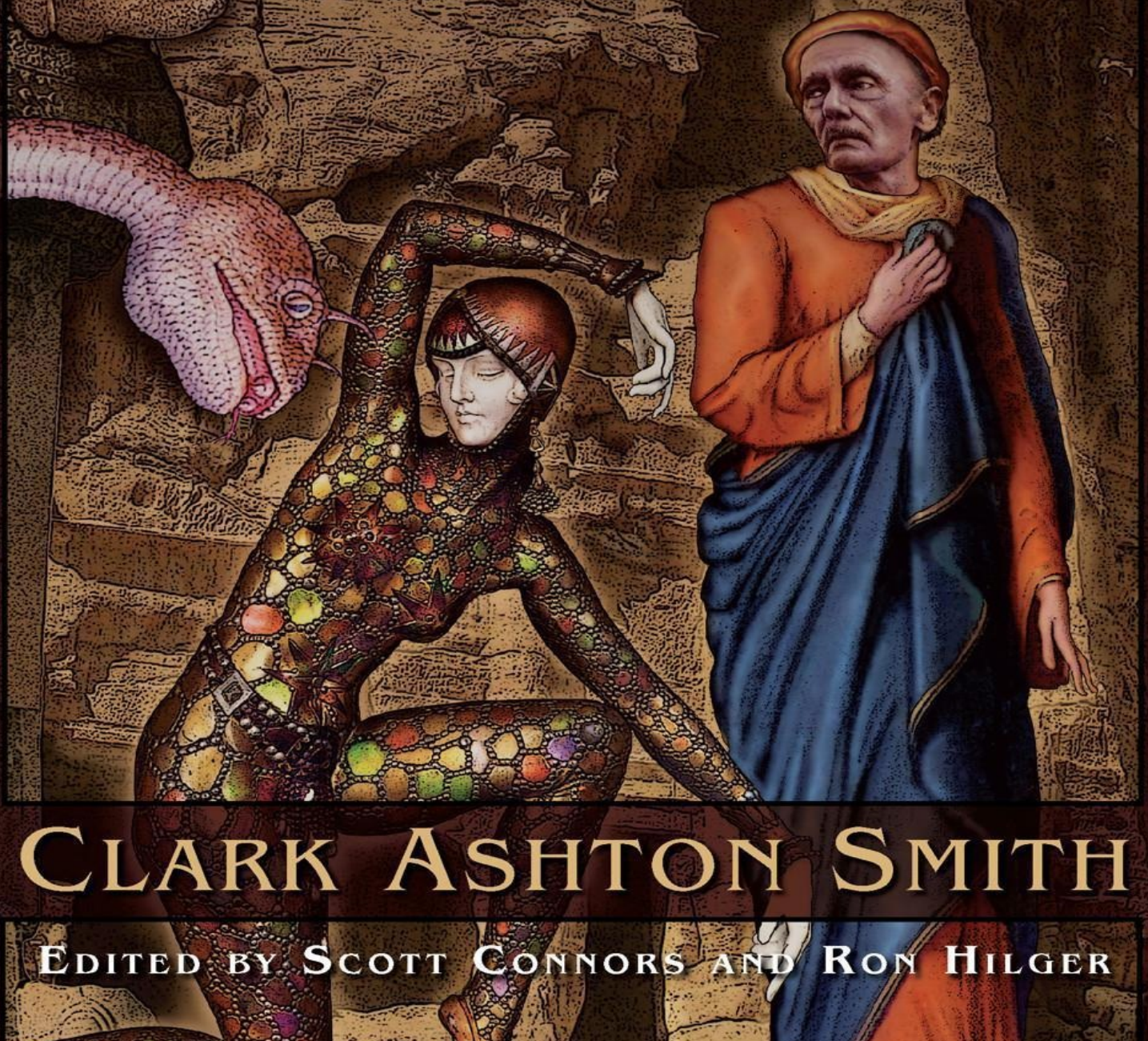


THE COLLECTED FANTASIES, VOLUME 4

THE *Maze* OF THE
Enchanter



CLARK ASHTON SMITH

EDITED BY SCOTT CONNORS AND RON HILGER

THE *Magie* OF THE
Enchanter

Volume Four of
The Collected Fantasies Of
Clark Ashton Smith

Edited by Scott Connors and Ron Hilger
With an Introduction by Gahan Wilson

Night Shade Books
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INTRODUCTION

By Gahan Wilson

Clark Ashton Smith's works have always stirred me to the bones. His writings are both meticulously rendered and totally unabashed, his writings can be outrageously grotesque or exquisitely delicate both simultaneously and without any clashing whatsoever. They are really and truly wonderful.

It took a lot of luck and considerable effort for me to track them down and delight in them, but one day I finally came across the first I knew he was the real thing.

I was, frankly, an odd little kid who was always lured by the fantastic and the bizarre. I remember the thing I loved the most about the yearly visit of Barnum and Bailey's big circus to Chicago was the freak show, and I would drag my father to its tent even though I knew he hated it.

Of course I also loved the acrobats and the band and the lion tamers, but they all had chosen to become what they now were whereas the grotesquely huge or absurdly tiny or horribly distorted otherwise drastically different people of the freak show were born that way and had somehow managed not only to accept their condition fully and without reservation, they had the guts to stand on a platform before throngs of regular-sized, regular-looking folk and make it work for them.

I started my search for this kind of strangeness in art with the Sunday strips, mostly *Dick Tracy* with his ugly villains, but soon expanded the hunt by quietly plucking DC Comics from the magazine racks of the Evanshire Drugstore in Evanston, Illinois, and reading them for free with my small, bare elbows resting on the cool marble counter of the soda fountain while—on the really good days—spooned and sucked away whole chocolate sodas as, with equal enthusiasm and greed, I read about the early doings of *Superman* and *Batman* and their multitudes of spectacular fiends and loved every crowded panel.

After that, I wandered further afield to the tiny little newsstand lurking beneath the elevated train at Main Street Station in order to collect and soak up science fiction pulp magazines with the shamelessly gaudy covers featuring green and tentacled alien monsters which were all inexplicable but universally attracted to voluptuous Earth girls who had lots of curly hair and looks of horror on their faces.

I won't pretend I didn't enjoy all of this, but it turned out to be merely a gentle introduction to the glorious day when I worked up the nerve to go to a large and legendary newsstand a whole bus ride further away which was said to carry all kinds of usually unavailable magazines, and my eyes widened and my mouth fell open and joy flooded my heart when I spotted and began to thumb through my very first issue of *Weird Tales* magazine, a publication unashamedly and even proudly devoted to being creepy, and my life was never quite the same again.

Weird Tales was, for a good part of Clark Ashton Smith's life, his major source of income. It's very true the relationship between Smith and the magazine was ever tricky and uneven and that its eccentric and autocratic editor, Farnsworth Wright, was guilty of highhandedly insisting on many alterations and eliminations which were hurtful to both the works and their creators (do note that the producers of this series of Smith's manuscripts have worked scholarly wonders to correct as many of these ill-advised "corrections" as possible), but without that same editor's initial OKs on Smith's stories the great bulk of the tales in these marvelous Night Shade collections would never have been written. Life is complicated.

One very important, if somewhat odd, requirement about creating really good fantasy is that it mu

be solidly based on reality, and though Clark Ashton Smith was about as romantic as a romantic could get and very gentle with his fellow humans, he was also an astute and occasionally merciless viewer of life and his species and their many failings, and his stories are very often wise teachings as well as entertainments.

I suggest, if you are a Smith beginner, it might be a good idea to start your reading of this book with its title tale—"The Maze of the Enchanter"—as I believe it is a particularly good example of the bizarre startlements, subtly unveiled richnesses and the deeply ironic humor of a great, eccentric artist in top form who is enjoying himself enormously.

At the end of this unabashedly affectionate salute to a man to whom I owe so much, I would like to leave you with a story about Clark Ashton Smith which I deeply treasure. I don't know where I read it, but doubtless in something printed by Arkham House, one of Smith's most true-blue supporters, possibly in the little magazine good old August Derleth put out for some years toward the end.

A group of Smith's fans had written the author to ask if he would be kind enough to let them visit him while traveling in the West, and he not only wrote a note saying he'd be delighted to do so, but drew them a little map showing them how to make their way to his secluded cabin.

