying:

"A city afire. Thus begins the age of the blackening. This moment is both fact and prophetic symbol. When lower Manhattan burns again in this way, it shall be changed as in the twinkling of an eye, and then shall the age of blackening begin its final culmination."

Tesla turned and looked at the Brooklyn Bridge; only a few people were crossing it on foot. He felt as if he were suspended in a crossroads

of time, as if he existed simultaneously in the past, present, and future. He felt at once as if the Brooklyn Bridge had not yet been built, that it stood before him now, and that it continued to exist in a future time when its steel cables were rusted with age. He could see only two or three people up ahead on the bridge, but at the same time he felt as if a great crowd of people were passing by him, trying to escape from lower Manhattan; he could feel these people, but not see them.

Tesla looked up to the sky and saw the plume of smoke drifting high overhead, an ominous gray smoke, the dragon breath of calamity and chaos.

Tesla walked forward on to the bridge, with the black book in his hand, and left the city and the smoke behind.

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WONDER OF THE WORLDS

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PROLOGUE:
Right Side Up

"Everyone learns to balance on his feet-- but a performer such as an acrobat learns to balance in time-- just as if he did it to music he carries in his head."

Houdini

January 17th, 1943

MJ-7 Laboratories, Somewhere in the U.S.A., One Mile Underground

"Incredible! Nikola Tesla is dead!"

Majestic Seven's top technical analyst had gasped these words as he peered through the eyepiece of a microscope at a crystal that was set into the end of a watch fob that had once belonged to Mark Twain.

"I saw him only a few weeks ago," the analyst said. "He was getting on in years, yes, but-- he was so full of life!"

Two men in dark suits stood next to the white-coated analyst. One of the men had a face that bore no expression whatsoever; the other man, the blank-faced man's partner, had an expression that was frozen in a faint scowl of suspicion, his forehead creased in the ridges of a washboard. The two men said nothing in reply to the analyst's observations. The analyst continued to peer through the eyepiece, his motionless figure betraying intense excitement.

The analyst finally said, "It's one of Tesla's crystals."

"Are you sure?" the blank-faced man asked. "How can you tell?"

The analyst said, "I've only seen two other crystals like this before. Both of them were made by Tesla several decades ago. This one is very similar to those others."

"How is this one like the others?" the blank-faced man asked.

"They're all a special kind of quartz," the analyst said, "infused with fast-spin atoms-- that is, atoms spinning at a high rate of speed. This polarizes the lattice structure of the crystal. Such quartz does not grow naturally. It has to be fabricated by growing the crystal in a special environment."

"What kind of environment?" the blank-faced man asked.

"We don't have all the specifics. We're still trying to duplicate Tesla's work. Maybe some of those documents you brought back from Tesla's safe might fill in the missing pieces for us. But basically, the quartz has to be grown while it rapidly rotates within an intense electromagnetic field pulsed at frequencies resonant to the structure of the quartz and the earth itself. But it's more complicated than that. While the quartz grows it has to be heated and cooled in an exact sequence of time intervals. It's a complicated interplay of forces-- a grand ballet performed to a grand symphony!"

"Uh-huh," the blank-faced man grunted. "And what's that do?"

The analyst slowly raised his head up from the microscope and turned to look the blank-faced man in the eye.

"A whole lot," the analyst said. "But I think the thing you need to know here is that these Tesla crystals are imbedded with small particles of gold and platinum group metals. All of these metals are also atomically polarized in fast-spin configurations. And all of this, the quartz and the metals together, form one integrated lattice structure allowing extreme electrical conductivity."

"And?" the blank faced man asked.

"And that," the analyst said, "turns the whole crystal into an etheric pump."

The blank-faced man looked down at the crystal like a hunting dog pointing his nose at a duck.

"Free energy," the blank-faced man said.

The analyst suddenly realized the blank-faced man's indifference and boredom had been a pose. The blank-faced man had been listening to every word the analyst had said.

"Free energy," the analyst said. "Only one thing. This crystal here is missing its fast-spin gold atoms."

"Missing? Are you sure?" the blank-faced man asked. "Maybe the crystal never had any gold in it."

"Highly unlikely," the analyst said. "To make a crystal like this is complicated and expensive. To leave out the gold would be like manufacturing an expensive automobile and leaving out the engine."

"So what happened to the gold?" the blank-faced man asked.

The analyst looked back through the eyepiece of the microscope.

"I believe it has transmuted," the analyst finally said. "The gold has projected to a higher space-- a parallel dimension of reality-- or perhaps it has shifted in time."

"In *time*?" the blank-faced man asked.

"Perhaps it has projected to the future-- or the past. This crystal may be something like an ignition switch for a time machine."

"I've heard rumors about Tesla's time travel experiments," the blank-faced man said.

"We all have," the analyst said. "If anyone around here knows anything about that, they're cleared for a level of security far above mine. And my level is pretty high."

"So's mine," the blank-faced man said.

"There *are* higher levels," the analyst said.

"Oh, yes," the blank-faced man said. "Much higher. Think Einstein knows?"

"Are you kidding?" the analyst said.

"Yes, I am," the blank-faced man said. "Don't you see me laughing?"

"From ear to ear," the analyst said.

"So when we get beyond the front-men, who really knows about this stuff?" the blank-faced man asked.

"Other than Tesla?" the analyst pondered. "Only a handful. Most of them are not part of our official government. They're private individuals that Majestic Seven keeps an eye on. Just like you kept an eye on Tesla."

"Alchemists," the blank-faced man said.

"Yeah," the analyst said. "Like that guy down in Florida-- what's his name?"

"Leedskalnin," the blank-faced man said.

"Yeah," the analyst said, "Leedskalnin. He might know something. Then again, he might not. I've heard he's a nut, some kind of idiot savant. He's producing results, but he doesn't really know the science behind it all. Then-- yet again-- he might be *playing* nuts."

"Oh, yeah," the blank-faced man said.

"If that's the case," the analyst said, "you'll never get any useful information out of him, not even with torture."

"We don't torture," the blank-faced man said.

"Of course not," the analyst said. He took the watch fob with its crystal out of the microscope and held it in his hand.

"What has George Ade said about this?" the analyst asked.

“Haven’t talked to him yet,” the blank-faced man said.
“I wanted your report first.”
“I suggest you talk to Ade,” the analyst said. “He’s one of the MJ-Seven old timers and an original member of the Mars Club.”
“Him and Kolman Czito,” the blank-faced man said. “The only two still living.”
The analyst gave the watch fob back to the blank-faced man, who weighed it in his hand.
“What about this crystal?” the blank-faced man asked.
“Is it dangerous or anything?”
The analyst replied, “Without its metallic elements, it’s just a crystal.”

January 18th, 1943

Hazelden, George Ade’s estate, Brook, Indiana

The blank-faced man steered the black Ford sedan down along the curving drive, the headlight beams of the car probing the grayish night air. Up ahead on the left, George Ade’s Tudor mansion glowed dimly in the low-lying fog. In the passenger seat, the blank-faced man’s partner glanced about at the dark expanse.

The blank-faced man stopped the car and killed the engine and lights. The two men opened the car doors, and got out, the blank-faced man gripping in his left hand the handle of a steel suitcase. They stood in the freezing air a moment, and then slammed their doors in unison. A hound dog immediately began howling in the distance. A porch light came on and the two men began walking toward it. Before they reached the front door, it swung open and George Ade appeared in the threshold, wearing dark slacks, a gray wool sweater with elbow patches, and an open-collared shirt. George Ade was a tall, long-faced, lean old man with a full head of steel-gray hair. Ade adjusted his spectacles with his left hand and grinned.

