

CASTLE AT THE WORLD'S EDGE

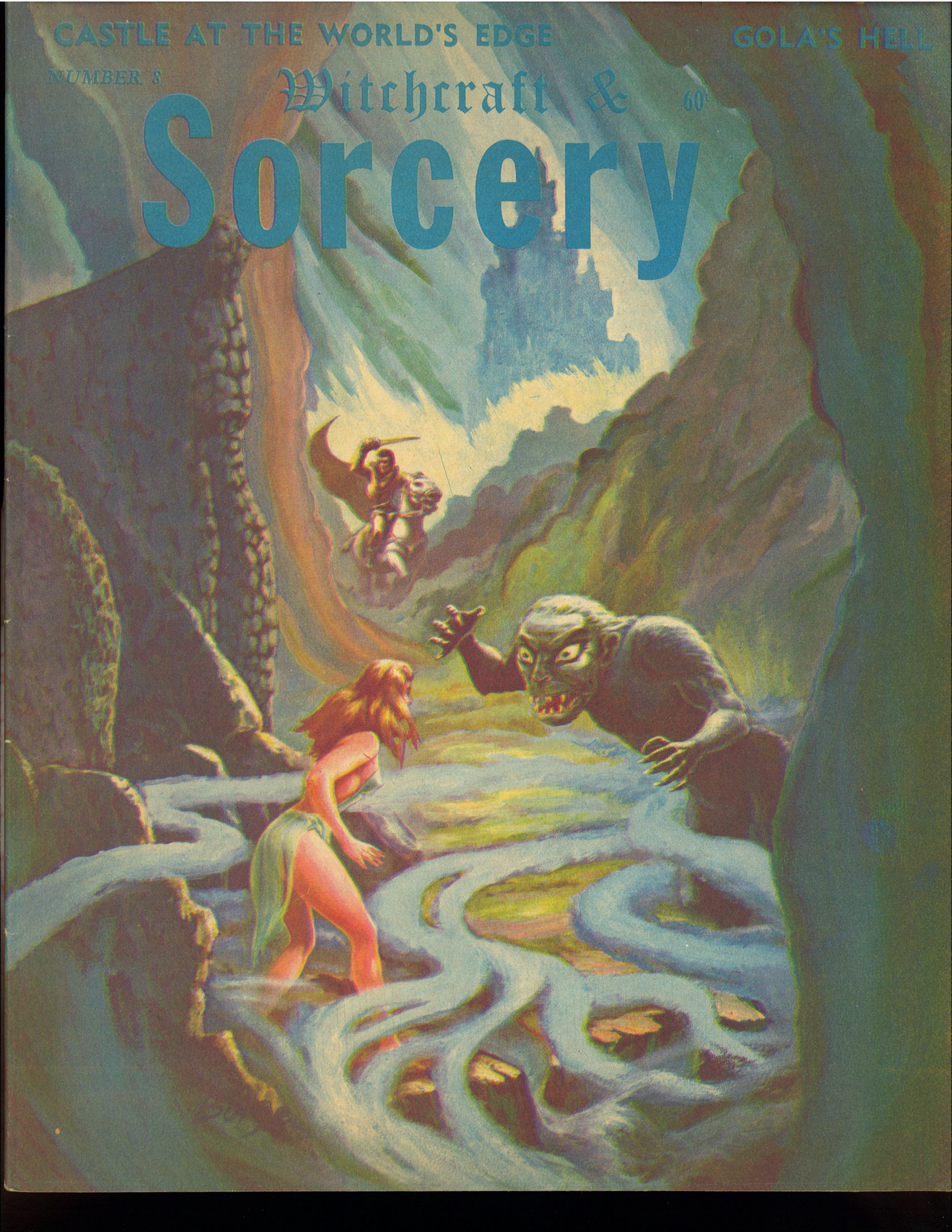
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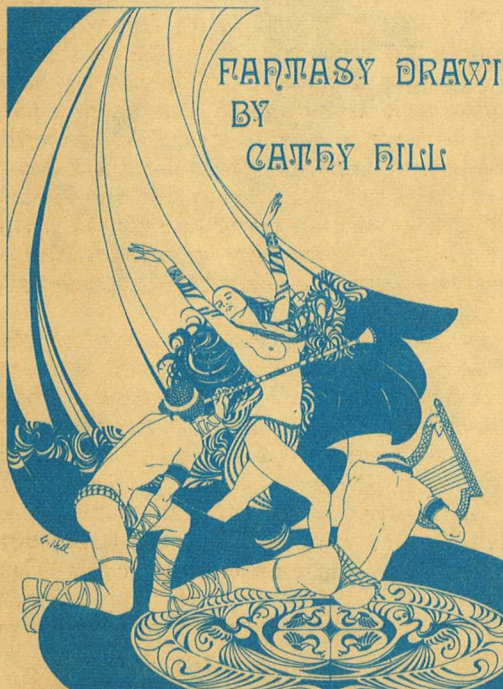
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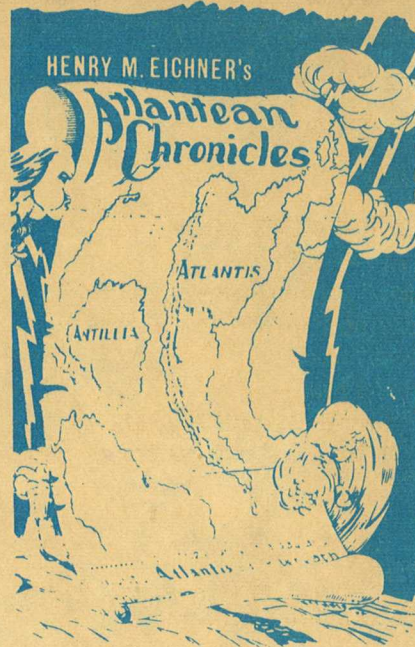
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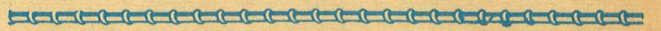
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(formerly COVEN 13)

NUMBER 8

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Cover: Burge for Castle at World's End

Gola's Hell, page 20, Hannes Bok.

Other illustrations by Fabian, R. Edwards Jennings and D Bruce Berry.