They were driving in their car, close to their goal, when they came to a fork in the narrow road which was not indicated on the map and they stopped and were puzzling what they should do next when one of them rose in his seat and pointed out the figure of a man climbing down the mountain slope to their left. They peered at him and saw that he was carrying a sign set on a small post. The sign was shaped like an arrow and it pointed at the man's back and it had CLARK ASHTON SMITH written on it in big bold letters. Of course Smith was on his way to stick it into the ground at the intersection.

I don't know about you, but this story warmed my heart when I first read it, and it still does now that I write it out.

Clark Ashton Smith considered himself primarily a poet and artist, but he began his publishing career with a series of Oriental *contes cruels* that were published in such magazines as the *Overland Monthly* and the *Black Cat*. He ceased the writing of short stories for many years, but under the influence of his correspondent H. P. Lovecraft he began experimenting with the weird tale when he wrote “The Abominations of Yondo” in 1925. His friend Genevieve K. Sully suggested that writing for the pulp would be a reasonably congenial way for him to earn enough money to support himself and his parents.

Between the years 1930 and 1935, the name of Clark Ashton Smith appeared on the contents page of *Weird Tales* no fewer than fifty-three times, leaving his closest competitors, Robert E. Howard, Seabury Quinn, and August W. Derleth, in the dust with forty-six, thirty-three and thirty stories respectively. This prodigious output did not come at the price of sloppy composition, but was distinguished by its richness of imagination and expression. Smith put the same effort into one of his stories that he did into a bejeweled and gorgeous sonnet. Donald Sidney-Fryer has described Smith's method of composition in his 1978 bio-bibliography *Emperor of Dreams* (Donald M. Grant, West Kingston, R.I.) thus:

First he would sketch the plot in longhand on some piece of note-paper, or in his notebook *The Black Book*, which Smith used circa 1929-1961. He would then write the first draft usually in longhand but occasionally directly on the typewriter. He would then rewrite the story 3 or 4 times (Smith's own estimate); this he usually did directly on the typewriter. Also, he would subject each draft to considerable alteration and correction in longhand, taking the ms. with him on a stroll and reading aloud to himself [. . .]. (19)

Unlike Lovecraft, who would refuse to allow publication of his stories without assurances that they would be printed without editorial alteration, Clark Ashton Smith would revise a tale if it would ensure acceptance. Smith was not any less devoted to his art than his friend, but unlike HPL he had to consider his responsibilities in caring for his elderly and infirm parents. He tolerated these changes to his carefully crafted short stories with varying degrees of resentment, and vowed that if he ever had the opportunity to collect them between hard covers he would restore the excised text. Unfortunately, he experienced severe eyestrain during the preparation of his first Arkham House collections, so he provided magazine tear sheets to August Derleth for his secretary to use in the preparation of the manuscript.

Lin Carter was the first of Smith's editors to attempt to provide the reader with pure Smith, but the efforts of Steve Behrends and Mark Michaud have revealed the extent to which Smith's prose was compromised. Through their series of pamphlets, the *Unexpurgated Clark Ashton Smith*, the reader and critic could see precisely the severity of these compromises; while, in the collections *Tales of Zothique* and *The Book of Hyperborea*, Behrends and Will Murray presented for the first time the stories just as Smith wrote them.

In establishing what the editors believe to be what Smith would have preferred, we were fortunate in having access to several repositories of Smith's manuscripts, most notably the Clark Ashton Smith Papers deposited at the John Hay Library of Brown University, but also including the Bancroft Library of the University of California at Berkeley; Special Collections of Brigham Young University; the California State Library; and several private collections. Most of the typescripts available are carbon copies; where possible, we also consulted the original manuscript appearance of the story, since Smith occasionally would pencil in a change to the top copy of the typescript that did not get recorded on the carbons. Priority was given to the latest known typescript prepared by Smith, except where he has indicated that the changes were made solely to satisfy editorial requirements. In these instances we compared the last version that satisfied Smith with the version sold. Changes made include the restoration of deleted material, except only in those instances where the change of a word or phrase seems consistent with an attempt by Smith to improve the story, as opposed to the change of a word or phrase to a less Latinate, and less graceful, near-equivalent. This represents a hybrid or fusion of two competing versions, but it is the only way that we see that Smith's intentions as author may be honored. In a few instances a word might be changed in the Arkham House collections that isn't indicated on the typescript. As discussed below, "The Beast of Averoine" is one such example.

We have also attempted to rationalize Smith's spellings and hyphenation practices. Smith used British spellings early in his career but gradually switched to American usage. He could also vary the spelling of certain words from story to story, e.g. "eerie" and "eery." We have generally standardized on his later usage, except for certain distinct word choices such as "grey." In doing so we have deviated from the "style sheet" prepared by the late Jim Turner for his 1988 omnibus collection for Arkham House, *A Rendezvous in Averoine*. Turner did not have access to such a wonderful scholarly tool as Boyd Pearson's website, www.eldrichdark.com. By combining its extremely useful search engine with consultation of Smith's actual manuscripts and typescripts, as well as seeing how he spelled a particular word in a poem or letter, the editors believe that they have reflected accurately Smith's idiosyncrasies of expression.

However, as Emerson reminds us, "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." Smith may have deliberately varied his spelling and usages depending upon the particular mood or atmosphere that he was trying to achieve in a particular story. As he explained in a letter to H. P. Lovecraft sometime in November 1930:

The problem of "style" in writing is certainly fascinating and profound. I find it highly important, when I begin a tale, to establish at once what might be called the appropriate "tone." If this is clearly determined at the start I seldom have much difficulty in maintaining it; but if it isn't, there is likely to be trouble. Obviously, the style of "Mohammed's Tomb" wouldn't do for "The Ghoul"; and one of my chief preoccupations in writing this last story was to *exclude* images, ideas and locutions which I would have used freely in a moderate story. The same, of course, applies to "Sir John Maundeville," which is a deliberate study of the archaic. (SL 137)

Therefore we have allowed certain variations in spelling and usage that seem to us to be consistent with Smith's stated principles as indicated above.

We are fortunate in that typescripts exist for all of the stories in this book except for "The Voyage of King Euvoran." Smith published both this tale and "The Maze of the Enchanter" in his self-published collection *The Double Shadow and Other Fantasies* (1933). Smith later published severely pruned versions of both stories in *Weird Tales*; in these instances we use the version published by Smith himself. The editors also had access to copies of *The Double Shadow*, *The White Sybil*, and *Genius Loci* that included Smith's hand-written corrections.

Several of the stories included in this volume differ significantly from previously published

versions. “The Disinterment of Venus” was much more salacious in its original form, and like the later “~~The Witchcraft of Ulua~~” was rejected by *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright until Smith made it less provocative. Wright was not as specific in his rejection of “The Beast of Averoigne.” Reviewers and critics who have commented upon the original version have universally praised its tripartite narration for the deft manner in which CAS handled characterization. When Smith wrote April Derleth, in a letter dated March 22, 1933, that the story was “immensely improved by the various revisions,” we believe that he was referring to the new climax, since in the original version the monster was laid in a manner reminiscent of “The Colossus of Ylourgne.” We present here a fusion of the two versions, preserving the original narrative structure while retaining the superior climax.

Smith attempted to add several pages of revisions to “The Dimension of Chance” before it appeared in *Wonder Stories*, but these remained unpublished until Steve Behrends brought them to the attention of CAS’ readers several years ago. The fate of “The Dweller in the Gulf,” another story published by *Wonder Stories*, is notorious; the change of title to “Dweller in Martian Depths” is the least of the indignities inflicted upon it.

We regret that we cannot present a totally authoritative text for Smith’s stories. Such typescripts do not exist. All that we can do is to apply our knowledge of Smith to the existing manuscripts and attempt to combine them to present what Smith would have preferred to publish were he not beset by editorial malfeasance in varying degrees. In doing so we hope to present Smith’s words in their purest form to date.

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Gilles Grenier the sorcerer and his wife, Sabine, coming into lower Averoigne from parts unknown at least unverified, had selected the location of their hut with a careful forethought.

The hut was close to those marshes through which the slackening waters of the river Isoile, after leaving the great forest, had overflowed in sluggish, reed-clogged channels and sedge-hidden pools mantled with scum like witches' oils. It stood among osiers and alders on a low, mound-shaped elevation; and in front, toward the marshes, there was a loamy meadow-bottom where the short stems and tufted leaves of the mandrake grew in lush abundance, being more plentiful and of greater size than elsewhere through all that sorcery-ridden province. The fleshy, bifurcated roots of this plant, held by many to resemble the human body, were used by Gilles and Sabine in the brewing of love philtres. Their potions, being compounded with much care and cunning, soon acquired a marvellous renown among the peasants and villagers, and were even in request among people of a loftier station who came privily to the wizard's hut. They would rouse, people said, a kindly warmth in the coldest and most prudent bosom, would melt the armor of the most obdurate virtue. As a result, the demand for these sovereign magistrals became enormous.