“You fellows look like you could use some coffee,” Ade said. “Come on in and get warm.”

The blank-faced man nodded, and he and his partner went through the door and into the foyer. Ade closed the front door and took their hats and hung them on a mahogany hall tree, and then gestured for their overcoats as well, which he carefully hung in a closet.

“What about that?” Ade asked, nodding to the steel suitcase that the blank-faced man gripped in his hand.

“Want to stow it in here?”

“No,” the blank-faced man said. “We’ll need it.”

Ade nodded, shut the closet door, and waved his hand out in the air.

“Just follow the rise in temperature, fellows,” Ade said.

The blank-faced man and his partner went into a large room off to their left with Ade coming in behind them. Overhead, exposed beams in perfect Tudor style crossed the ceiling. Mounted upon the beams were ornate crystal globe electric light fixtures, exactly like what a Tudor-era Englishman would have installed in his house, if he could have had electric light. To the right of the entrance a glass-fronted bookcase was surmounted by a sculpture of William Tell pulling back his bowstring. Beyond that, against the wall to the right, was another glass-fronted cabinet, not a bookcase, but a display for pieces of rare Chinese porcelain. Removed from this by several feet sat a table laden with several books, a Tiffany lamp, and a silver coffee pot with large porcelain mugs on a silver tray. At the other end of this table were arranged some small oriental bronze sculptures and ivory carvings. In front of the table was a low couch with a blanket folded over one of its arms. Set into the wall to the left was a row of square windows. Below the windows and extending along their length was a long padded nook-bench with pillows thrown down in a studied casualness. At the far end of the room the fireplace roared forth yellow and orange tongues of flame. In front of it Ade had arranged two armchairs and a little wooden stool.

The armchairs had been set into place for the two visitors; the stool was for Ade himself, who liked to put his back to the fire.

"Come on down here," Ade said, gesturing toward the armchairs, "and get the chill off. I'll bring the coffee."

The blank-faced man extended a playing card to Ade. Ade took the card and looked at it. It was a king of diamonds from a poker deck.

"That's all right," Ade said, handing the card back to the blank-faced man who took it. "I know who you are. And your partner, too. And why you're here. You're not F.B.I.-- not really. You're both MJ-Seven agents and you're here to discuss Tesla."

The blank-faced man looked over at his partner.

Ade said, "You know that we MJ-Sevens never retire. And I'm a deep cover agent at the highest level. I keep up on the latest goings-on, and so I know all of you fellows on sight. Most of the rest of you, however, don't know me. And I like that. Now go ahead and have a seat and get comfortable."

The blank-faced man nodded to his partner and they each sat down in an armchair.

"You go way back," the blank-faced man said, setting the steel suitcase down on the floor next to his chair. "You're an original member of the Mars Club."

"Oh, yes," Ade said, going over to the table with the silver coffee pot. He began pouring coffee into the large porcelain mugs. "That's what got me into all this in the first place. Do I have enough logs on the fire there?"

"Sure," the blank-faced man said.

"I'm burning a lot of wood now," Ade said. "Can't get enough heating oil to keep this big old house livable. I didn't think about not being able to get heating oil when I had this place built nearly forty years ago. But now with the government rations..."

Ade brought two of the filled mugs over to the blank-faced man and his partner. The two men took the mugs in their hands and watched the steam rise in the air.

Ade said, "You fellows couldn't put in a word for me with the rationing board, could you?"

The blank-faced man shrugged.

"Didn't think so," Ade said. "But I've found that it never hurts to ask. Now go on. Try that coffee. Go on. You're looking at it like it's poisoned."

The two men sipped their coffee.

"You like it," Ade said. "I can tell. You know your coffee, all right. Tell you my secret: I get my beans from a particular plantation down in Columbia."

"Servant's night off?" the blank-faced man asked.

"I don't call them servants," Ade said, going back to pour himself a cup of coffee. "They're just folks that help out around here. We all work together. But, yes, everyone has gone off to the movies in town. Thought it would be better that way so we could talk."

The blank-faced man set his coffee mug down on a small end table next to his chair, and then picked up the steel suitcase and placed it in his lap.

"Well, I'm dying to see what you've got there," Ade said coming over to the fireplace with a coffee mug in his hand. He sat down on the stool and the blank-faced man opened the steel suitcase and took out a manuscript bound in twine.

"I had an expert take a look at this," the blank-faced man said. "To see if Mark Twain wrote it." He held the manuscript out to Ade who sat his mug aside and then grasped the manuscript.

Ade smiled, looking over the top page.

"Oh?" Ade asked. "And what did your expert conclude?"

"He gave me a very definite maybe," the blank-faced man said.

"You should've come to me first," Ade said.

"No time," the blank-faced man said. "The President called me from overseas by coded radio-telephone..."

"One of Mr. Tesla's inventions," Ade interjected.

"...And ordered me to get a rough-and-ready answer on this manuscript immediately."

"Sounds like it was ready enough but very rough," Ade said.

"What do you think about it?" the blank-faced man asked.

"Did this come from Tesla's effects?" Ade asked.

The blank-faced man nodded.

Ade nodded in return.

"I knew Mark Twain wrote a secret manuscript which he gave to Tesla," Ade said. "It was about our trip to Mars in 1893, the very thing that began the Mars Club and eventually led to the formation of Majestic Seven. Is that what's in this manuscript?"

The blank-faced man nodded.

"Why do you doubt its authenticity?" Ade asked.

"You're an MJ-Seven," the blank-faced man said. "You know we're trained to doubt everything. Maybe that manuscript is a plant-- a dummy to throw us off track with false information."

"And who do you think would be able to plant a dummy in Tesla's safe? Not the Germans?" Ade asked.

"No," the blank-faced man said, "not by themselves. We're thinking maybe they had a little help from the Martians."

"I see," Ade said. "What's in this manuscript that makes you suspect that it's a fake?"

"There's a discrepancy involving time," the blank-faced man said. "The account says a week passed on earth while all of you went and returned to Mars in about a day. And when you were on Mars the whole daylight period passed in something like three or four hours. The whole timeline is screwy. We smelled a fake."

"We?" Ade asked.

"My partner here and I," the blank-faced man said. "We got to thinking about the rumors involving Tesla's time travel experiments. And we thought maybe this manuscript might be a very clever way to divert research into that by making us think that Tesla was traveling through time back in the 1890s."

Ade studied the two men sitting before him. Finally he said, "Did you go back to the MJ-Seven archives to read the official account of our 1893 Mars journey?"

"I've reviewed the secret history of Majestic Seven and Tesla's 1893 trip to Mars," the blank-faced man said. "There was nothing there in those accounts that might suggest that Tesla traveled in time, only in space. The only things I found that might relate to time travel experiments were a few incidents, a couple with the Wardencllyffe Tower in the early 1900s, another in 1915 where Tesla picked up strange signals from the Pacific Ocean, and another incident concerning a radio message he received from Amelia Earhart."

"After Earhart disappeared," Ade said.

"That's right," the blank-faced man said.

"There's more to all those stories," Ade said. "Several versions of each, depending upon who is doing the telling, especially the Earhart story. The best intelligence I have on that was that she was actually captured by the Japanese and is alive to this day as a war prisoner. But Earhart was doing secret research for Tesla. I know that for a fact, because I'm the one who recruited her for that mission, which, as it turned out, happened to be her last."

"What about the Wardencllyffe incidents and the 1915 signals?"