FROM THE COVEN

Last issue's lead stories seem to have proved successful—both Gary Brandner's "Price of a Demon" and my own "Thirst" will be reprinted in England in YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES—which is always a pleasure for an editor to be able to announce. In this issue we are bringing you two more strong modern-setting horror tales, "Sergi" by Dale C. Donaldson (editor of a fine horror fiction publication called **Moonbroth**) and "Gola's Hell" by Emil Petaja.

"Gola's Hell" was an early painting by Hannes Bok which Emil felt held interesting possibilities as a springboard for a story. He wrote the story and we bought both it and the Bok illustration.

In addition to modern horror fiction we have something a bit unusual, a gothic terror yarn involving the trappings of heroic fantasy—but set in the future. This sounds so gimmicky that I might be suspicious of a story described like that to me, but suffice it to say that the story was written to entertain, not to permit the writer to play games. It's a strong horror story that can probably be enjoyed by readers who ordinarily don't like heroic fantasy; and it can be viewed as an allegory. Carleton Grindle, who wrote it, will be recalled as the author of the popular "Momentary Ghost" from our 5th issue. . .

"Castle at the World's Edge" is the title, and I should point out that it isn't the story we promised for this issue—E.C. Tubb's "Death God's Doom." That one was crowded out, paradoxically, by problems arising from our gaining 8 pages this issue. It should be in next issue, but I'm wary about promises. Just let's say we'll try.

On the subject of last issue, we inadvertently slighted two fine artists, Berni Wrightson and Bob Maurus. Berni collaborated with Jeff Jones for the illustrations to "Thirst" and we left his credit line off the contents page. Bob did our cover alone, not in collaboration with Jerry Burge as we erroneously stated. Apologies to both these fine gentlemen.

Jade Pagoda, Hoffman Price's popular column, is back. I hope we'll be able to run it in each issue now.

After last time, I'm almost reluctant to make specific predictions for next issue. We intend to run Tubb's "Death God' Doom." We also have fiction on hand by Gahan Wilson, Robert E. Howard, Gans T. Fields (of Weird Tales fame), R. A. Lafferty, Miram Allen de Ford and Eddy Bertin. And, not for next issue, but soon, we have a sequel by Carleton Grindle to his "Castle at the World's Edge."

Gerald W Page

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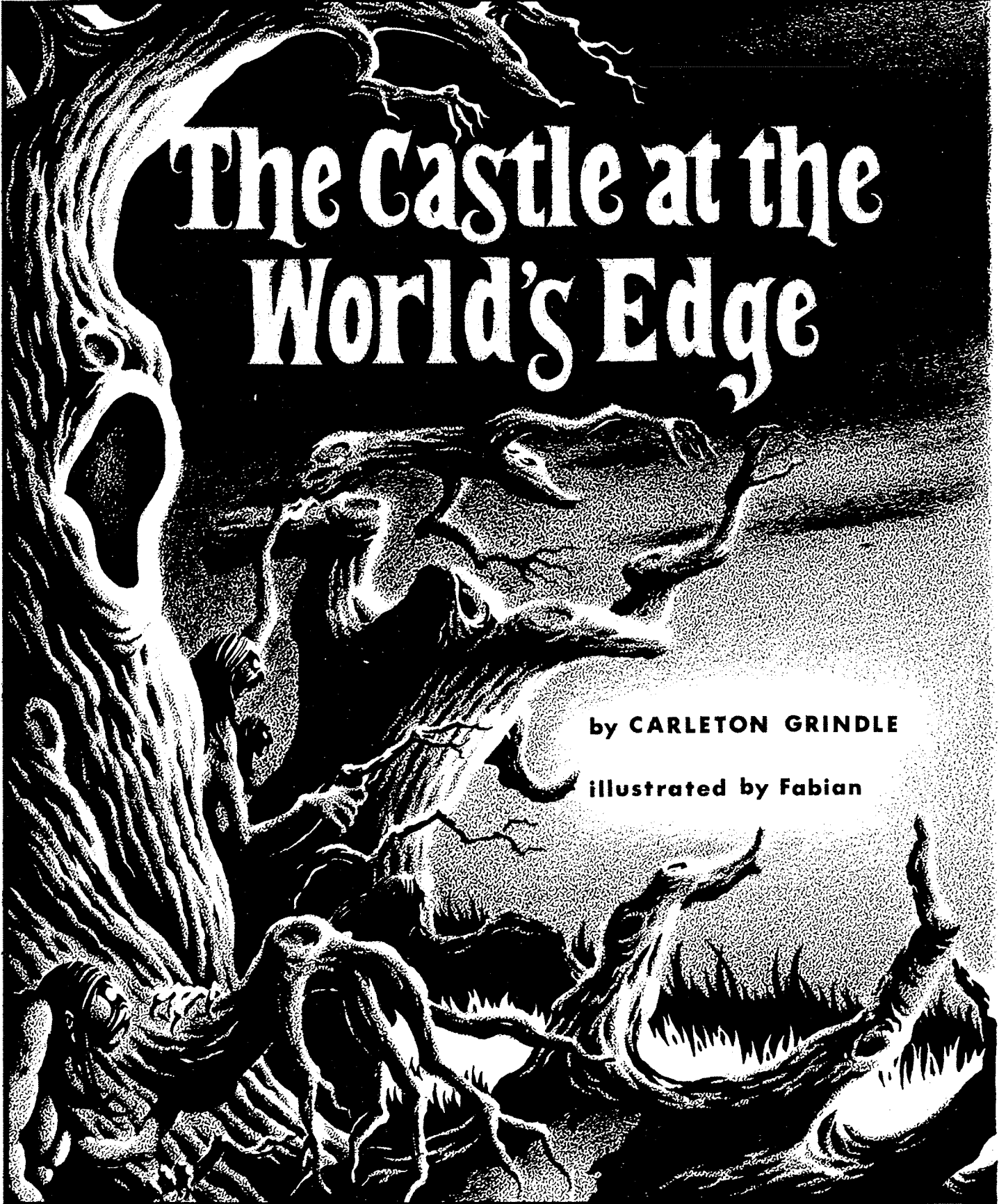
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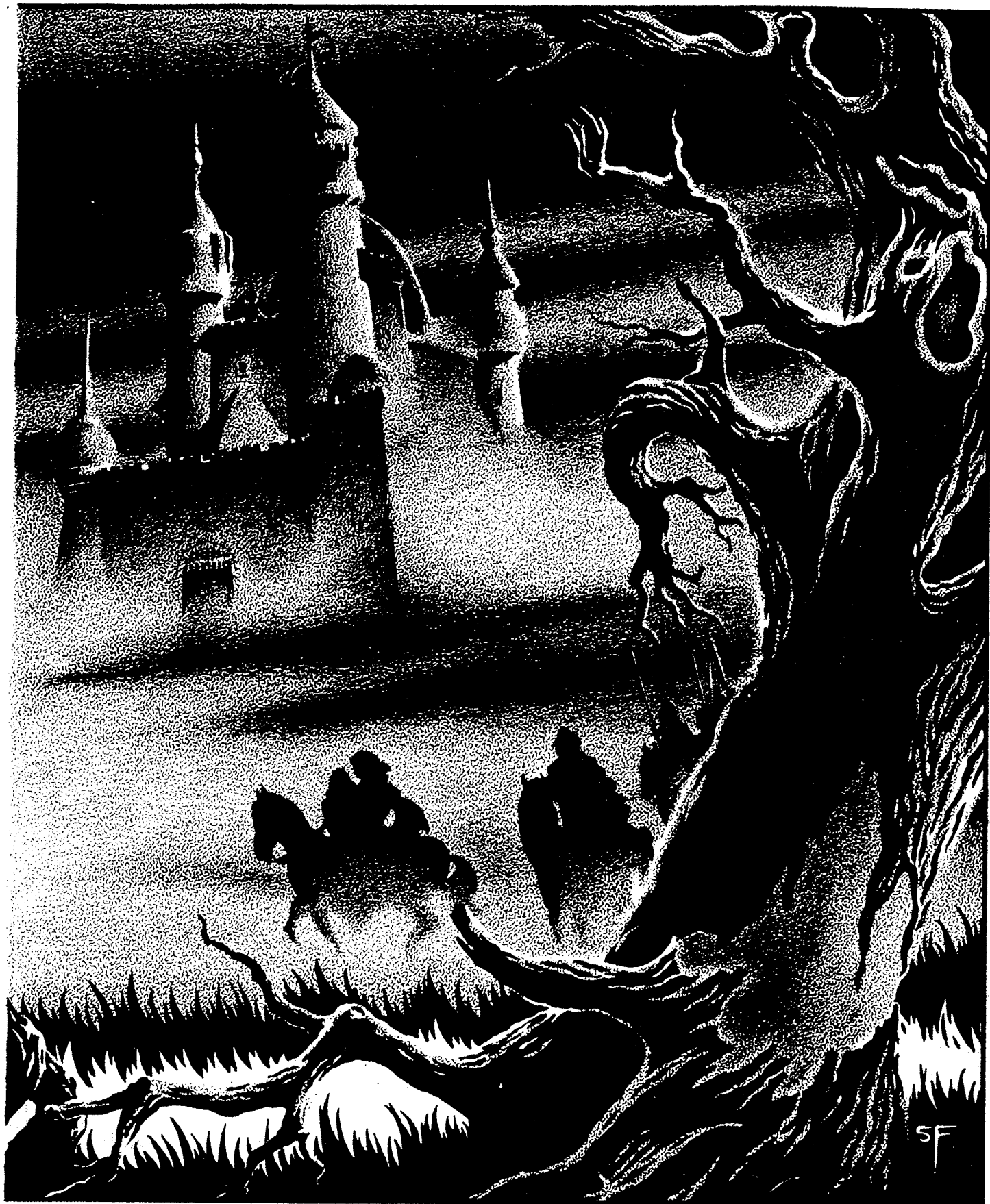
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The Castle at the World's Edge