The couple dealt also in other drugs and simples, in charms and divination; and Gilles, according to common belief, could read infallibly the dictates of the stars. Oddly enough, considering the temper of the fifteenth century, when magic and witchcraft were still so widely reprobated, he and his wife enjoyed a repute by no means ill or unsavory. No charges of malefice were brought against them; and because of the number of honest marriages promoted by the philtres, the local clergy were content to disregard the many illicit amours that had come to a successful issue through the same agency.

It is true, there were those who looked askance at Gilles in the beginning, and who whispered fearfully that he had been driven out of Blois, where all persons bearing the name Grenier were popularly believed to be werewolves. They called attention to the excessive hairiness of the wizard whose hands were black with bristles and whose beard grew almost to his eyes. Such insinuations, however, were generally considered as lacking proof, insomuch as no other signs or marks of lycanthropy were ever displayed by Gilles. And in time, for reasons that have been sufficiently indicated, the few detractors of Gilles were wholly overborne by a secret but widespread sentiment in public favor.

Even by their patrons, very little was known regarding the strange couple, who maintained the reserve proper to those who dealt in mystery and enchantment. Sabine, a comely woman with blue-grey eyes and wheat-colored hair, and no trace of the traditional witch in her appearance, was obviously much younger than Gilles, whose sable mane and beard were already touched with the white warp of time. It was rumored by visitors that she had oftentimes been overheard in sharp dispute with her husband; and people soon made a jest of this, remarking that the philtres might well be put to domestic use by those who purveyed them. But aside from such rumors and ribaldries, little was

thought of the matter. The connubial infelicities of Gilles and his wife, whether grave or trivial, in no wise impaired the renown of their love-potions.

Also, little was thought of Sabine's absence, when, five years after the coming of the pair into Averoigne, it became remarked by neighbors and customers that Gilles was alone. In reply to queries the sorcerer merely said that his spouse had departed on a long journey, to visit relatives in a remote province. The explanation was accepted without debate, and it did not occur to anyone that there had been no eye-witnesses of Sabine's departure.

It was then mid-autumn; and Gilles told the inquirers, in a somewhat vague and indirect fashion that his wife would not return before spring. Winter came early that year and tarried late, with deep-crusted snows in the forest and upon the uplands, and a heavy armor of fretted ice on the marshes. It was a winter of much hardship and privation. When the tardy spring had broken the silver buds of the willows and had covered the alders with a foliage of chrysolite, few thought to ask of Gilles regarding Sabine's return. And later, when the purple bells of the mandrake were succeeded by small orange-colored apples, her prolonged absence was taken for granted.

Gilles, living tranquilly with his books and cauldrons, and gathering the roots and herbs for his magical medicaments, was well enough pleased to have it taken for granted. He did not believe that Sabine would ever return; and his unbelief, it would seem, was far from irrational. He had killed her one eve in autumn, during a dispute of unbearable acrimony, slitting her soft, pale throat in self-defense with a knife which he had wrested from her fingers when she lifted it against him. Afterwards he had buried her by the late rays of a gibbous moon beneath the mandrakes in the meadow-bottom, replacing the leafy sods with much care, so that there was no evidence of their having been disturbed other than by the digging of a few roots in the way of daily business.

After the melting of the long snows from the meadow, he himself could scarcely have been altogether sure of the spot in which he had interred her body. He noticed, however, as the season drew on, that there was a place where the mandrakes grew with even more than their wonted exuberance, and this place, he believed, was the very site of her grave. Visiting it often, he smiled with a secret irony, and was pleased rather than troubled by the thought of that charnel nourishment which might have contributed to the lushness of the dark, glossy leaves. In fact, it may well have been a similar irony that had led him to choose the mandrake meadow as a place of burial for the murdered witch's wife.

Gilles Grenier was not sorry that he had killed Sabine. They had been ill-mated from the beginning, and the woman had shown toward him in their quotidian quarrels the venomous spitefulness of a veritable hell-cat. He had not loved the vixen; and it was far pleasanter to be alone, with his somewhat somber temper unruffled by her acrid speeches, and his sallow face and grizzling beard untorn by her sharp finger-nails.

With the renewal of spring, as the sorcerer had expected, there was much demand for his love-philtres among the smitten swains and lasses of the neighborhood. There came to him, also, the gallants who sought to overcome a stubborn chastity, and the wives who wished to recall a wandering fancy or allure the forbidden desires of young men. Anon, it became necessary for Gilles to replenish his stock of mandrake potions; and with this purpose in mind, he went forth at midnight beneath the full May moon, to dig the newly grown roots from which he would brew his amatory enchantments.

Smiling darkly beneath his beard, he began to cull the great, moon-pale plants which flourished over Sabine's grave, digging out the homunculus-like taproots very carefully with a curious trowel made from the femur of a witch.

Though he was well used to the weird and often vaguely human forms assumed by the mandrakes, Gilles was somewhat surprised by the appearance of the first root. It seemed inordinately large, unnaturally white, and eyeing it more closely, he saw that it bore the exact likeness of a woman's body.

and lower limbs, being cloven to the middle and clearly formed even to the ten toes! There were no arms, however, and the bosom ended in the large tuft of ovate leaves.

Gilles was more than startled by the fashion in which the root seemed to turn and writhe when he lifted it from the ground. He dropped it hastily, and the minikin limbs lay quivering on the grass. But after a little reflection, he took the prodigy as a possible mark of Satanic favor, and continued his digging. To his amazement, the next root was formed in much the same manner as the first. A half-dozen more, which he proceeded to dig, were shaped in miniature mockery of a woman from breasts to heels; and amid the superstitious awe and wonder with which he regarded them, he became aware of their singularly intimate resemblance to Sabine.

At this discovery, Gilles was deeply perturbed, for the thing was beyond his comprehension. The miracle, whether divine or demoniac, began to assume a sinister and doubtful aspect. It was as if the slain woman herself had returned, or had somehow wrought her unholy simulacrum in the mandrakes.

His hand trembled as he started to dig up another plant; and working with less than his usual care, he failed to remove the whole of the bifurcated root, cutting into it clumsily with the trowel of sharp bone.

He saw that he had severed one of the tiny ankles. At the same instant, a shrill, reproachful cry, like the voice of Sabine herself in mingled pain and anger, seemed to pierce his ears with intolerable acuity, though the volume was strangely lessened, as if the voice had come from a distance. The cry ceased, and was not repeated. Gilles, sorely terrified, found himself staring at the trowel, on which there was a dark, blood-like stain. Trembling, he pulled out the severed root, and saw that it was dripping with a sanguine fluid.

At first, in his dark fear and half-guilty apprehension, he thought of burying the roots which lay palely before him with their eldritch and obscene similitude to the dead sorceress. He would hide them deeply from his own sight and the ken of others, lest the murder he had done should somehow be suspected.

Presently, however, his alarm began to lessen. It occurred to him that, even if seen by others, the roots would be looked upon merely as a freak of nature and would in no manner serve to betray his crime, since their actual resemblance to the person of Sabine was a thing which none but he could rightfully know.

Also, he thought, the roots might well possess an extraordinary virtue, and from them, perhaps, he would brew philtres of never-equalled power and efficacy. Overcoming entirely his initial dread and repulsion, he filled a small osier basket with the quivering, leaf-headed figurines. Then he went back to his hut, seeing in the bizarre phenomenon merely the curious advantage to which it might be turned and wholly oblivious to any darker meaning, such as might have been read by others in his place.

In his callous hardihood, he was not disquieted overmuch by the profuse bleeding of a sanguine matter from the mandrakes when he came to prepare them for his cauldron. The ungodly, furious hissing, the mad foaming and boiling of the brew, like a devil's broth, he ascribed to the unique potency of its ingredients. He even dared to choose the most shapely and perfect of the woman-like plants, and hung it up in his hut amid other roots and dried herbs and simples, intending to consult it as an oracle in the future, according to the custom of wizards.