"I can't talk to you about those. I've referred you to the rumor mill. Nose around-- you might find some garrulous old coot that has looser lips than mine. I've talked more to you tonight, and more directly, than I have in years. I'll just tip you off this much: Our 1893 trip to Mars did involve time travel of a sort. It just isn't mentioned in the file you read. You probably don't have a high enough security rating to read the complete and unabridged file. If you had read the complete file, you would know that a week of time was lost during our journey, what today is

called a 'time dilation effect.' This here, my friend, is a real Mark Twain manuscript. I'd love to read it."

"Sorry," the blank-faced man said. "I have to take it back with me. Orders."

"I understand," Ade said with genuine regret as he handed the manuscript back to the blank-faced man who placed it back into the steel suitcase. Ade sat for a moment looking dejected, but then suddenly his face lit up.

"Now that I know for certain the whereabouts of that manuscript, I'll get access to it," Ade said. "I know FDR will let me read it if I ask him."

"Well, you'll have to be the one to do the asking," the blank-faced man said.

"Oh, I will!" Ade said with a nod, and he took a swig of coffee from his mug.

"Here's another thing we came across," the blank-faced man said, bringing Mark Twain's watch fob out of the case. "Ever see this before?"

Ade took the watch fob and looked at it.

"No," Ade said, "but I've heard of it. It was given to Mark Twain by Nikola Tesla to commemorate our 1893 trip to Mars. I think that was around 1903, about the tenth anniversary of our trip. Just around the time that Majestic Seven was formed."

The blank-faced man said, "It has been determined that the crystal set into the end of that watch fob is one made by Tesla."

Ade grinned, turning the crystal around in the light, and said, "I wouldn't be at all surprised."

"We've been told that the crystal has been sort of 'decommissioned,'" the blank-faced man said. "It's missing its metallic elements."

"Well, I should think so," Ade said. "Mr. Tesla wouldn't have given Mr. Clemens an *active* power crystal. That'd be ridiculous. It would be like carrying around a live hand grenade."

"Do you have any idea how the crystal lost its metallic elements?" the blank-faced man asked while watching the muscles of Ade's face very closely. Ade continued to smile.

"What makes you think I'd know anything about that?" Ade asked slowly.

"Oh, I don't know..." the blank-faced man replied, continuing to watch Ade's face.

"Isn't it your job just to collect Mr. Tesla's property and send it on to its assigned destination?" Ade asked.

"Part of my job," the blank-faced man said.

The fire crackled behind Ade's back.

"You know," Ade said, "what you're asking about is above your level of security clearance. Either I'm going to have to do some shutting-up or you're going to have to get some higher clearance. Why don't you just tell President Roosevelt that you've got all of Mr. Tesla's effects secured and you're sending them on to Ohio?"

"I'm not ready to do that yet," the blank-faced man said. "I want to know about it."

"About what?" Ade asked.

"Time travel," the blank-faced man replied.

"No you don't," Ade said.

"Did Tesla travel in time?" the blank-faced man asked. "Is that crystal a part off of a time machine?"

Ade handed the watch fob back to the blank-faced man.

"You're a bright young man," Ade said, "and that makes me sad, because I used to be a bright young man. Wish we could all have a time machine. I can't help you. For one thing: I don't know how much I can safely tell you without getting myself in hot water with FDR and several other big fish. For another thing: I don't know how much I *should* tell you. Ever hear of Pandora's Box? And for one last thing: I don't know that I *can* tell you all that much anyway. I was never involved directly. You have to understand that most of my work for Majestic Seven after 1905 was very marginal. I like to think of myself as sort of a middleman-- a cosmic facilitator-- I've been like the glue that holds one part to another. I'm a great introducer. I'm the guy that gets the ball rolling. I'm not the ball. I'm not the guy you want to talk to."

"Who's the guy I want to talk to?" the blank-faced man asked.

Ade stood up and turned around to look at the fire. It was starting to die down. He picked up an iron poker and jabbed at the logs.

"I knew some of Mr. Tesla's secrets," Ade said. "But there was another man who knew more."

"Kolman Czito?" the blank-faced man asked.

"Mr. Czito knows many of the technical aspects of Mr. Tesla's work," Ade said, "but he's not the man of whom I was thinking. There was another man who had first-hand knowledge of the temporal applications of Mr. Tesla's theories. I'm talking about Harry Houdini."

"He's been dead for years," the blank-faced man said.

Ade turned back around. He had a strange, far-away glint in his eye.

"That's the report out," Ade said. "But his brother is still alive."

"Which one?" the blank-faced man asked. "There were two of them, weren't there?"

"Two still living," Ade said. "I'm talking about the one who is also a magician. He inherited all of Houdini's equipment. He goes by the stage name 'Hardeen,' but his real name is Theodore Weiss. He lives in Brooklyn. He's the man you want to see. He's the guy you want to talk to."

January 19th, 1943

House of Theodore Weiss, Brooklyn, New York

The blank-faced man rang the doorbell. His partner stood beside him. Several moments passed in silence. Then the inner, front door opened, and through the glass pane of the outer door Hardeen's face appeared as if floating in a black void, like the message that surfaces in the little window of a 'Magic 8-Ball.'

"Mr. Weiss?" the blank faced man asked.

"Who wants to know," Hardeen said, not asked, with a flat, tough suspicion.

"Federal government," the blank-faced man said, holding up an F.B.I. credential.

Hardeen scrutinized the card.

"Well," Hardeen said, "it doesn't look like you got that out of a box of Crackerjacks, so come in."

Hardeen opened the outer glass door. The blank-faced man and his partner stepped into the entrance hall of the house.

"I do something?" Hardeen asked, squinting suspiciously at the blank-faced man.

"I don't know," the blank-faced man said. "Have you done something?"

"Yeah," Hardeen said. "Everyday. Every damn day-- if I can get away with it!"

Hardeen cackled.

The blank-faced man looked at his partner.

"Come on in!" Hardeen said. "Take a seat."

Hardeen led them to a little parlor stuffed with old furniture. Pictures of his wife and sons were mounted on the wall. Nothing about Houdini was anywhere to be seen.

The blank-faced man sat down in an armchair. His partner perched on the edge of a davenport. Hardeen swung an armless chair in front of the two men, sat down on it, and leaned forward.

"O.K." Hardeen said. "Now what do two G-Men want with an old guy like me?"

"It's about your brother," the blank-faced man said.

"Leo?" Hardeen asked incredulously. "What the hell do you think *he's* done? What the hell *could* he do? Cheat on his taxes?"

Hardeen cackled again.

"I'm not talking about Leo," the blank-faced man said.

Hardeen looked back and forth at the two men. His smile faded, his mouth closed up slowly, his skin began to turn pale.

"You mean..." Hardeen's voice trailed away weakly.
He took a breath. "What are you talking about?" he asked with that breath.
The blank-faced man kept looking at Hardeen.
"Houdini," Hardeen said.
The blank-faced man nodded.

Hardeen seemed to visibly shrink in the presence of his two visitors. Then he suddenly rose to his feet.

"My God!" Hardeen cried. "My God!" He turned away and covered his face with his hands. He started to cry. His shoulders heaved. Then he suddenly threw his hands to his sides, and spun about. His face had turned blood red with rage.

"My God, you've found something," Hardeen shouted. "Haven't you! Haven't you!" There was no questioning tone in his voice; he was making a declarative accusation. "I've been at you guys for years to get with it and get the goods! And now you've finally got to the bottom of it!"

"Bottom of what?" the blank-faced man asked.

"Of what?" Hardeen bellowed. "Of his murder! Of my brother's murder!"

"We're not here about that," the blank-faced man said quietly.

Hardeen seemed to shrink visibly again, to go pale again. He slumped back down into his chair.

"You're...you're not," Hardeen said. He had been delivered two thunder-strokes in quick succession.