by **CARLETON GRINDLE**

illustrated by **Fabian**



As Chaos nibbled at what remained of earth, Egon sought—and found—a spell to restore Order.

But it was not a spell he wished to use . . .

1

The Battle on the Edge of the Earth

The city was old, its temporal components stretching back in mists of time even thicker than the roiling fog that swirled among its tumbled spires and through its broken, littered streets. Once it was vast but now a hungry Chaos nibbled at the brink of the world which was now within the borders of the city. Each day a layer of what remained of the earth's edge became a part of Chaos—a layer little thicker than a molecule. But Chaos is stubborn and days add to weeks and months and years. Once the city was the home of magicians and necromancers, wizards and sorcerers, men with the powers and prerogatives of gods. But Chaos was winning and earth grew smaller each day.

For a year Egon searched the city on the edge of the earth before he found Kohl's lost library and the way to combat Chaos. On that fateful day he rode to the city accompanied by the Lady Darane, whose domain once lay to the east which was now all claimed by Chaos. With them went six men-at-arms. It was Harthos, big as an ox, with shoulders as broad and massive as pillars, who moved the great slab of masonry that covered the entrance to Kohl's library.

The library was below the surface of the ground and Egon led the way down, lighting the chamber with a bright globe summoned by a spell he knew. He was the last sorcerer, searching for lost spells that might be used against the coming of Chaos, to restore order to a dissolving universe. It took only moments of examination to assure him this was what he was looking for, that these were the lost books of the sorcerer Kohl. And among the volumes on thaumaturgy and demonology, on scrying, astrology, goety, on spells and sortilege—among those works Egon found, its title almost hidden in the layers of dust upon its cover, the *Greatbook of Kohl* itself.

It was a large book, thick of page and great of size. Egon ordered his men-at-arms to fetch the hundreds of other books in the library while he carried the *Greatbook* up the stairs himself, into the air where the cold touch of the fog brushed against him like the touch of corpses that refused to decompose. For in a way, that was what Chaos was.

"I've found it," he said to Darane. Carefully he placed the book on the ground and opened it. There was little light in the heavy mist. Egon made a passage with his hands and the air glowed with a soft, steady light that illumined his thin, hollow face, the dark, glorious face of Darane, and the pages of the book.

Upon the pages words were written in a strange, spidery hand with ink but little faded by the passage of centuries since Kohl had written down these words and spells and observations. And the configuration of the letters and their arrangement into words was also strange . . .