The new philtres which he had concocted were bought by eager customers, and Gilles ventured to recommend them for their surpassing virtue, which would kindle amorous warmth in a bosom of marble or inflame the very dead.

Now, in the old legend of Averroigne which I recount herewith, it is told that the impious and audacious wizard, fearing neither God nor devil nor witch-woman, dared to dig again in the earth near Sabine's grave, removing many more of the white, female-shapen roots, which cried aloud in shrieking complaint to the waning moon or turned like living limbs at his violence. And all those which he dug

were formed alike, in the miniature image of the dead Sabine, from breasts to toes. And from them, as is said, he compounded other philtres, which he meant to sell in time when such should be requested.

As it happened, however, these latter potions were never dispensed; and only a few of the first were sold, owing to the frightful and calamitous consequences that followed their use. For those to whom the potions had been administered privily, whether men or women, were not moved by the genial force of desire, as was the wonted result, but were driven by a darker rage, by a woeful and Satanic madness irresistibly impelling them to harm or even slay the persons who had sought to attract their love.

Husbands were turned against wives, lasses against their lovers, with speeches of bitter hate and scathful deeds. A certain young gallant who had gone to the promised rendezvous was met by a vengeful madwoman, who tore his face into bleeding shreds with her nails. A mistress who had thought to win back her recreant knight was mistreated foully and done to death by him who had hitherto been impeccably gentle, even if faithless.

The scandal of these untoward happenings was such as would attend an invasion of demons. The crazed men and women, it was thought at first, were veritably possessed by devils. But when the use of the potions became rumored, and their provenance was clearly established, the burden of the blame fell upon Gilles Grenier, who, by the law of both church and state, was now charged with sorcery.

The constables who went to arrest Gilles found him at evening in his hut of raddled osiers, stooping and muttering above a cauldron that foamed and hissed and boiled as if it had been filled with the spate of Phlegethon. They entered and took him unaware. He submitted calmly, but expressed surprise when told of the lamentable effect of the love-philtres; and he neither affirmed nor denied the charge of wizardry.

As they were about to leave with their prisoner, the officers heard a shrill, tiny, shrewish voice that cried from the shadows of the hut, where bunches of dried simples and other sorcerous ingredients were hanging. It appeared to issue from a strange, half-withered root, cloven in the very likeness of a woman's body and legs—a root that was partly pale, and partly black with cauldron-smoke. One of the constables thought that he recognized the voice as being that of Sabine, the sorcerer's wife. All swore that they heard the voice clearly, and were able to distinguish these words:

“Dig deeply in the meadow, where the mandrakes grow the thickliest.”

The officers were sorely frightened, both by this uncanny voice and the obscene likeness of the root which they regarded as a work of Satan. Also, there was much doubt as to the wisdom of obeying the oracular injunction. Gilles, who was questioned narrowly as to its meaning, refused to offer an interpretation; but certain marks of perturbation in his manner finally led the officers to examine the mandrake meadow below the hut.

Digging by lantern-light in the specified spot, they found many more of the enchanted roots, which seemed to crowd the ground; and beneath, they came to the rotting corpse of a woman, which was so recognizable as that of Sabine. As a result of this discovery, Gilles Grenier was arraigned not only for sorcery but also for the murder of his wife. He was readily convicted of both crimes, though he denied stoutly the imputation of intentional malefice, and claimed to the very last that he had killed Sabine only in defense of his own life against her termagant fury. He was hanged on the gibbet in company with other murderers, and his dead body was then burned at the stake.

1. The Deposition of Brother Gérôme

I, a poor scrivener and the humblest monk of the Benedictine Abbey of Périgon, have been asked by our abbot Théophile to write down this record of a strange evil that is still rampant, still unquelled. And, ere I have done writing, it may be that the evil shall come forth again from its lurking-place, and again be manifest.

We, the friars of Périgon, and all others who have knowledge of this thing, agree that its advent was coeval with the first rising of the red comet which still burns nightly, a flying balefire, above the moonless hills. Like Satan's rutilant hair, trailing on the wind of Gehenna as he hastens worldward, it first rose below the Dragon in early summer; and now it follows the Scorpion toward the western woods. Some say that the horror came from the comet, flying without wings to earth across the stars. And truly, before this summer of 1369, and the lifting of that red, disastrous scourge upon the heavens, there was no rumor or legend of such a thing in all Averoigne.

As for me, I must deem that the beast is a spawn of the seventh hell, a foulness born of the bubbling, flame-blent ooze; for it has no likeness to the beasts of earth, to the creatures of air and water. And the comet may well have been the fiery vehicle of its coming.

To me, for my sins and unworthiness, was it first given to behold the beast. Surely the sight there was a warning of those ways which lead to perdition: for on that occasion I had broken the rule of St. Benedict which forbids eating during a one-day's errand away from the monastery. I had tarried late after bearing a letter from Théophile to the good priest of Ste. Zénobie, though I should have been back well before evensong. And also, apart from eating, I had drunk the mellow white wine of Ste. Zénobie with its kindly people. Doubtless because I had done these things, I met the nameless, night-born terror in the woods behind the abbey when I returned.

The day had vanished, fading unaware; and the long summer eve, without moon, had thickened to still and eldritch darkness ere I approached the abbey postern. And hurrying along the forest path, I felt an eerie fear of the gnarled, hunchback oaks and their pit-deep shadows. And when I saw between their antic boughs the vengefully streaming fire of the new comet, which seemed to pursue me as I went, the goodly warmth of the wine died out and I began to regret my truancy. For I knew that the comet was a harbinger of ill, an omen of death and Satanry to come.

Now, as I passed among the ancient trees that tower thickly, growing toward the postern, I thought that I beheld a light from one of the abbey windows and was much cheered thereby. But, going on, I saw that the light was near at hand, beneath a lowering bough beside my path; and moreover, it moved as with the flitting of a restless fenfire, and was wholly dissimilar to the honest glow of a lamp, lantern or taper. And the light was of changeable color, being pale as a corposant, or ruddy as new-spilled blood, or green as the poisonous distillation that surrounds the moon.

Then, with ineffable terror, I beheld the thing to which the light clung like a hellish nimbus, moving

as it moved, and revealing dimly the black abomination of head and limbs that were not those of any creature wrought by God. The horror stood erect, rising to the height of a tall man, and it moved with the swaying of a great serpent, and its members undulated as if they were boneless. The round black head, having no visible ears or hair, was thrust forward on a neck of snakish length. Two eyes, small and lidless, glowing hotly as coals from a wizard's brazier, were set low and near together in the noseless face above the serrate gleaming of bat-like teeth.

This much I saw, and no more, ere the thing went past me with the strange nimbus flaring from venomous green to a wrathful red. Of its actual shape, and the number of its limbs, I could form no just notion. It uttered no sound, and its motion was altogether silent. Running and slithering rapidly it disappeared in the bough-black night, among the antique oaks; and I saw the hellish light no more.

I was nigh dead with fear when I reached the abbey and sought admittance at the postern. And the porter who came at last to admit me, after I had knocked many times, forbore to chide me for my tardiness when I told him of that which I had seen in the moonless wood.

On the morrow, I was called before Théophile, who rebuked me sternly for my breach of discipline and imposed a penance of daylong solitude. Being forbidden to hold speech with the others, I did not hear till the second morn of the thing that was found before noons in the wood behind Pérignon, where I had met the nameless beast.

The thing was a great stag which had been slain in some ungodly fashion, not by wolf or hunter or poacher. It was unmarked by any wound, other than a wide gash that had laid bare the spine from neck to tail; and the spine itself had been shattered and the white marrow sucked therefrom; but no other portion of the stag had been devoured. None could surmise the nature of the beast that slew and ravened in such a manner; but many, for the first time, began to credit my tale, which the abbot and the brothers had hitherto looked upon as a sort of drunken dream. Verily, they said, a creature from the Pit was abroad, and this creature had killed the stag and had sucked the marrow from its broken spine. And I, aghast with the recollection of that loathly vision, marvelled at the mercy of God, which had permitted me to escape the doom of the stag.

None other, it seemed, had beheld the monster on that occasion; for all the monks, save me, had been asleep in the dormitory; and Théophile had retired early to his cell. But, during the nights that followed the slaying of the stag, the presence of this baleful thing was made manifest to all.