"I thought your brother died in an accident," the blank-faced man said.

"An acci--" Hardeen stopped. "Who did you say you were?"

"Special division of the F.B.I.," the blank-faced man said.

"And you think it was an accident?" Hardeen asked between clenched teeth. "After all my letters-- after all my calls to J. Edgar-- I get...*this*?" Hardeen waved his hand at the two men in enraged, disgusted contempt.

"I'm sorry," the blank-faced man said. "I'm here about another matter. I haven't been briefed on your brother's case. But I've always heard that his cause of death was accidental."

"That's the story," Hardeen said bitterly. "That's the story that had to be told so that my sister-in-law could get her insurance payments and so that me and the rest of our family could all stay alive! That's the story I've been shoveling out for the last sixteen years while I've been waiting for you guys to come up with something! And now you tell me you know nothing about it!"

The blank-faced man said, "I didn't come here to give you grief."

"Yeah?" Hardeen asked. "Well, I got it. Up to here!"

Hardeen made a slashing gesture at his throat. "Look, like I told you guys a hundred times before, I'm not interested in prosecution! I just want to know who was behind it all! I want their names! Their names! I'll handle the rest-- all by myself."

The blank faced man replied, "As I said, we're here about something else, although, who knows? It may tie in to your concerns."

"Tie in?" Hardeen asked, his rage giving way to realization, wakefulness, and intense curiosity.

"That's right," the blank-faced man said. "Tie in. Did Houdini ever mention the name of Tesla to you, Nikola Tesla?"

Hardeen's head went back like someone had thrown cold water in his face.

"Tesla," Hardeen repeated.

"Yes," the blank-faced man said. "Tesla. Nikola Tesla. Or anything about Mars-- the planet Mars-- the Mars Club?"

Hardeen slowly turned his head to one side.

"Say, *who* did you say you guys were?" Hardeen asked.

“Special division of--“ the blank-faced man started to say.

“That don’t mean nothing!” Hardeen said. “Show me *all* your cards.”

The blank-faced man reached inside his coat and brought out a deck of cards. He fanned them out face up.

“Pick a card,” the blank-faced man said.

Hardeen reached over and removed the king of diamonds.

“I think I know how this trick is done,” Hardeen said. He held up the king of diamonds, and looked over the top edge of the card to the window and street beyond. At the same time, he concentrated on the periphery of his vision. In a moment, the card seemed to flare up, as if it were glowing with light. Hardeen shifted his gaze downward and looked-- not at the surface of the card-- but into its depths. A clear, stereoscopic image of a face appeared on the back of the playing card-- the image of the blank-faced man-- floating against a blue background. Next to the face floated a pyramid formed of seven gold rays of light emitting from an eye-- the symbol of Majestic Seven. Below this floated the number 27811323981732 and the words, “Assignment: Gold Pigeon.”

Hardeen closed his eyes and then opened them again. The image was gone. The back of the playing card now only displayed an abstract pattern of lines and dashes.

“That’s a neat trick you boys have there,” Hardeen said, handing the playing card back to the blank-faced man. “Got any more?”

“Oh,” the blank-faced man said, “we have lots of tricks.”

“I bet you do,” Hardeen said. “Like to see a few of them some time. You should’ve showed me your trick when you first came in. It would’ve saved us all a lot of time and trouble.”

“I was hoping I wouldn’t have to do that,” the blank-faced man said.

“I know all about MJ-Seven,” Hardeen said. “I did a few jobs for your organization over the years. Nothing spectacular. Not like Houdini. But then, I could never top him. Who could? You want to know about the Mars Club? There’s nothing I could tell you about that. You probably know more than I do.”

The blank-faced man said, “We’re more interested in Houdini’s work with Tesla when the two of them became involved with time travel.”

“You think this ties in?” Hardeen asked.

“To the possibility of murder? Maybe,” the blank-faced man replied. “We have information that leads us to suspect that Houdini kept a journal about it all.”

“About the time travel?” Hardeen asked. “Yeah. Yeah, he kept a journal of sorts. Not a diary. It’s more like a story. He wrote it over a period of years and finished it about a year before he died. It’s a handwritten book, in Houdini’s own hand. He had a name for it. He called it *The Key to All Locks*-- or sometimes he’d just call it *Eighty-two*.”

“Why *Eighty-two*?” the blank-faced man asked.

“Good question,” Hardeen said. “I wondered that myself for many years. Houdini would never tell me. I knew it referred to some kind of code. Houdini was always using codes and making codes. He made codes and ciphers for MJ-Seven and the Secret Service. I finally figured out this much: the number eighty-two is a code for the words *lock* and *key*. Houdini’s handwritten book is both lock and key to a very big mystery-- maybe the biggest mystery-- time, fate, destiny-- whatever you want to call this thing we’re all tangled up in-- this thing we all try to understand, but never really understand-- our own existence. That’s what Houdini’s book is-- *lock and key*-- *Eighty-two*.”

“*Eighty-two* reveals the methods of time travel?” the blank-faced man asked.

“I said it is both *lock and key*,” Hardeen replied. “*You* have to decipher it for yourself. I think each person who would read it would find something unique in it. It’s like the book speaks directly to whoever reads it. It’s written on many different levels of understanding. I think some of its secrets can only be revealed by decoding ciphers embedded in its text. It’s deep waters, very deep waters, too deep for me. Houdini told me that he let a rabbi read it once, and after the

rabbi read it, he told Houdini, 'Don't you ever show that to anyone ever again!' By that time I had already read it, though I don't think it mattered much, because, as I said, a lot of it was way over my head. Only somebody like Houdini who had actually approached the Door would fully understand it."

"The 'Door'?" the blank-faced man asked.

"That's what Houdini called it, Hardeen said. "'The Door.' It was the entrance to all the dimensions of time, space, and mind."

"Do you know what happened to this book?" the blank-faced man asked.

"I got it," Hardeen said. "Right down in my basement. Come on."

Hardeen rose from his chair and led the two men back to the foyer and down a hall to a basement door. He opened the door and descended the steps, the two men following down behind him.

"Guess I always knew you guys would show up one day and ask for *eighty-two*," Hardeen said. "I would've volunteered it, but it never occurred to me that it might tie in. I never made the connection. But now it's so clear. I was thinking fake mediums all the time. Maybe I should've been thinking-- Martians-- or time travelers."

Hardeen had reached the basement, which was cluttered with wooden crates and pasteboard boxes. He turned around to look at the blank-faced man.

"It's over here," Hardeen said, stepping toward a far corner beyond the furnace. "I never keep it in one place very long. That's how I've kept it from being stolen all these years."

Hardeen stopped in front of a metal trunk, painted red with the name "HOUDINI" stenciled on it in white. He opened the trunk. It was filled with ropes, locks, keys, and tools. Hardeen pulled back a false bottom of the trunk and brought out a book-- a thick journal with a lock. He handed it to the blank-faced man.

"Here," Hardeen said. "Read it-- if you've got the guts."

The blank-faced man took the journal in his hand. It was a thick, hard-backed book, bound in dark red leather with brass corners and lock.

"Go ahead and open it and read it. You won't believe it. Nobody would ever believe it. I don't believe it myself, but I know it's true. I lived part of it. Go ahead and open it. I broke the lock long ago-- couldn't pick it."

The blank-faced man opened the book. The first page was covered with Houdini's handwriting in flowing ink. At the top of the page were the words *The Key to All Locks* underlined three times. The blank-faced man closed the book.

"I'll need to take this with me," the blank-faced man said.

"I know," Hardeen said.