"I can't read it," said Darane. "Can you?"

"A code, I think. Or ancient language."

"Can you translate it?"

Around them stirred the fog as if it were touched by light wind. The glow of Egon's magic faded and darkness gathered around them. Egon shut the book and lifted it in his arms. Carefully he placed it in the great empty saddle bag on his own horse.

"Can you translate it?" Darane asked again.

"I can," Egon said, fastening the straps. "I only hope I can translate it in the time we have left."

"How much time before the brink of the world advances to the walls of your castle?" Her voice was tense and Egon recalled the panicked look in her eyes that day when she came to his castle, forced to flee her own lands by the advance of the Chaotic fog. He finished buckling the straps and turned to her, forcing a lighter tone into his voice as he spoke.

"We have the time. The spell we need is here, I'm sure of it. I'll begin work at once on breaking Kohl's cipher and in a few days . . ."

"How long have you searched for this book?"

"Since I knew it was in this city."

"I never believed you'd find it," she said. "Perhaps you will break the code in time."

"All we have is faith in one another," he replied. "But it's a luxury we can well afford, eh, Darane?" There was an edge of mockery to his voice, a strange distant look in his eye. He turned to supervise the moving of the books from the doomed library, little caring whether or not his mockery was lost on Darane. But in that moment he heard a sound.

A low, crooning sound that echoed through the rubble until it was shattered and ruined like the city itself, it touched the ear with a feeling as cold and dry to the mind as the fog was to the flesh. Egon whirled and peered into the darkness as if to see the source of the call. It came again, and on its feet came a brother call. And then yelping and baying, a cacophony of hunting sounds.

"Mistgaunts," Egon said. "Listen!"

"Are they coming this way?" Darane could not keep the fright from her voice.

"No. No, they're moving toward the eastern edge of the city—toward the brink. The way they sound, I think they already have their prey."

Harthos, his bulk looming like a wall in the fog, deposited his load of books on the ground. "It sounds a small pack, Lord Egon. Nor more than four or five."

"I wonder what they've cornered."

"It isn't our business," Darane said. "Whoever it is can take care of himself."

"Mistgaunts seldom attack dangerous prey," Egon said. "Harthos, order three men to stay here and guard the books. You and the other two come with me. Darane, you stay here."

Before Darane could coherently voice her objections, Egon was on his horse and spurring the creature toward the continuing howl. The horse feared the mistgaunts, but was well-trained and fast. It galloped between the rubble that lined the streets to the outskirts of the city and the howl of the mistgaunts grew closer.

Now they were almost to the brink.

Egon reined the horse to a stop and listened. Between his knees, Egon could feel the trembling of the frightened horse, but he knew the animal well enough to know it would not be panicked when battle came.

Something loomed out of the fog: tall and lean and pallid, with great, staring eyes and loose, flacid folds of flesh, instead of lips, pulled back to reveal yellow, dripping, sabre fangs.

At sight of the mistgaunt, Egon's hand moved to the hilt of his shortsword. Drawing the weapon, he spurred his horse.

The mistgaunt had been startled at sight of Egon, but as the horse shot forward, it growled and impossibly-jointed long arms flayed the air with sharp talons. Egon leaned forward in the saddle, veering his horse to one side so that both animal and rider narrowly avoided those razor-sharp claws. Egon's arm moved in a slicing motion that brought the edge of his sword against the creature's stomach and through the flesh.

The mistgaunt screamed its death scream but Egon did not look back. Ahead in the fog the creature's brothers answered its cry and gathered for the fight.

Then Egon saw what they were after.

It was a girl, small and thin, her rough villager's tunic torn and open against the cold mist. She stood on the brink of the world, armed only with a stick, facing three of the mistgaunts. She was holding them at bay, for the moment, with her make-shift club.

But now for a time the mistgaunts had lost interest in her. They turned to face their new, more dangerous, enemy. And with an intelligence that seemed almost to belie their bestiality, they separated and moved toward Egon, coming at him from three directions.

Slowly they moved, maneuvering for closeness so that they could attack at once, making Egon's chances of killing more than one of them small. But Egon saw their purpose. He veered the horse to the left, then abruptly to the right, spurring it to a sudden gallop toward one of the mistgaunts.

The mistgaunt jumped aside, but Egon saw its move and slashed out with his sword. The blade chopped meat and the creature cried out its pain as a hand flew from a stump in a sudden fountain of blood. Egon reined back the horse and slashed again, but this time sliced only air as the injured mistgaunt rolled clear.

The other two were trying to move in, their cries of anger and fear loud. Egon's horse whinnied in fear and reared, almost unseating Egon.

But Egon held on and the horse came down on top of the injured mistgaunt. Hooves broke through rib and muscle with a sharp snapping sound and the mistgaunt gave a different kind of yell.

Its injured arm flayed the ground and thrashed the air. It tried uselessly to rake the side of the horse or the legs of the man. Egon drove down his sword, point first, pinning the creature's chest. But with its dying convulsions, the creature's good arm lashed up and the knife-sharp talons sunk into the horse, tore across, toward and into its heart. The horse screamed its life away and Egon found himself flying through the air.

The impact with which he struck the ground drove air from his lungs. His vision clouded momentarily, but when it cleared

he saw in the pale, eternal twilight of the world's brink, two mistgaunts closing in on him.

He had not lost his sword, but he was one against two and they had their talons and long arms that gave them as much reach as he and his sword. He scrambled to his feet, with a curse at his own foolishness in rushing forward like this.

Suddenly the girl was there.

He had last been aware of her before charging the second mistgaunt. Now she loomed up behind one of the creatures and brought a heavy wooden pole hard against its skull. The creature flopped forward, stunned, and Egon took advantage of the momentary confusion to drive his sword into the shoulder of the other one.

Where the fifth mistgaunt came from, Egon never knew. Probably it heard the others and came in hopes of getting in on whatever meal had been cornered. Suddenly it was there, leaping at the magician and deftly avoiding his sword.

The strain of the fight was beginning to tell. Egon was faced now with an opponent fresher than he was—and that opponent was taking advantage of the fact. Egon's sword slashed and sliced the air about the mistgaunt, always finding where the mistgaunt had been, never where it was.