Now, night by night, the comet greatened, burning like an evil mist of blood and fire, while the stars blanched before it and terror shadowed the thoughts of men. And in our prayers, from prime to evensong, we sought to deprecate the unknown ills which the comet would bring in its train. And daily by day, from peasants, priests, woodcutters and others who came to visit the abbey, we heard the tale of fearsome and mysterious depredations, similar in all ways to the killing of the stag.

Dead wolves were found with their chins laid open and the spinal marrow gone; and an ox and a horse were treated in like fashion. Then, it would seem, the beast grew bolder—or else it wearied of such humble prey as deer and wolves, horses and oxen.

At first, it did not strike at living men, but assailed the helpless dead like some foul eater of carrion. Two freshly buried corpses were found lying in the cemetery at Ste. Zénobie, where the thing had dug them from their graves and had laid open their vertebrae. In each case, only a little of the marrow had been eaten; but as if in rage or disappointment, the cadavers had been torn into shreds from crown to heel, and the tatters of their flesh were mixed inextricably with the rags of their cerements. From this it would seem that only the spinal marrow of creatures newly killed was pleasing to the monster.

Thereafter the dead were not molested; but a grievous toll was taken from the living. On the night following the desecration of the graves, two charcoal-burners, who plied their trade in the forest at a distance of no more than a mile from Pérignon, were slain foully in their hut. Other charcoal-burners dwelling nearby, heard the shrill screams that fell to sudden silence; and peering fearfully through the

chinks of their bolted doors, they saw anon in the grey starlight the departure of a black, obscene glowing shape that issued from the hut. Not till dawn did they dare to verify the fate of their hapless fellows, who, they then discovered, had been served in the same manner as the wolves and other victims of the beast.

When the tale of this happening was brought to the abbey, Théophile called me before him and questioned me closely anent the apparition which I had encountered. He, like the others, had doubted me at first, deeming that I was frightened by a shadow or by some furtive creature of the wood. But after the series of atrocious maraudings, it was plain to all that a fiendish thing such as had never been fabled in Averoine, was abroad and ravening through the summer woods. And moreover it was plain that this thing was the same which I had beheld on the eve of my return from Ste. Zénobie.

Our good abbot was greatly exercised over this evil, which had chosen to manifest itself in the neighborhood of the abbey, and whose depredations were all committed within a five-hours' journey of Périgon. Pale from his over-strict austerities and vigils, with hollow cheeks and burning eyes, Théophile called me before him and made me tell my story over and over, listening as one who flagellates himself for a fancied sin. And though I, like all others, was deeply sensible of this hellish horror and the scandal of its presence, I marvelled somewhat at the godly wrath and indignation of our abbot, in whom blazed a martial ardor against the minions of Asmodai.

"Truly," he said, "there is a great devil among us, that has risen with the comet from Malebolge. We, the monks of Périgon, must go forth with cross and holy water to hunt the devil in its hidden lair which lies haply at our very portals."

So, on the afternoon of that same day, Théophile, together with myself and six others chosen for their hardihood, sallied forth from the abbey and made search of the mighty forest for miles around, entering with lifted crosses, by torchlight, the deep caves to which we came, but finding no fiercer thing than wolf or badger. Also, we searched the vaults of the ruined castle of Faussesflammes, which is said to be haunted by vampires. But nowhere could we trace the sable monster, or find any sign of its lairing.

Since then, the middle summer has gone by with nightly deeds of terror, beneath the blasting of the comet. Beasts, men, children, women, have been done to death by the monster, which, though seeming to haunt mainly the environs of the abbey, has ranged afield even to the shores of the river Isoile and the gates of La Frénaie and Ximes. And some have beheld the monster at night, a black and slithering foulness clad in changeable luminescence; but no man has ever beheld it by day.

Thrice has the horror been seen in the woods behind the abbey; and once, by full moonlight, a brother peering from his window descried it in the abbey garden, as it glided between the rows of peaches and turnips, going toward the forest. And all agree that the thing is silent, uttering no sound, and swifter in its motion than the weaving viper.

Much have these occurrences preyed on our abbot, who keeps to his cell in unremitting prayer and vigil, and comes forth no longer, as was his wont, to dine and hold converse with the guests of the abbey. Pale and meager as a dying saint he grows, and a strange illness devours him as if with perpetual fever; and he mortifies the flesh till he totters with weakness. And we others, living in the fear of God, and abhorring the deeds of Satan, can only pray that the unknown scourge be lifted from the land, and pass with the passing of the comet.

2. The Letter of Théophile to Sister Thérèse

... To you, my sister in God as well as by consanguinity, I must ease my mind (if this be possible) by writing again of the dread thing that harbors close to Périgon: for this thing has struck once more within the abbey walls, coming in darkness and without sound or other ostent than the Phlegethonic

luster that surrounds its body and members.

I have told you of the death of Brother Gérôme, slain at evening in his cell, while he was copying an Alexandrian manuscript. Now the fiend has become even bolder; for last night it entered the dormitory, where the brothers sleep in their robes, girded and ready to arise instantly. And without waking the others, on whom it must have cast a Lethean spell, it took Brother Augustin, slumbering on his pallet at the end of the row. And the fell deed was not discovered till daybreak, when the monk who slept nearest to Augustin awakened and saw his body, which lay face downward with the back of the robe and the flesh beneath a mass of bloody tatters.

On this occasion, the Beast was not beheld by anyone; but at other times, full often, it has been seen around the abbey; and its craftiness and hardihood are beyond belief, except as those of an archdevil. And I know not where the horror will end; for exorcisms and the sprinkling of holy water at all doors and windows have failed to prevent the intrusion of the Beast; and God and Christ and all the holy Saints are deaf to our prayers.

Of the terror laid upon Averoigne by this thing, and the bale and mischief it has wrought outside the abbey, I need not tell, since all this will have come to you as a matter of common report. But here, Périgon, there is much that I would not have rumored publicly, lest the good fame of the abbey should suffer. I deem it an humiliating thing, and a derogation and pollution of our sanctity, that a foul fiend should have ingress to our halls unhindered and at will.

There are strange whispers among the brothers, who believe that Satan himself has risen to haunt us. Several have met the Beast even in the chapel, where it has left an unspeakably blasphemous sign of its presence. Bolts and locks are vain against it; and vain is the lifted cross to drive it away. It comes and goes at its own choosing; and they who behold it flee in irrestrainable terror. None know where it will strike next; and there are those among the brothers who believe it menaces me, the elected abbot of Périgon; since many have seen it gliding along the hall outside my cell. And Brother Constantin, the cellarer, who returned late from a visit to Vyônes not long ago, swears that he saw it by moonlight as it climbed the wall toward that window of my cell which faces the great forest. And when seeing Constantin, the thing dropped to the ground like a huge ape and vanished among the trees.

All, it would seem, save me, have beheld the monster. And now, my sister, I must confess a strange thing, which above all else would attest the influential power of Hell in this matter, and the hovering of the wings of Asmodai about Périgon.

Each night since the coming of the comet and the Beast, I have retired early to my cell, with the intention of spending the nocturnal hours in vigil and prayer, as I am universally believed to do. And on each night a stupor falls upon me as I kneel before the Christ on the silver crucifix; and oblivion steps my senses in its poppy; and I lie without dreams on the cold floor till dawn. Of that which goes on in the abbey I know nothing; and all the brothers might be done to death by the Beast, and their spines broken and sucked as is its invariable fashion, without my knowledge.

Haircloth have I worn; and thorns and thistle-burs have I strewn on the floor, to awake me from this evil and ineluctable slumber that is like the working of some Orient drug. But the thorns and thistles are as a couch of paradisaal ease, and I feel them not till dawn. And dim and confused are my senses when I awaken; and deep languor thralls my limbs. And day by day a lethal weakness grows upon me, which all ascribe to saintly pernoctations of prayer and austerity.

Surely I have become the victim of a spell, and am holden by a baleful enchantment while the Beast is abroad with its hellish doings. Heaven, in its inscrutable wisdom, punishing me for what sin I know not, has delivered me utterly to this bondage and has thrust me down to the sloughs of a Stygian despair.

Ever I am haunted by an eerie notion, that the Beast comes nightly to earth from the red comet which passes like a fiery wain above Averoigne; and by day it returns to the comet, having eaten it

fill of that provender for which it seeks. And only with the comet's fading will the horror cease to harry the land and infest Périgon. But I know not if this thought is madness, or a whisper from the Pit.