They all started up the steps again. When they reached the foyer Hardeen opened the front door and said, "If you come up with anything...anything that...ties in...I'd like to know about it-- if you can tell me."

The blank-faced man gave a nod and he and his partner went through the open door and out and down the front steps.

Hardeen stood looking at them from the open door.

January 19th, 1943

Somewhere in the Sky over the Western United States

The Douglas C-47 Skytrain cruised at 20,000 feet over the Rocky Mountains, its olive green fuselage glinting in the rays of the setting sun. Inside the plane, the blank-faced man and his partner dozed in their seats. It had been a long, rough flight from New Jersey, and both men were tired. When they had boarded at the secret airfield, there had been only the pilot, co-pilot, and

navigator to greet them. Soon another MJ-7 agent arrived, a tall blonde man with clear blue eyes, a man of Swedish extraction. He had arrived accompanied by a man driving a forklift. On the forks sat a large wooden crate with wheels and with nothing on it but a stencil of an arrow and the words "RIGHT SIDE UP." The blonde MJ-7 agent signed a clipboard given to him by the pilot, and then the crate was loaded on to the plane, barely clearing the doorway. The forklift driver and another man rolled the crate to the back of the plane, tied it to the floor with strong cords, and then went out. The blonde MJ-7 agent took a seat up front with the blank-faced man and his partner. For general security reasons these three men said nothing to each other during the course of the flight. The plane took off without incident, and the long flight to Nevada commenced.

Now somewhere over a rugged range of mountains, the blank-faced man stirred uneasily in his seat. A bad feeling, part airsickness, part anxiety, ran through his torso and up to his neck. He half-opened his eyes. The blonde MJ-7 agent was standing over him, staring at him.

The blonde asked, "Has it ever occurred to you that we are grossly underpaid?"

The blank-faced man kept his eyes half-opened.

The blonde's faint smile faded. He waited for the blank-faced man to say something, but the blank-faced man would say nothing.

"Where is it?" the blonde finally snapped.

"Where's what?" the blank-faced man asked still pretending to be half-asleep.

"You know," the blonde said. "The Houdini journal. Is it in that case?"

"Naw," the blank-faced man said. "That's just my dirty laundry."

The blonde brought his right hand up. The muzzle of a 38 automatic glittered.

The blank-faced man's partner made a lunge from his seat. The blonde fired the 38 twice, hitting the blank-faced man's partner in his face and throat. He was instantly dead.

But the sudden lunge had saved the blank-faced man's life. In that instant he was able to kick out with his left foot and knock the 38 out of the blonde's hand. In the next instant the blank-faced man was on his feet, delivering two lightning-fast hammer-blows to the blonde's face. In the instant following, a fist struck the blank-faced man from behind. He staggered forward and reeled around to see a large swarthy man in a black pullover sweater. Behind this large man, another man was climbing out of the already-opened crate. This second man, also dressed in a black sweater, was tall and lean with a receding hairline and widow's peak.

The blonde had crawled along the cabin floor and had retrieved his 38. The navigator had come into the main cabin, with his pistol drawn. The blonde fired upon the navigator, striking him in the chest. The navigator dropped to the floor.

The blank-faced man drew his Colt 45 automatic from the holster inside his coat and shot the blonde dead. The swarthy man leaped on to the blank-faced man and knocked him to the floor. The man with the widow's peak ran forward with a drawn German Luger and charged toward the cockpit. The co-pilot came out into the cabin and fired at the man with the widow's peak, hitting his shoulder. The man with the widow's peak fired back, hitting the co-pilot in the chest. The co-pilot dropped in a heap next to the navigator.

On the floor, the blank-faced man struggled to bring the muzzle of his 45 into alignment with the head of the swarthy man, while the swarthy man gripped the blank-faced man's wrists.

The man with the widow's peak charged on forward into the cockpit, spurting blood from his shoulder. Two shots rang out in the cockpit and the plane went into a dive.

The swarthy man had the blank-faced man down on the floor. As the two men struggled, the blank-faced man fired off a round from his 45, and the swarthy man slumped over, dead. The man with the widow's peak came back into the main cabin, pointing his Luger. The blank-faced man fired his pistol. A bullet hole pierced the other man's forehead, directly below his widow's peak, and he fell back and down.

The blank-faced man staggered to his feet and made it to the cockpit. The pilot was slumped forward over the controls, shot in the temple, his pistol still dangling from his hand.

The blank-faced man tried to move the pilot's controls, but they were jammed. He looked out the window. A mountain loomed directly ahead. The plane was going down toward a promontory at its center.

The blank-faced man clawed his way back into the main cabin, stepped over the bloody dead bodies, opened a bin, pulled out a parachute, and threw it on his back. He cinched the belt tight around his chest and waist. Then he grabbed the steel suitcase and locked its handle to his left wrist with a pair of handcuffs. He went to the door of the plane, turned the handle with all his strength, and pushed the door open.

The suction of air tore the blank-faced man out of the plane before he could jump. In the sudden plunge, the air in his lungs was drawn out. He gasped as he plummeted downward through blue sky. The white and gray ground below spun about. The cold air lashed the skin of his face. His right hand groped wildly for the zip cord, found the cord, and pulled hard.

The chute exploded open, but it had been wrapped in haste, and it tangled above him, half-opened.

The blank-faced man instantly knew there was no hope.

The ground below spun faster now. Gray became forest green; white became drifts of snow. Flatness twisted, bent, and became shape. Forest green became spinning pine-topped lancets. Then, as the blank-faced man shot past the uppermost branches of the pines, his spinning slowed to a turn, and his turn, ever slower, became a stop, and the ground below, in an eternal stillness, transformed into a dull gray that, in an infinite interval, faded to an all-engulfing blackness.

January 20th, 1943

Somewhere on the Slopes of a Mountain near Pike's Peak

The blank-faced man opened his eyes. He had been sleeping for a long time, and he felt great. The sky above him was dark and filled with brilliant stars. He could see nothing but stars. This is wonderful, the blank-faced man thought. Then he tried to move, but he couldn't. He tried again, but still nothing. Where am I, the blank-faced man asked himself. How did I get here?

There was no reason to panic, everything was so beautiful. He would call for someone, that is what he would do, he thought. He tried to call, but nothing would come out. How did I get here, he pondered again.

The blank-faced man tried to move again. It was as if he had no body. It seemed to him that he could breathe, but not deeply. It seemed that his lungs were breathing without any conscious control.

Then the blank-faced man had a flash of memory. He remembered he had been on a plane. He was on an assignment, a trip to a secret laboratory in Nevada. He was to deliver the watch fob for further tests at--

The blank-faced man suddenly remembered everything-- the gun shots-- his desperate fight in the cabin-- the pilot dead at the controls-- his fall from the plane-- the half opened chute-- the ground coming up fast in a spin....

I'm dying, the blank-faced man thought, it will all be over soon. It ends like this. Sky and stars. Maybe I'll be up there soon...or down in the other direction...or nowhere at all...just nowhere at all....

The blank-faced man heard the sound of feet trudging on hard-pack snow, and, along with the trudging, a sliding sound, and a low grunt, and then, coming even closer, heavy breathing.

The sounds stopped, making the silence even heavier than it had been before. Then the sounds started again: trudging, sliding, grunting, breathing-- followed by another silence.

Someone is coming this way, the blank-faced man thought.

The sounds had started again, and they were continuing very steadily, as if the one making them had reached a decision to push on without stop, to will his self to continue no matter what pain he was feeling.

The sounds were very close; the breathing was shaky with exhaustion. The trudging stopped. A thud followed-- then a beam of light flashed into view-- then the voice, high-pitched, old, and played out:

"So awake you are now! That's good. Can you feel anything? Do you hurt anywhere? Look at me."