The girl came forward, trying to get behind the beast with her club, but the creature moved aside, almost putting Egon between her and it. Egon saw the purpose of its move and leaped sideways, striking out with his sword. The blade missed, barely, and the mistgaunt jumped back with a surprised yelp. But Egon gained no advantage in merely holding things as they were.

The girl cried out. Egon saw the mistgaunt she had stunned was on its feet again. It moved shamblingly forward and she tried to club it again.

The creature ducked, lashed out. Talons snagged cloth and ripped threads apart. A streak of red marked the girl's shoulder.

She fell back with the force of the blow, which saved her from having her throat torn open by the mistgaunt's other hand. But she was on the ground now, perilously close to the brink. So close that Egon was certain she would fall.

Egon leaped back from the mistgaunt he was battling, trying to disengage himself long enough to go to the girl's aid. But all he could do was maneuver himself and his opponent toward the edge. He would not be able to reach the girl in time.

It was the cry of Harthos, splitting the air with a ringing challenge that distracted the mistgaunt. It turned, and in that moment Egon pinked the creature's hand. But Egon saw his men-at-arms riding up and turned from the mistgaunt to see about the girl.

She lay right on the brink, her hair falling over the edge, hungry fogs licking her hair and face. The mistgaunt, momentarily distracted by the arrival of the other humans, saw Egon and snarled. An ugly discoloration marked the place where the girl's club had struck his head, but he was otherwise unmarked except for the girl's blood on his claws. Egon slashed with his sword, though he was well outside reach of the creature. The creature backed off, toward an outcropping of boulders. The girl stirred and lifted herself from the ground, moving away from the brink.

The creature reached the boulders and could go no farther. Egon leaped.

The creature deftly twisted away from Egon's sword.

The blade struck stone. Egon could not recover in time. The point skidded less than an inch before the strain grew too much for the blade to bear. With a loud snap, metal broke, and the blade flew off into the mists. Egon felt small splinters of metal strike his arm and face. Now, except for the hilt and two inches of broken blade, he was unarmed.

The mistgaunt snarled and came for him.

The men-at-arms were busy with the other mistgaunt, as agile an opponent for them as it had been for Egon. Egon moved back, barely avoiding the talons the mistgaunt aimed at his face.

Whether his foot struck a rock or an uneven place in the ground Egon didn't know. But it struck something and his balance gave way. He plopped to the ground, more surprised than pained, on the brink of the world.

He rolled.

He threw out his arms, somehow managing to stop himself. But his head dangled over the abyss and fog touched his cheeks with the caress of a necrophile.

He looked up, saw the mistgaunt looming above him, taloned arms drawn back for the kill.

He never thought his action through. There was no time for thought, only action.

He kicked with both legs, driving his feet into the charging mistgaunt's flaccid belly. His knees drew back, springing with the weight of the beast. Then he pistoned his legs up, driving the mistgaunt's body into the air, up and over his head into the mists.

He thought he would go with it, but somehow in that fragment of eternity between when the mistgaunt's body toppled and his own should have toppled, Egon caught hold of something and saved himself. He twisted and looked down at the plummeting mistgaunt and heard its grey, lost cry of death.

Already the forces of Chaos were at work on the creature, disassembling it to its component molecules, scattering them to the winds of Chaos to become particles of mist. Last to go was the creature's yell.

Then Egon turned and saw how he had saved himself. He had driven what remained of his broken blade into the packed earth and somehow held on to it to prevent his fall.

He got to his feet. Harthos reached his side and steadied him. The mistgaunts were all dead now. The girl lay collapsed nearby, but her labored breathing told him she yet lived.

"We'll take her back with us," Egon said.

"Is that wise, my Lord?"

It was Darane who spoke. She sat casually on her horse, her black hair framing her pale, beautiful face, her dark eyes staring at Egon as if they could pierce the armor of his soul.

"You were told to stay in the ruins," he said.

"We had no way to stop her, my Lord," Harthos said.

"I quite understand," said Egon.

2

The Greatbook of Kohl

Egon woke at his workroom table, unaware that he had fallen asleep. The book was open before him on the table. His

head rested on it. The greyness that was morning peered through the tower window with waxen light. It was close to dawn, last he remembered. Now. . . Well, he could not have slept long for no one had come to see about him.

He was stiff from spending the night bent over the heavy wood table, poring over the *Greatbook of Kohl*. He stood up, stretching his limbs and realizing just how tired he really was. He would spend the greater portion of this day asleep, of that he was sure. But no matter. Chaos had devoured the sun and day was a pale ghost of what legend said it once was. Only the ancient weakening spells of the early sorcerers gave the earth what grey light and warmth there was. But night was the same, even with the haze and mist. Night was the same and Egon preferred the night which Chaos couldn't kill.

He was in his tower workroom. It was a bare room with stone walls and floor, tall narrow walls. There was a table in the center of the room, cleared of everything but the *Greatbook*. The astrolabes and other paraphernalia of his sorcery, the grimoires and charts and ephemeride were stored on tables by the walls or on shelves or in cabinets. A single box of broken chalk sat on a corner of the table, the one object he had neglected to clear away in his eagerness to read the legendary book.

He worked the greater part of the night deciphering the code in which it was written. It was a simple code, easy to break. Egon was good with codes. He found a passage that he believed was one of the few oft-quoted passages of the book and easily transcribed it. That gave him most of the key. Slow as it was, he managed to read the early parts of the book and learn something.

And he was certain the book held the spell he wanted.

There were two doors from the tower room. One led to a ladder whereby one might climb straight down inside the tower. The other led to a balcony around the turret and then to stairs that wound around the outside of the tower down to the courtyard. Egon went to the balcony.

To the east lay the edge of the world.

The roiling thickness of Chaotic fog swirled into grey sky. A thin, dying forest hid the ruins of the distant city and a field lay between forest and castle. Each day Chaos took a little bit more of the earth and moved westward. The lands of Darane were devoured almost a year before. Now the city was fare for Chaos. How much longer would it be, Egon wondered, before Chaos swallowed the castle itself.

How much time before the world itself was finally consumed?

For centuries Chaos had been assailing earth, for that was the way of the universe. The forces of opposition, of good versus evil, of right against wrong. In the end the forces were called by their rightful names, Order and Chaos.