Pray for me, Therèse, in my bewitchment and my despair: for God has abandoned me, and the yoke of hell has somehow fallen upon me; and naught can I do to defend the abbey from this evil. And I, in my turn, pray that such things may touch you not nor approach you in the quiet cloisters of the convent at Ximes

3. The Story of Luc le Chaudronnier

Old age, like a moth in some fading arras, will gnaw my memories oversoon, as it gnaws the memories of all men. Therefore I write this record of the true origin and slaying of that creature known as the Beast of Averoigne. And when I have ended the writing, the record shall be sealed in a brazen box, and that box be set in a secret chamber of my house at Ximes, so that no man shall learn the dreadful verity of this matter till many years and decades have gone by. Indeed, it were not well for such evil prodigies to be divulged while any who took part in the happening are still on the earthward side of Purgatory. And at present the truth is known only to me and to certain others who are sworn to maintain secrecy.

The ravages of the Beast, however, are common knowledge, and have become a tale with which to frighten children. Men say that it slew fifty people, night by night, in the summer of 1369, devouring in each case the spinal marrow. It ranged mostly about the abbey of Périgon and to Ximes and St. Zénobie and La Frênaie. Its nativity and lairing-place were mysteries that none could unravel; and church and state were alike powerless to curb its maraudings, so that a dire terror fell upon the land and people went to and fro as in the shadow of death.

From the very beginning, because of my own commerce with occult things and with the spirits of darkness, the baleful Beast was the subject of my concern. I knew that it was no creature of earth or of the terrene hells, but had come with the flaming comet from ulterior space; but regarding its character and attributes and genesis, I could learn no more at first than any other. Vainly I consulted the stars and made use of geomancy and necromancy; and the familiars whom I interrogated professed themselves ignorant, saying that the Beast was altogether alien and beyond the ken of sublunar devils.

Then I bethought me of the ring of Eibon, which I had inherited from my fathers, who were all wizards. The ring had come down, it was said, from ancient Hyperborea; and it was made of a redder gold than any that the earth yields in latter cycles, and was set with a great purple gem, somber and smouldering, whose like is no longer to be found. And in the gem an antique demon was held captive, a spirit from pre-human worlds and ages, which would answer the interrogation of sorcerers.

So, from a rarely opened casket, I brought out the ring of Eibon and made such preparations as were needful for the questioning of the demon. And when the purple stone was held inverted above a small brazier filled with hotly burning amber, the demon made answer, speaking in a voice that was like the shrill singing of fire. It told me the origin of the Beast, which belonged to a race of stellar devils that had not visited the earth since the foundering of Atlantis; and it told me the attributes of the Beast, which, in its own proper form, was invisible and intangible to men, and could manifest itself only in a fashion supremely abominable. Moreover, it informed me of the one method by which the Beast could be banished, if overtaken in a tangible shape. Even to me, the student of darkness, these revelations were a source of horror and surprise. And for many reasons, I deemed the mode of exorcism a doubtful and perilous thing. But the demon had sworn that there was no other way.

Musing on these dark matters, I waited among my books and braziers and alembics, for the stars had warned me that my intervention would be required in good time.

Toward the end of August, when the great comet was beginning to decline a little, there occurred

the lamentable death of Sister Therèse, killed by the Beast in her cell at the Benedictine convent Ximes. On this occasion, the Beast was plainly seen by late passers as it ran down the convent wall by moonlight from a window; and others met it in the shadowy streets or watched it climb the city ramparts, running like a monstrous beetle or spider on the sheer stone as it fled from Ximes to regain its hidden lair.

To me, following the death of Therèse, there came privily the town marshal, together with the abbot Théophile, in whose worn features and bowed form I descried the ravages of mortal sorrow and horror and humiliation. And the two, albeit with palpable hesitation, begged my advice and assistance in the laying of the Beast.

“You, Messire le Chaudronnier,” said the marshal, “are reputed to know the arcanic arts of sorcery and the spells that summon or dismiss evil demons and other spirits. Therefore, in dealing with this devil, it may be that you shall succeed where all others have failed. Not willingly do we employ you in the matter, since it is not seemly for the church and the law to ally themselves with wizardry. But the need is desperate, lest the demon should take other victims. In return for your aid, we can promise you a goodly reward of gold and a guarantee of lifelong immunity from all inquisition and prosecution which your doings might otherwise invite. The Bishop of Ximes, and the Archbishop of Vyônes, are privy to this offer, which must be kept secret.”

“I ask no reward,” I replied, “if it be in my power to rid Averoigne of this scourge. But you have set me a difficult task, and one that is haply attended by strange perils.”

“All assistance that can be given you shall be yours to command,” said the marshal. “Men-at-arms shall attend you, if need be.”

Then Théophile, speaking in a low, broken voice, assured me that all doors, including those of the abbey of Pérignon, would be opened at my request, and that everything possible would be done to further the laying of the fiend.

I reflected briefly, and said:

“Go now, but send to me, an hour before sunset, two men-at-arms, mounted, and with a third steed. And let the men be chosen for their valor and discretion: for this very night I shall visit Pérignon, where the horror seems to center.”

Remembering the advice of the gem-imprisoned demon, I made no preparation for the journey except to place upon my index finger the ring of Eibon, and to arm myself with a small hammer which I placed at my girdle in lieu of a sword. Then I awaited the set hour, when the men and the horses came to my house, as had been stipulated.

The men were stout and tested warriors, clad in chain-mail, and carrying swords and halberds. I mounted the third horse, a black and spirited mare, and we rode forth from Ximes toward Pérignon, taking a direct and little-used way which ran for many miles through the werewolf-haunted forest.

My companions were taciturn, speaking only in answer to some question, and then briefly. This pleased me; for I knew that they would maintain a discreet silence regarding that which might occur before dawn. Swiftly we rode, while the sun sank in a redness as of welling blood among the tall trees, and soon the darkness wove its thickening webs from bough to bough, closing upon us like some inexorable net of evil. Deeper we went, into the brooding woods; and even I, the master of sorceries, trembled a little at the knowledge of all that was abroad in the darkness.

Undelayed and unmolested, however, we came to the abbey at late moonrise, when all the monks except the aged porter, had retired to their dormitory. The abbot, returning at sunset from Ximes, had given word to the porter of our coming, and he would have admitted us; but this, as it happened, was no part of my plan. Saying I had reason to believe the Beast would re-enter the abbey that very night, I told the porter my intention of waiting outside the walls to intercept it, and merely asked him to accompany us in a tour of the building's exterior, so that he could point out the various rooms. This he

did, and during the course of the tour, he indicated a certain window in the second story as being that of Théophile's chamber. The window faced the forest, and I remarked the abbot's rashness in leaving it open. This, the porter told me, was his invariable custom, in spite of the oft-repeated demoniacal invasions of the monastery. Behind the window we saw the glimmering of a taper, as if the abbot were keeping late vigil.

We had committed our horses to the porter's care. After he had conducted us around the abbey and had left us, we returned to the space before Théophile's window and began our long watch in silence.

Pale and hollow as the face of a corpse, the moon rose higher, swimming above the somber oaks and pines, and pouring a spectral silver on the grey stone of the abbey walls. In the west the comet flared among the lusterless signs, veiling the lifted sting of the Scorpion as it sank.

We waited hour by hour in the shortening shadow of a tall oak, where none could see us from the windows. When the moon had passed over, sloping westward, the shadow began to lengthen toward the wall. All was mortally still, and we saw no movement, apart from the slow shifting of the light and shade. Half-way between midnight and dawn, the taper went out in Théophile's cell, as if it had burned to the socket; and thereafter the room remained dark.

Unquestioning, with ready weapons, the two men-at-arms companioned me in that vigil. Well they knew the demonian terror which they might face before dawn; but there was no trace of trepidation in their bearing. And knowing much that they could not know, I drew the ring of Eibon from my finger and made ready for that which the demon had directed me to do.

The men stood nearer than I to the forest, facing it perpetually according to a strict order that I had given. But nothing stirred in the fretted gloom; and the slow night ebbed; and the skies grew paler, as if with morning twilight. Then, an hour before sunrise, when the shadow of the great oak had reached the wall and was climbing toward Théophile's window, there came the thing I had anticipated. Very suddenly it came, and without forewarning of its nearness, a horror of hellish red light, swift as kindling, windblown flame, that leapt from the forest gloom and sprang upon us where we stood stiff and weary from our night-long vigil.