The blank-faced man could not turn his head, but with great effort he turned his eyes to the right. By the dim illumination of a flashlight beam he saw a bearded old man wearing spectacles and a black knit cap staring down at him.

"You can't move," the old man observed. "Don't worry. I've brought a big sled up the mountain. I'm going to strap you to it. First I'm going to slide this board under you. Got to get you tied to it to stabilize your neck."

The blank-faced man heard more heavy breathing, and then, dully beneath his head, he felt a board being gently shoved between him and the bed of snow and slush upon which he lay.

The old man spoke as he lashed the broken and bloody body of the blank-faced man to the board; straps tightened across forehead, shoulders, torso, and legs.

"Saw you come down from the planeThe tangled chute. The plane crashed into the mountain. It'll take 'em days to find the wreck. They wouldn't have found you. I was in the right place. Have a cabin down the slope of this mountain. Glad it's *down* the slope from here. I'll get you tied up good and we'll be on our way."

The old man pulled the board under the blank faced man with powerful tugs, giving a grunt each time. He got the blank-faced man up on the sled and began tying him on.

"Used to use this sled to go for groceries in town. Then my dog died. Didn't use it anymore after that. It's coming in handy now."

In the tying, the old man's fingers worked rapidly with the sureness and deftness of an artist. They were slender fingers, but attached to rather beefy hands and wrists. The old man himself was broad of frame, short, and bow-legged. He had wavy white hair, which he wore long, down to his shoulders, and a long, wavy white beard and mustache. His spectacles were wired-rimmed bifocals. He wore a heavy red plaid woolen coat, a wool sweater underneath, and underneath those garments a pair of blue denim overalls. The bottoms of the overalls were tucked into thick leather boots. The cap and beard gave the old man an elfin appearance, but the way he worked suggested that he may have been a miner, or, perhaps at one time, a construction worker.

"Seen some awful air crashes in my day. Really awful ones, back in Chicago. But I say: man's gotta fly, man's gotta fly. There's risk in everything. Everything we do. I've found that if the goal is worthwhile, the risk is not a risk. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. What's this?"

The old man had picked up the steel suitcase that was still handcuffed to the blank-faced man's left wrist.

"Something very important," the old man said. "I'll just put it here on the side of the sled for now, and we'll figure out what to do with it down at the cabin."

The old man finished tying the blank-faced man to the sled.

"All right," the old man said. "Here we go."

They started to move forward down the side of the mountain. The blank-faced man saw pine trees drift by overhead in the field of his vision. The trees kept moving by as a buzzing sound filled his head. He was blacking out again. Everything dimmed.

January 21st 1943

A Cabin Somewhere near Pike's Peak

The blank-faced man opened his eyes. He could see the ceiling of a log cabin lit by the flicker of flames. The old man was seated somewhere nearby, and he began to speak:

“Well, you’ve finally awakened. I gave you an injection the night I found you. Thought it would be better if you slept. You’re either very lucky or it’s fate. I think it’s fate. I didn’t believe in fate when I was younger, but then there was a lot I didn’t understand back then. Like the man said, ‘You’ve come to the right place.’ I think I can help you, and I mean help you in a lot of ways. For one thing, I think I can get your body mended. You’ve broken your neck. And you’ve also sustained some serious injuries to your spine and legs. You’re broken up very badly. If you were in the best hospital in this country, I doubt that they could save you. But I think I can get your body mended. I have a construction here on this mountain that I’ve built of stone-- it’s a pyramid. It’s actually a model of the Pyramid of Giza. I’ve been doing experiments with it for the last several years-- experiments with electricity and ether. I’m going to put you in that pyramid and get your spine and legs healed. It’ll take a while, perhaps a few weeks, but I think I can get your body mended.”

He’s mad, the blank-faced man thought, the old man is insane. I will die here in this cabin in the clutches of this mad man.

The old man bent over and looked down. The blank-faced man could see the old man’s eyes through the lenses of his bifocals. His eyes were pale blue with flecks of hazel. The old man did not look insane, only very determined.

“Don’t worry. Nothing is at it seems,” the old man said, and then he sat back down.

The old man continued, “I managed to get that suitcase unlocked from your wrist. Guess it was damaged in the fall, for it sprung open while I was fiddlin’ with it. Had some interesting contents. Hope you don’t mind that I looked. My curiosity has always gotten me into trouble. Curiosity killed the cat, but the cat has *nine* lives. This is a very nice watch fob. And this, a book manuscript, is very interesting. And this, somebody’s diary-- people shouldn’t read other people’s diaries, but this one has really got my curiosity up. I suppose you know good and well who this diary belonged to, don’t you? I wonder if you’ve read it. I bet you haven’t read it yet. Something tells me.... Would you like me to read some of it to you now? I think you would. I’ll read a little of it to you, and then I’ll take you down to the pyramid for a treatment. I think we’d both like to hear what’s written down here by-- Houdini. What kind of guy do you think he was? Do you think he really did all those things they say he did? Do you think he really pulled off all that stuff? Was he a good guy? Did he make the world any better...all that stuff he did? I wonder. I shouldn’t read this, but I’m going to read it; I’m not ashamed. Listen to this, would you? Then I’ll take you down to the pyramid for a treatment.”

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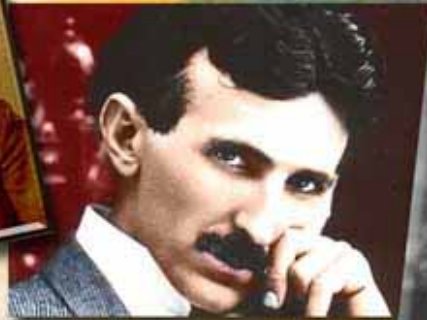
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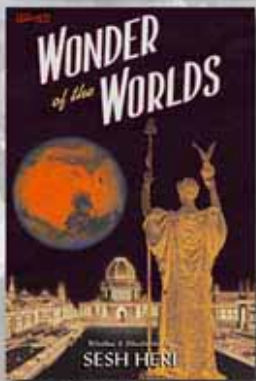


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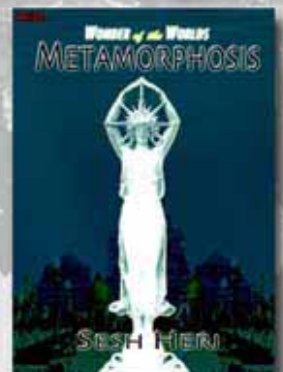
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REAL LIFE FRIGHTS!

Theodore Roosevelt's 'WENDIGO'

FRONTIERSMEN are not, as a rule, apt to be very superstitious. They lead lives too hard and practical, and have too little imagination in things spiritual and supernatural. I have heard but few ghost stories while living on the frontier, and these few were of a perfectly commonplace and conventional type.

But I once listened to a goblin story which rather impressed me. It was told by a grizzled, weather-beaten old mountain hunter, named Bauman, who was born and had passed all his life on the frontier. He must have believed what he said, for he could hardly repress a shudder at certain points of the tale; but he was of German ancestry, and in childhood had doubtless been saturated with all kinds of ghost and goblin lore, so that many fearsome superstitions were latent in his mind; besides, he knew well the stories told by the Indian medicine men in their winter camps, of the snow-walkers, and the spectres, and the formless evil beings that haunt the forest depths, and dog and waylay the lonely wanderer who after nightfall passes through the regions where they lurk....