Order spread. It touched infinity, it drove the boundaries of Chaos beyond imagining.

Now Chaos was returning. Order crumbled to its touch and each day saw the limits of Order less. Chaos was consuming Order and the very forces which had driven the human spirit were consumed with it. Even the remaining lands and oceans were not untouched with Chaos, for strange creatures roamed the world: creatures such as the mistgaunts. Or changelings as touched with animal or bird as with human. Strange unnatural creatures swam the seas and the way in which many trees were



twisted and gnarled was not altogether right.

As he walked down the stairs Egon could not feel the elation he believed he should. It was, after all, an anticlimax, this finding of the *Greatbook* after so many years of searching.

Kohl was the greatest of the ancient sorcerers and among the first to predict the onslaught of Chaos, centuries ago.

Those were the days when sorcery was at its peak and the sorcerers of an ancient earth were the greatest sorcerers of the galaxy. Man walked the surfaces of other worlds and touched strange lands and planes, talked with creatures more alien than the hybrids of Chaos that now walked the earth. It was said by some that the meddlings of an incautious sorcerer at the edge of the universe brought about the disaster that was now devouring Order. Egon did not know.

But he did know Kohl, centuries before, predicted the return of the Chaos that now licked at the edges of the earth. Legend said that Kohl had formulated a Spell of Order and a Spell Against Chaos that might be used to save the world. For years Egon searched the litter of the abandoned city to find the book. All that remained now was the simple labor of finding the spell and working it.

As he reached the bottom of the steps, Egon saw Darane walking across the courtyard toward him.

Though her lands were bits of fog, devoured by Chaos, still she walked regally as would befit a queen. She wore a flowing, yellow robe gathered at the waist by a broad scarlet band worked with designs of black. The faint wind gently stirred the

long black hair about her pale, beautiful face. She smiled in greeting, a cold, imperial smile.

"You look as if you didn't sleep, Egon."

"I fell asleep over the book."

"Poor Egon. You work so hard. Is this the book you sought?"

"It is. The spell is in the book and I've found the key to the book's code. It's only a matter of time."

"So—after all these years."

"You'll soon have your lands back," Egon said. "That should make you happy."

"With Order returned there'll be a whole world for us if we want it. A world for the two of us."

"There are other people left, you know."

She laughed. She stepped forward and put her arms around Egon's neck. "Like that little peasant girl you found last night?"

"Like her. Yes. Thousands of people are left."

"Crowded into villages of caves, hunted by mistgaunts and changelings. Peasants!" She said the word with distaste. "Egon, the *Greatbook of Khol* is power. Power for us. We're the last sorcerers—we can use that power correctly, as it was meant to be used. Why be satisfied with your castle and my few acres of land? Why let Order proceed of its own accord? We can control Order. Make it create what *we* want—make the world a paradise for us. Populate it with our slaves."

Egon laughed. "The idea's absurd."

She drew closer to him, pressed her face against his chest. "Don't laugh at me, Egon. Not ever. We're the only two who can stop Chaos. What does it matter if we use our talents to our advantage? That's only right."

"I have little desire for power, Darane—"

"Have you desire for me, Egon?"

She held up her face and a light smile flickered over her sensuous lips. Egon kissed her and she responded passionately, hungrily, her lips moving against his own. "Egon..." she said. "Let's do this thing right. For us."

Egon held her tightly.

"Darane, your ambition is so great I sometimes think you must have all the ambition left in the world."

"You became a sorcerer, Egon. No man seeks that kind of power without ambition to back his desire."

Egon laughed. "True enough, but my ambition differs from yours. I'll be content to study and learn. To see what Order does when it returns—rather than force it to my will."

"You are a god and you would neglect your godhood," Darane said. She pulled back at arm's length and looked into Egon's eyes with a hint of pity and reproach in her own dark eyes.

"All the old gods have faded way," Egon said, "leaving only Order and Chaos—the final gods. But I'm tired now and don't care to argue with so agile a mind as yours until I'm refreshed by sleep. I have a guest to see to before I can sleep, so—"

"Do you mean that she-changeling you captured last night?"

"She looked perfectly normal to me. And I did not capture her. I saved her from mistgaunts and brought her here to treat her wounds. She's free to leave when she wants to."

"A soothing ointment has been put on her wounds and she's had sleep and food. You ought to drive her out."

"Darane—"

"What good is she? So she's a body to warm your sheets. She's also a peasant. She won't understand or like your magic. You already have one mistress. A second one is more than either you or I care for."

Egon gently pushed her away. Just as gently, he said, "You aren't going to make me argue with you. I'm too tired and if I lose my temper I won't speak rationally. Now don't say things you know aren't true. I have host duties to perform."

He left Darane and crossed the courtyard to the main hall.

As he made his way to the apartments he had ordered the girl placed in, he realized he did not even know her name. As he reached the door, servants stopped what they were doing in the hallway and respectfully moved aside, bowing.

He knocked on the door. A voice howled, "Come in!"

It was hardly the tone of greeting Egon was expecting. He threw open the door and looked inside. He did not see the scene he was expecting.

What he did see was Pragaëa, oldest of the castle's chamber maids, waving her arms about in frustration. Seemingly, she was on the verge of tears. On the bed, hunched defiantly against the headboard, was the girl. A sheet was drawn up around her, and she held a pillow as if to throw it. Her small dark eyes glittered with anger and her face was set in defiant lines.

"My Lord Egon," Pragaëa said. "She's a madwoman!" Pragaëa's arms moved aimlessly, frantically. She turned first this way, then that, as if she were uncertain what to do or where to go.

"What's happening?" Egon asked.

"I was preparing her bath. Simply preparing her bath, when she went *mad*—berserk, Lord Egon."

Egon had sudden thoughts of changelings he had heard of who looked perfectly normal but acted—differently. Could this girl—

"I'll not be washed by her," the girl said.

"She was merely drawing your tub."

"Nor by you either," the girl snapped. "You two keep your hands to yourselves. I'm old enough to give myself a bath—when I need it."

"The tub is ready. Pragaëa merely meant to tell you, not bathe you."

Whether or not that placated her, Egon couldn't tell. But she thought it over. After a moment she said, "How did I get here?"

"You don't remember?"