One of the men-at-arms was borne to the ground, and I saw above him, in a floating redness as of ghostly blood, the black and semi-serpentine form of the Beast. A flat and snakish head, without ears or nose, was tearing at the man's armor with sharp serrate teeth, and I heard the teeth clash and graze on the linked iron. Swiftly I laid the ring of Eibon on a stone I had placed in readiness, and broke the dark jewel with a blow of the hammer that I carried.

From the pieces of the lightly shattered gem, the disemprisoned demon rose in the form of a smoldering fire, small as a candle-flame at first, and greatening like the conflagration of piled faggots. And hissing softly with the voice of fire, and brightening to a wrathful, terrible gold, the demon leapt forward to do battle with the Beast, even as it had promised me, in return for its freedom after cycles of captivity.

It closed upon the Beast with a vengeful flaring, tall as the flame of an auto-da-fé, and the Beast relinquished the man-at-arms on the ground beneath it, and writhed back like a burnt serpent. The body and members of the Beast were loathfully convulsed, and they seemed to melt in the manner of wax and to change dimly and horribly beneath the flame, undergoing an incredible metamorphosis. Moment by moment, like a werewolf that returns from its beasthood, the thing took on the wavering similitude of man. The unclean blackness flowed and swirled, assuming the weft of cloth amid its changes, and becoming the folds of a dark robe and cowl such as are worn by the Benedictines. Then from the cowl, a face began to peer, and the face, though shadowy and distorted, was that of the abbot Théophile.

This prodigy I beheld for an instant; and the men also beheld it. But still the fire-shaped demon assailed the abhorrently transfigured thing, and the face melted again into waxy blackness, and a gre-

column of sooty smoke arose, followed by an odor as of burning flesh commingled with some mighty foulness. And out of the volumed smoke, above the hissing of the demon, there came a single cry the voice of Théophile. But the smoke thickened, hiding both the assailant and that which it assailed, and there was no sound, other than the singing of fed fire.

At last, the sable fumes began to lift, ascending and disappearing amid the boughs, and a dancing golden light, in the shape of a will-o'-the-wisp, went soaring over the dark trees toward the stars. And I knew that the demon of the ring had fulfilled its promise, and had now gone back to those remote and ultramundane deeps from which the sorcerer Eibon had drawn it down in Hyperborea to become the captive of the purple gem.

The stench of burning passed from the air, together with the mighty foulness; and of that which had been the Beast there was no longer any trace. So I knew that the horror born of the red comet had been driven away by the fiery demon. The fallen man-at-arms had risen, unharmed beneath his mail, and I and his fellow stood beside me, saying naught. But I knew that they had seen the changes of the Beast and had divined something of the truth. So, while the moon grew grey with the nearness of dawn, they made them swear an awful oath of secrecy, and enjoined them to bear witness to the statement I must make before the monks of Pérignon.

Then, having settled this matter, so that the good renown of the holy Théophile should suffer no calumny, we aroused the porter. We averred that the Beast had come upon us unaware, and had gained the abbot's cell before we could prevent it, and had come forth again, carrying Théophile with its snakish members as if to bear him away to the sunken comet. I had exorcised the unclean devil, which had vanished in a cloud of sulphurous fire and vapor; and, most unluckily, the abbot had been consumed by the fire. His death, I said, was a true martyrdom, and would not be in vain: the Beast would no longer plague the country or bedevil Pérignon, since the exorcism I had used was infallible.

This tale was accepted without question by the Brothers, who grieved mightily for their good abbot. Indeed, the tale was true enough, for Théophile had been innocent, and was wholly ignorant of the foul change that came upon him nightly in his cell, and the deeds that were done by the Beast through his loathfully transfigured body. Each night the thing had come down from the passing comet to assuage its hellish hunger; and being otherwise impalpable and powerless, it had used the abbot for its energumen, moulding his flesh in the image of some obscene monster from beyond the stars.

It had slain a peasant girl in Ste. Zénobie on that night while we waited behind the abbey. But thereafter the Beast was seen no more in Averoigne; and the murderous deeds were not repeated.

In time the comet passed to other heavens, fading slowly; and the black terror it had wrought became a varying legend, even as all other bygone things. The abbot Théophile was canonized for his strange martyrdom; and they who read this record in future ages will believe it not, saying that no demon or malign spirit could have prevailed thus upon true holiness. Indeed, it were well that none should believe the story: for thin is the veil betwixt man and the godless deep. The skies are haunted by that which it were madness to know; and strange abominations pass evermore between earth and moon and athwart the galaxies. Unnamable things have come to us in alien horror and will come again. And the evil of the stars is not as the evil of earth.

I

It was on Spanish Mountain, where he had climbed from Donner to escape the society of his fellow campers, that Lemuel Sarkis first met the people of the planet Mlok.

Since he was far from being an expert mountaineer, he had not cared to assail the crowning castellation of the long, somber ridge, but had contented himself with the lower, more accessible eastern terminus. From this, he could look down on the waters of Frog Lake, lying dark and still at the bottom of a bare declivity.

Among volcanic-looking boulders, well out of the wind that swept the upper ridge, he seated himself in morose contemplation while the mountain shadows lengthened, shaken out like lazy wings, and a pale light crept eastward on the waters of black opal below. The vastness of the solitude, its grim and craggy grandeur, began to have a soothing effect upon Sarkis; and the human trivialities and banalities that had driven him to flight assumed their proper insignificance in the mighty perspective on which he peered.

He had seen no one, not even a shepherd or fisherman, in his climb through the forested ravine and up the sunflower-covered slopes. He was startled as well as annoyed when a pebble loosened as if by some unheard foot fall clattered past him and went over the precipice. Someone else had climbed the mountain; and his misanthropic aversion rose in a gall-like bitterness as he turned to survey the intruder.

Instead of the tourist or mountaineer he had expected, he saw two beings who bore not even the remotest appearance to humanity, and, moreover, were obviously unrelated to any species of earthly life. Not only for that first startled moment, but during the entire episode that followed, Sarkis wondered if he had fallen asleep and had been visited by some preposterous dream.

Each of the beings was about four feet high, with a somewhat doubtful division into head and body. Their formation was incredibly flat and two-dimensional; and they seemed to float rather than stand, as if swimming through the air. The upper division, which one accustomed to earthly physical structures would have taken for the head, was much larger than the lower, and more rotund. It resembled the featureless disk of a moonfish, and was fringed with numberless interbranching tendrils or feelers like a floral arabesque. The lower division suggested a Chinese kite. It was marked with unknown goblin features, some of which may have been eyes, of a peculiarly elongated and oblique sort. It ended in three broad, streamer-like members, subdividing into webby tassels, that trailed on the ground but seemed wholly inadequate for the purpose of legs.

The coloration of these beings baffled Sarkis. He received alternate impressions of opal-shades, blackness, elusive greyness and blood-bright violet.

Impossible, beyond belief, they hung before him among the rocks, swaying forward with a dreamlike slowness, as if attached to the ground by their tasseled streamers. Their fringes of woven tendrils seemed to float toward him, quivering with restless life, and certain of their eyelike features gradual

brightened and drew his gaze with the hypnotic gleaming of crystals.

~~The feeling of divorce from diurnal reality increased upon him; for now he seemed to hear a low insistent humming, to which he could assign no definite source. It corresponded vaguely with the slow vibration of the fringes in its beat and cadence. He heard it all around him in the air, like a mesh of sound; and yet somehow it was inside his own brain, as if the unused cells were thrilling with telepathic murmur from worlds unknown to man.~~

The humming grew louder, it took on a partial coherence and articulation, as if certain semiphonetic sounds were repeated over and over in a long-drawn sequence. Still more articulate it grew, seeming to form a prolonged vocable. Startlingly it dawned upon him that the vocable was intended for the English phrase, "Come with us," and he realized that the beings were trying earnestly to convey an invitation by means of unearthly vocal organs.

Like one who has been mesmerized, without fear or wonder, he gave himself up to the impressions that besieged his senses. On the flat, vacant, moonfish disks, very gradually, dim, intricate lines and masses limned themselves, growing brighter and more distinct till they began to suggest an actual picture.

Sarkis could comprehend little enough of what he saw; but he received an idea of immense distance and alien, distorted perspective. In a glare of exotic light, a sea-like flood of intense color, strangely angled machineries towered, and structures that might have been either buildings or vegetable growths, receded on a ground of baffling dimension and doubtful inclination. Through this baroque scenery, there floated forms that bore a slight and incoherent resemblance to the beings who confronted him: a resemblance like the broken hint of natural shapes maintained in the utmost perversions of cubism. Together with these forms, as if convoyed by them, there moved another figure having an equally remote and dubious likeness to a human being.