When the event occurred, Bauman was still a young man, and was trapping with a partner among the mountains dividing the forks of Salmon from the head of Wisdom River. Not having had much luck he and his partner determined to go up into a particularly wild and lonely pass through which ran a small stream said to contain many Beaver. The pass had an evil reputation, because the year before a solitary hunter who had wandered into it

was there slain, seemingly by a wild beast, the half-eaten remains being afterwards found by some mining prospectors who had passed his camp only the night before.

The memory of this event, however, weighed very lightly with the two trappers, who were as adventurous and hardy as others of their kind. They took their two lean mountain Ponies to the foot of the pass, where they left them in an open Beaver meadow, the rocky timberclad ground being from thence onwards impracticable for Horses. They then struck out on foot through the vast, gloomy forest, and in about four hours, reached a little open glade where they concluded to camp, as signs of game were plenty.

There was still an hour or two of daylight left; and after building brush lean-to and throwing down and opening their packs, they started up stream. The country was very dense and hard to travel through, as there was much down timber, although here and there the sombre woodland was broken by small glades of mountain grass.

At dusk, they again reached camp. The glade in which it was pitched was not many yards wide, the tall, close-set pines and firs rising round it like a wall. On one side, was a little stream, beyond which rose the steep mountain-slopes, covered with the unbroken growth of the evergreen forest.

They were surprised to find that during their short absence, something, apparently a Bear, had visited camp, and had rummaged about among their things, scattering the contents of their

packs, and in sheer wantonness destroying their lean-to. The footprints of the beast were quite plain but at first they paid no particular heed to them, busying themselves with rebuilding the lean-to, laying out their beds and stores, and lighting the fire.

While Bauman was making ready supper, it being already dark, his companion began to examine the tracks more closely, and soon took a brand from the fire to follow them up, where the intruder had walked along a game trail after leaving the camp. When the brand flickered out, he returned and took another, repeating his inspection of the footprints very closely. Coming back to the fire, he stood by it a minute or two, peering out into the darkness, and suddenly remarked: "Bauman, that Bear has been walking on two legs." Bauman laughed at this, but his partner insisted that he was right; and upon again examining the tracks with a torch, they certainly did seem to be made by but two paws, or feet. However, it was too dark to make sure. After discussing whether the footprints could possibly be those of a human being, and coming to the conclusion that they could not be, the two men rolled up in their blankets, and went to sleep under the lean-to.

At midnight, Bauman was awakened by some noise, and sat up in his blankets. As he did so, his nostrils were struck by a strong, wild-beast odor, and he caught the loom of a great body in the darkness at the mouth of the lean-to. Grasping his rifle, he fired at the vague, threatening shadow, but must have missed; for

immediately afterwards he heard the smashing of the underwood as the thing, whatever it was, rushed off into the impenetrable blackness of the forest and the night.

After this the two men slept but little, sitting up by the rekindled fire, but they heard nothing more. In the morning, they started out to look at the few traps they had set the previous evening, and to put out new ones. By an unspoken agreement, they kept together all day, and returned to camp towards evening.

On nearing it they saw, hardly to their astonishment, that the lean-to had been again torn down. The visitor of the preceding day had returned; and in wanton malice had tossed about their camp kit and bedding, and destroyed the shanty. The ground was marked up by its tracks; and on leaving the camp, it had gone along the soft earth by the brook, where the footprints were as plain as if on snow, and, after a careful scrutiny of the trail, it certainly did seem as if, whatever the thing was, it had walked off on but two legs.

The men, thoroughly uneasy, gathered a great heap of dead logs, and kept up a roaring fire throughout the night, one or the other sitting on guard most of the time. About midnight, the thing came down through the forest opposite, across the brook, and stayed there on the hillside for nearly an hour. They could hear the branches crackle as it moved about, and several times it uttered a harsh, grating, long-drawn moan, a peculiarly sinister sound.

Yet it did not venture near the fire.

In the morning, the two trappers, after discussing the strange events of the last thirty-six hours, decided that they would shoulder their packs and leave the valley that afternoon. They were the more ready to do this because, in spite of seeing a good deal of game sign, they had caught very little fur. However, it was necessary first to go along the line of their traps and gather them, and this they started out to do.

All the morning, they kept together, picking up trap after trap, each one empty. On first leaving camp, they had the disagreeable sensation of being followed. In the dense spruce thickets, they occasionally heard a branch snap after they had passed; and now and then, there were slight rustling noises among the small pines to one side of them.

At noon, they were back within a couple of miles of camp. In the high bright sunlight, their fears seemed absurd to the two armed men, accustomed as they were, through long years of lonely wandering in the wilderness, to face every kind of danger from man, brute, or element. There were still three Beaver traps to collect from a little pond in a wide ravine nearby. Bauman volunteered to gather these, and bring them in, while his companion went ahead to camp and made ready the packs.

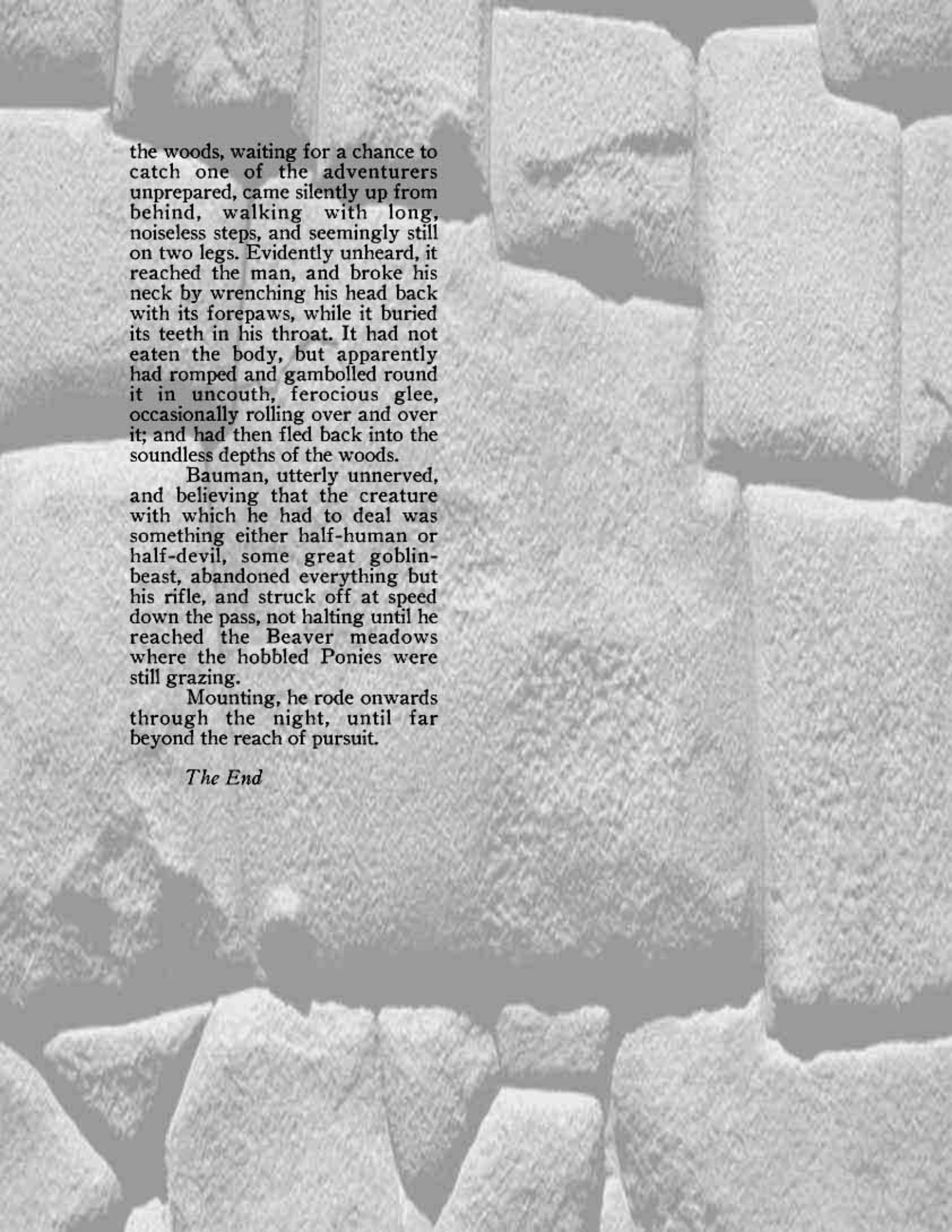
On reaching the pond, Bauman found three Beaver in the traps, one of which had been pulled loose and carried into a Beaver house. He took several hours in securing and preparing