"Maybe. I thought it might be a dream."

"May I leave?" Pragaëa asked.

"Yes," Egon said. He caught the tensing of the girl's muscles and added, "Leave the door open as you go."

"Yes, my Lord."

When Pragaëa was gone, Egon sat in a chair near the bed. Suspiciously, the girl watched him.

She was young, blonde, and beautiful in a wild sort of way. She was lean from not eating regularly, but her health seemed good and her body—what he could tell about it with the sheet pulled up like that—seemed supple and pliant. Her hair was long and in need of washing. Her eyes were dark blue. Her

mouth was neither too wide nor too short and her lips, despite the lack of makeup, were full and red.

"The mistgaunts were for real?" she asked.

"Your wounds should answer that."

She lowered the sheet slightly and glanced down at her now healing wound. Then, suddenly remembering Egon, she reddened and pulled the sheet up again. "How long have I been here?"

"We brought you back last night."

"But my wound is almost healed."

"Our medicines are effective."

"Then I didn't dream it. You really did save me from those things?"

"This is all real. None of it is dream."

She shook her head, wonderingly. Hair fell across her face and she pushed it back.

"Now then," Egon said. "Have you a name?"

"Of course. It's Mera."

"Hello, Mera. My name is Egon."

At the sound of his name, her head jerked up, her eyes widened—though whether with fear or disbelief he could not tell.

"Egon? You mean the wizard?"

"I'm Egon the wizard."

She was silent for a moment.

A trifle uncertainly, Egon said, "I don't know what stories you've heard . . ."

"It isn't that. I mean, it is that—. I mean, I don't know what I mean. You aren't exactly like . . . I don't know what I thought you'd be like."

"Should I have horns or wings or should my eyes glow red?"

"Oh, no," she said, as if horrified he should think that. "But the stories they tell. You won't believe how much they talk about you in the villages. They say you can save us."

Egon decided to change the subject. "How did you manage to get in trouble yesterday?"

She pulled the sheet about her and moved to a more comfortable position before answering.

"I ran away," she said.

"From your village?"

"From my folks. They wanted me to marry Zhon."

"And you didn't want to, so you ran away."

She nodded. "Right. I ran away. I figured I'd find another village where there'd be men my own age—men I'd want to marry. Not many men in my village. Zhon's as old as my old man. Two seasons back he lost his wife and has been after my old man ever since. Finally he offered more than he could afford to turn down. So I ran away to find a better place. I never did find a village."

"Do you know where your village is?"

"Near the river," she said.

"What river?"

"Just the river. I guess it doesn't have a name."

"I see," Egon said. "You don't know your way back home and can't tell us how to get there."

"I don't want to go home."

"I guess you don't. It may not be better than the one you left, but there's a village near here. In a few days we'll take you to it."

He got up and started for the door. "I'm tired. I was up all night. You get a bath and have some food. I'll see you later today."

She climbed from the bed and ran to him, the sheet wrapped around her, the ends trailing the floor. "Wait, before you go," she said.

He paused. She looked very much as he imagined a small child must look. He had known few small children in his life—even when he was a child himself.

"I'm not sure I want to go to the village," she said. "Can't I stay here?"

He laughed. "It's out of the question."

"Why?"

He found himself at a loss for words. "I'm very tired," he said. "I need sleep. You have your bath and breakfast and I'll see you later on." He turned and went through the open door.

"I don't want to go to the village," she called after him. "I want to stay here."

3

Order against Chaos

In the days that passed the changes that so abruptly affected the life of Egon fell into routine.

He was mainly absorbed in the *Greatbook*. Now that he had the key it was all a matter of simple, routine work. Merely copybook exercise, deciphering line after line, paragraph after paragraph, page after page, one spell at a time until it was done. And he would be done when he found the correct spell. The spell Kohl had devised to restore Order to a disordered universe.

Wanted: a spell against Chaos.

Work for it.

Work . . .

The nights. The turret room, like an elevated crypt, stone walled, stone cold. A fire in a brazier on the hearth to keep you warm. A hardwood bench for your buttocks, a rough-hewn wood table top for your elbows. Flickering candle light across yellowing pages filled with fading handwritten words. Silence except for the wind and the scratching of your pen against parchment. Night after night, until a week is up and most of the old formulae are yours, most of the pages done with and turned so you can get on to the next.

At the end of a week, Egon found a spell.

He could read the code by now. He read the spell slowly, unbelievably. He read it again before copying it out. He could not believe what he read.

He could not believe it and he would not believe there was no other way until he deciphered every spell in the book. Perhaps this was not the only one. Perhaps Kohl had formulated many spells, Egon turned the page . . .

"Is it true," Mera asked, "that you will find a way to destroy the fog?"

"The fog?" Egon asked.

"You know. The fog. It stands at the end of the world and eats in at us. Sooner or later it'll eat us."

"You mean Chaos."

"If that's its name. Do you think you can stop it?"



"I think it can be stopped."

"By you?"

Egon could not suppress his smile.

"I hope you can," she said. "I wonder what the world will be like without it . . ."

It was a question Egon had often considered vaguely, even philosophically. But spoken outright, it was somehow surprising, disturbing.

"Why, I suppose the way it was before," he said.

"Before? You mean the fog wasn't always there?"

"No, of course not. The fog is Chaos. Once the universe was orderly, like it is here. But it grew disorderly and Chaos has worked in toward us."

She was puzzled. She flicked a bit of hair from her face and looked at Egon as if trying to understand him, not what he said. "But what will it be like?" she repeated.

"Well, the world will be much larger."

"The fog will go back and there'll be ground?"

"Yes. But the earth is round, like a ball. Or it was. It'll hang in space and the sun will return and the stars and moon."

"The sun?"

"A huge glowing, fiery ball in the sky. It gives the earth heat and warmth so that life can exist on it."

"But life exists now."

"Only because of magic. A spell. The spell grows weaker as the earth grows smaller. Long before Chaos destroys the remaining parts of the world, the heat and warmth spell will go. The water in the rivers and seas will freeze, perhaps the air itself will freeze. The people and animals will die. Of course soon after that we'll all be converted into fog anyway."