Somehow, Sarkis divined that this latter figure was intended for himself. The scene was a picture of some foreign world or dimension which these fantastic creatures invited him to visit! Alike in all its details, the tableau was duplicated on the disks.

With curious lucidity and coolness, he pondered the invitation. Should he accept it? And if he did accept, what would happen? Of course, it was all a dream—and dreams were tricky things, with a habit of vanishing if one tried consciously to fathom their elusive vistas. But—supposing it were not a dream? From what world, then, had these beings emerged, and by what mode of transit were they enabled to visit the earth? Surely they could not have come from any planet of the solar system: the utter strangeness seemed to argue that they were children of another galaxy, or at least of another sun than ours.

The beings appeared to perceive his hesitation. The pictures on their bodies faded, and were slowly replaced by others, as if they sought to woo him with the varied sceneries of their native world. At the same time, the humming noise resumed; and after awhile, the equivocal monotone began to suggest familiar words, most of which continued to elude Sarkis. He seemed to make out an eerie prolongation of "offer" and "escape," as if these vocables were uttered by some enormous, droning insect.

Then, through the strange hypnotic sound, he heard the crisp laughter of a girl and the glib chattering of human voices. Plainly several people had climbed the mountain and were coming toward him along the slope, though he could not see them as yet.

The dreamy charm was broken, and he felt a shock of actual fear as well as a deep startlement when he saw that the unknown visitors were still before him. Those intruding human voices had convinced him that the happening was no dream. He felt the involuntary recoil of the earth-born mind from things that are monstrous and inexplicable.

The voices drew nearer behind the rocks, and he thought that he recognized the tones of one or more of his fellow-campers. Then, as he continued to face the apparitions, he discerned above the

grotesquely floating forms the sudden flash of sourceless coppery metals that barred the air, hanging aloft like some mechanical mirage. A maze of slanted rods and curving reticulations seemed to hover and descend about the two beings. An instant later, it was gone, and the visitants had also disappeared.

Sarkis hardly saw the approach of a woman and two men, all members of the party he had wished to avoid. To a bewilderment like that of some rudely awakened sleeper, was added the eerie consternation of one who thinks that he has met the supernatural.

A week later, Sarkis had returned to his lodgings in San Francisco and had resumed the tedious commercial art which formed his one reliable source of livelihood. This uncongenial exigency had involved the ruthless smothering of higher ambitions. He had wanted to paint imaginative pictures, had dreamt of fixing in opulent color a fantasy such as Beardsley had caught in ornate line. But such pictures, it seemed, were in small request.

The happening on Spanish Mountain had stirred his imagination profoundly, though he was still doubtful of its actuality. He gave himself to endless speculation, and often he cursed the untimely interruption that had caused the visitants to vanish.

It seemed to him that the beings (if they were not mere hallucinatory images) had appeared in answer to his own vague and undirected longings for the supermundane. Like envoys from a foreign universe, they had sought him out, had favored him with their invitation. Their attempt at verbal communication argued a knowledge of terrene language; and it was plain that they could come and go at will, no doubt by means of some occult mechanism.

What did they want with him? he wondered. What would have been his fate if he had accompanied them?

His pictorial bent for the fantastic was deeply stimulated; and more than once, after his daily stint of advertising-art was done, he tried to paint the visitants from memory. This he found peculiarly difficult: the images with which he sought to deal were without analogy; and their very hues and proportions baffled his recollection. It was as if an alien spectrum, a trans-Euclidean geometry, had somehow been involved.

One eve, he stood glowering with dissatisfaction before his easel. The picture, he thought, was a silly smudge of over-painted colors which utterly failed to convey the true outlandishness of its theme.

There was no sound or other warning, nothing that could consciously attract his attention. But turning abruptly, he saw behind him the two beings he had met on Spanish Mountain. They swayed slowly in the lamplight between the cluttered table and a somewhat shabby divan, trailing their tasseled members on an old rug whose fading floral designs were splashed with fresh paint.

With the loaded brush in his fingers, Sarkis could only stand and stare, held in the same hypnotic thrall that had swept him beyond fear or wonder on the mountain. Once more he beheld the gradual, somnolent waving of the arabesque feelers; again he heard the dreamy monotonous hum that resolved itself into long-drawn vocables, inviting him to go with the visitants. Again, on the moonfish disk were depicted scenes that would have been the despair of a futurist.

Almost without emotion or thought of any kind, Sarkis gave an audible consent. He hardly knew that he had spoken.

Slowly, as it had begun, the waving motion of the feelers ceased. The consonant humming died, the pictures faded. Then, as before, there came the coppery flash of air-suspended machinery. Broad oblique rods and concave meshes hovered between ceiling and floor, descended about the alien entities—and about Sarkis himself. Dimly, between the glowing bars, he descried the familiar furnishings of his room.

An instant more, and the room vanished like a film of shadow wiped away in light. There was no sense of movement or of transit; but it seemed that a foreign sky had opened above, pouring down

deluge of crimson. Redness streamed upon him, it filled his eyes with a fury as of boiling blood, dripped over him in sullen or burning cascades.

By degrees, he began to distinguish outlines and masses. The bars and meshes were still around him, his strange companions were still beside him. They were weirdly altered now, and they swam in the crimson flood like the goblin fish of some infernal sea. Involuntarily, Sarkis shrank away from them: they were terrifying, monstrous.

He saw now that he was standing on a curiously tessellated floor that curved upward on all sides like the bottom of a huge saucer. High, outward-sloping walls, windowless and roofless, towered all about him. The mechanism that surrounded him was also topless, and he perceived that it was changing. Very slowly, like dying flames, the rods and meshes sank and disappeared in a circle of small sockets that were part of the floor.

A deep vermilion heaven domed the tower, pouring down the thick, heavy light. The material of which the building was composed, whether stone, metal or some unheard-of element, flowed with lusters of liquid ruby and dissolving cinnabar.

Sarkis became aware that the air he breathed, though well-supplied with oxygen, was uncomfortably thick and seemed to choke his lungs. Also, when he tried to move, he found his weight enormously increased, as if by the gravitation of a gigantic planet.

Where he was or how he had gotten there, he could not imagine. He had nursed an artistic longing for the weird, the otherworldly; but he had never dreamed of this utter and delirious alienation from known things. Moreover, he had not foreseen the shock to human nerves that would ensue an actual transition into another sphere. His sensations of physical discomfort were soon supplemented by a sort of optic torture: the light troubled him, it stimulated his senses cruelly, and yet it stifled and oppressed him at the same time.

A multitude of beings similar to his companions began to enter the topless tower, floating gradually down from the sky or swimming in through low doors. They crowded about him, and he found himself moving toward one of the exits, with their feelers and streamers tugging gently at his limbs. He felt an unreasoning terror at their touch, like a child in the grip of nightmare shadows. Their humming awaked in his brain the thought of some hostile horde of abominably droning insects.

Passing through the doorway, he entered a sea of light in which he was unable to discern clearly the features of the landscape. Almost vertically overhead, he saw the blinding blot of a vast sun. The throng of goblin people, increasing momentarily, bore him down a grassless, barren slope whose bottom was lost in the inundating crimson.

More and more, he felt an inexpressible malaise, a frightful mixture of confusion, irritation and depression, to which all his senses contributed. He tried to recall the circumstances of his departure from earth, tried to assure himself that there was some natural explanation of all that had happened. The beings whose invitation he had accepted were, he told himself, friendly and well-meaning, and he would suffer no harm. But such thoughts were powerless to calm his agitated nerves, now subject to the assault of innumerable vibratory forces which the human system had never been meant to sustain.

The torture deepened. His journey down the slope, rendered doubly slow by the dragging gravitational pull and the leisurely drifting of his fantastic entourage, who seemed to obey another and more decelerated tempo of time than man, was literally a descent into hell. Every impression became a source of pain and terror, and he found a lurking menace of evil in all that surrounded him.

At the bottom of the slope, a second roofless bowl-shaped tower loomed from the murk, on the shore of a stagnant sea. To him, at that moment, it was like a shrine of alien diabolism, hateful and menacing; and he wanted to scream aloud with a nameless horror when the goblin creatures bore him toward it and urged him through its portals.

The interior of this tower, yawning to the red sky, was lined with countless outlandish carvings

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