the Beaver, and when he started homewards he marked with some uneasiness how low the sun was getting. As he hurried towards camp, under the tall trees, the silence and desolation of the forest weighed on him. His feet made no sound on the pine needles, and the slanting sun rays, striking through among the straight trunks, made a gray twilight in which objects at a distance glimmer indistinctly. There was nothing to break the ghostly stillness which, when there is no breeze, always broods over these somber primeval forests.

At last, he came to the edge of the little glade where the camp lay, and shouted as he approached it, but got no answer. The camp fire had gone out, though the thin blue smoke was still curling upwards. Near it lay the packs wrapped and arranged. At first, Bauman could see nobody; nor did he receive an answer to his call. Stepping forward he again shouted; and as he did so, his eye fell on the body of his friend, stretched beside the trunk of a great fallen spruce. Rushing towards it, the horrified trapper found that the body was still warm, but that the neck was broken, while there were four great fang marks in the throat.

The footprints of the unknown beast-creature, printed deep in the soil, told the whole story.

The unfortunate man, having finished his packing, had sat down on the spruce log with his face to the fire, and his back to the dense woods, to wait for his companion. While thus waiting, his monstrous assailant, which must have been lurking nearby in



the woods, waiting for a chance to catch one of the adventurers unprepared, came silently up from behind, walking with long, noiseless steps, and seemingly still on two legs. Evidently unheard, it reached the man, and broke his neck by wrenching his head back with its forepaws, while it buried its teeth in his throat. It had not eaten the body, but apparently had romped and gambolled round it in uncouth, ferocious glee, occasionally rolling over and over it; and had then fled back into the soundless depths of the woods.

Bauman, utterly unnerved, and believing that the creature with which he had to deal was something either half-human or half-devil, some great goblin-beast, abandoned everything but his rifle, and struck off at speed down the pass, not halting until he reached the Beaver meadows where the hobbled Ponies were still grazing.

Mounting, he rode onwards through the night, until far beyond the reach of pursuit.

The End

The Vampiress

by Wm. Michael Mott

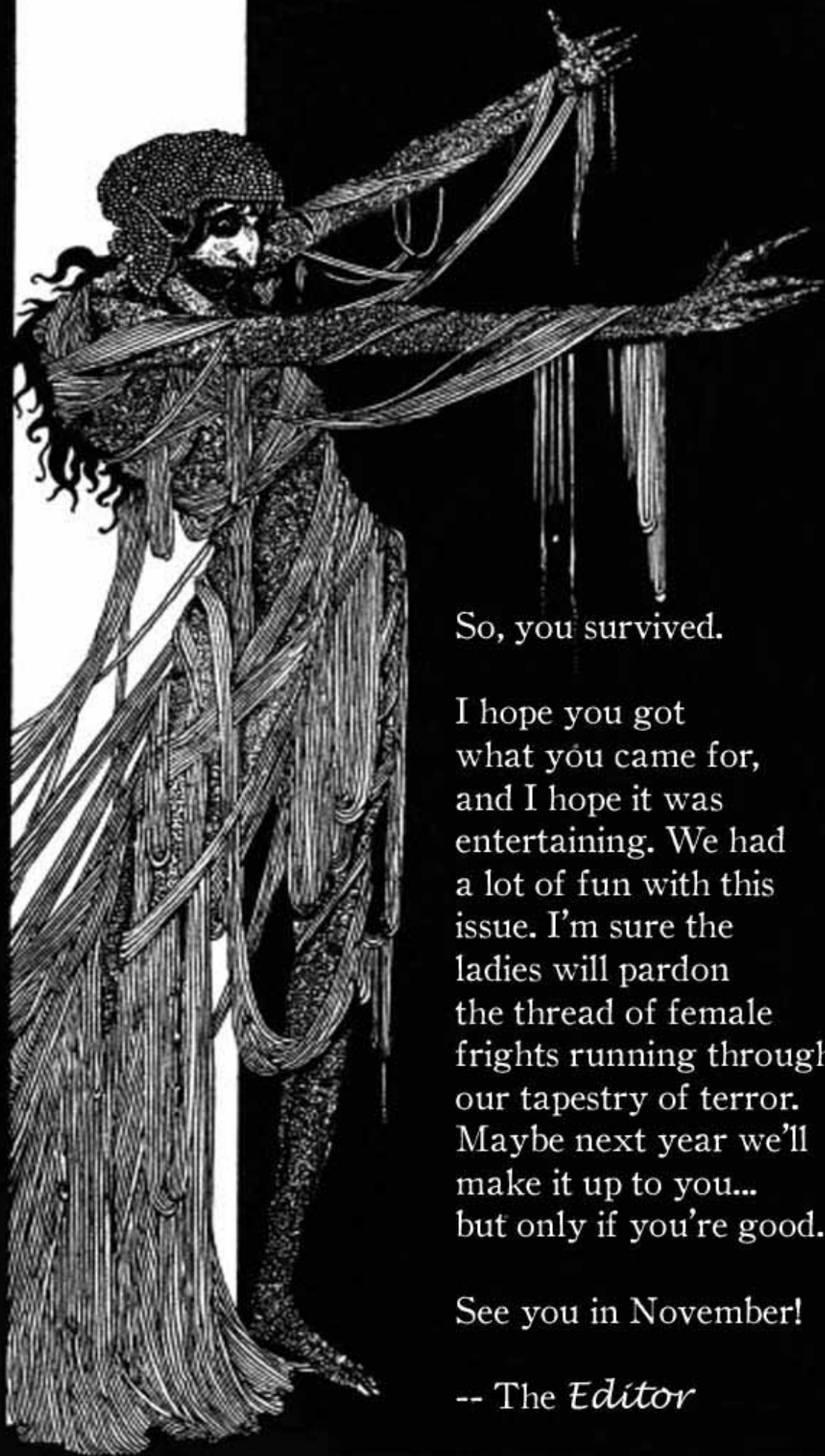


*She sang to me her song of love
And my heart bled crystal tears;
She said my soul would be enough,
If I'd but shed my fears.
I know not if I'm burning
With fright, or with desire,
Yet I loath the endless yearning
For the kiss of the vampire.*

*Gateways lie still 'neath heath and hill
And in forgotten vales;
Dark worlds slumber in unknown number
And doors gape into hells.
A lover waits with jaws agape
In lands lost to the sun,
With razor-kisses readied
For a love as yet undone.*

--Wm Michael Mott

H O R R I Z O N



So, you survived.

I hope you got what you came for, and I hope it was entertaining. We had a lot of fun with this issue. I'm sure the ladies will pardon the thread of female frights running through our tapestry of terror. Maybe next year we'll make it up to you... but only if you're good.

See you in November!

-- The *Editor*

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