They were on the eastern battlement of Egon's castle. Across the fields, beyond the woods, at the edge of the earth the swirling fogs of Chaos were advancing. A low sound of thunder echoed across the land. It meant, Egon supposed, that some structure in the city, its foundation eaten away at last, had toppled into the abyss.

"Let me explain it this way," Egon said. "There are two forces in the universe. Order and Chaos. They are natural opponents, natural rivals for the state of things. Man is a product of Order. His every instinct, his every intuition, is toward Order, even in the face of an obviously Chaotic reality. Have you not heard the story-tellers speak of the Ways of Chaos?"

"I've heard stories. They say Chaos does this or that."

"They're wrong. Chaos is a total state of randomness. Can you comprehend that? Everything in Chaos is without purpose, without reason, without form. Other than destruction. Chaos comes, it claims, it destroys. Chaos has no way but that—a total lack of way. Man's ways have always been opposed to Chaos. Man has always sought to impose a system of Order upon everything.

"To man, a tall mountain is a thing that must be climbed because climbing it and classifying its nature and showing its inferiority to man's way is a method of bringing it to Order. Unexplained lands or regions of any sort are the domain of Chaos. Man must have order. No part of man's maps must be marked unknown. In the old days, man traveled to other planets and stars in order to bring the universe itself into a system of Order that he could understand."

"Other planets? I don't understand. You say the earth will be round like a ball. Why shouldn't it just go on and on like the top of a table? I can see almost to the edge from here—except for those trees. It looks flat enough to me . . ."

He laughed.

It came to him that he laughed and talked with Mera more easily than he did with Darane.

4

The Armies of Chaos

That night, the mistgaunts attacked.

Egon was working in his tower room when he heard the alarm. It was just after dusk, that period when the spell of light and warmth diminished for the night. The alarm was the cry of a soldier on the southern wall, a cry that pierced the air and jerked Egon from his concentration. He leaped to his feet, shoving back the bench he sat upon. His hand closed on the hilt of the sword nearby.

He ran from the turret to the balcony and peered down.

The courtyard was lighted by burning cressets set at intervals along the walls. Among the dark shadows of the yard, Egon could see darker shadows—the moving figures of the mistgaunts, their thin pasty bodies moving boldly toward the great hall, their large empty eyes searching and peering about.

"Raise the alarm!" Egon shouted. "The wall's been breached!"

Into the courtyard ran three soldiers, armed with pikes, Egon watched only long enough to see the foremost of them drive the head of his pike into one of the mistgaunts, and to see the other mistgaunts gathering to attack the three soldiers.

Yelling the rallying cry of his father and grandfathers, Egon ran down the stairs. He reached the bottom of the stairs and found himself confronting a mistgaunt.

The flaccid flesh of the creature's lipless mouth pulled back, revealing rows of dripping fangs. It moved—but Egon moved quicker than it did, avoiding the sweep of its claws and at the same time slicing open its belly with his sword.

Anger flooded Egon's senses. More anger than he had ever known—and fear as well. Never before had mistgaunts been this bold. Never before had they breached the walls of Egon's castle, killed men in his own courtyard. Anger and fear blended into something new within him, something that gathered and became a sort of life of its own, moving him into the fray. He moved like a dancer and his sword flashed like lightning, at first silver, but quickly growing red.

In the middle of the court, a pikeman lay dead. Above the corpse an impatient mistgaunt crouched and began to feast.

The creature did not see Egon—but Egon saw the mistgaunt. Rage mounted in the man and he fought his way to the creature and, with a single stroke, lopped off its head. He turned in time to confront another mistgaunt and his sword flashed scarlet fire, biting deep into the creature's head, splitting the skull like an overripe melon.

He stood in the center of the yard and the yard was filled with mistgaunts. Had any two of them chosen to attack at the same time, they would have had him—for the point and edge of a sword may service only one at a time. But at that moment Egon heard a cry and knew by it that his men were streaming

into the courtyard. The mistgaunts panicked, finding themselves under strong and angry attack. Egon heard the warcry of Harthos and saw the giant lifting a mistgaunt bodily and throwing it into a confused, howling group of its fellows.

Then came Chaos to the courtyard of Egon. Chaos in the form of mindless, insensate fighting and slaughter. How long it would last, Egon neither knew or cared. Within minutes he knew the important things: that there were not enough mistgaunts here to match his men-at-arms in battle.

Finally it was over.

Egon stood above the disemboweled carcass of his final opponent and stared around. The yard was littered with butchered mistgaunts. Perhaps six of his men were dead and wounds were visible on as many more who were not standing. He made no effort to count the wounded who stood. It came to him that the unheard-of had happened. The mistgaunts had attacked.

He gave orders to tend the wounded and the dead, then instructed Harthos to organize parties to search out the grounds for any mistgaunts that might remain and to see to the posting of a stronger guard.

Was this war?

Egon went from the courtyard into the hall. The place seemed untouched. There was no sign of the mistgaunts. He checked on Mera, whose rooms were closest, and found her unharmed. From there he went to see Darane.

He found her awake in her room. She was dressed in a long robe of dark blue. A silver fillet held back her hair.

Her face was set. Her eyes were like dark fires.

"No mistgaunt reached my chamber," she said in answer to Egon's questions. There was an edge of anger to her voice.

"I'm pleased you're unharmed," Egon said. "After I go, lock your door. I'll have guards posted. Men are searching the castle now in case any of the beasts got through."

He turned to go.

"Egon, wait!"

He turned. Her expression had not softened and he did not understand it.

"You seem angry, Darane . . ."

"Why haven't you acted, Egon?"

"What do you mean?"

"The spell. Why haven't you worked the spell against Chaos?"

"I haven't finished translating the book yet."

She turned away from him. Her fisted hand flailed empty air. "Egon, the mistgaunts are creatures of Chaos. They're hybrids—born of Order, but twisted by the touch of Chaos. They hate Order as you love it. They came here bent on destroying you before you can strike against Chaos."

"They're mindless. Beasts."

She whirled to face him and her eyes flashed and her face was no longer merely stern, but fully angry. "They're the minions of Chaos itself and they'll destroy you and me if we don't act. Why haven't you acted?"

"I told you—"

"I know better, Egon. I went to your tower chamber yesterday. I read your translations. You found the lost spell days ago."

It all came to Egon, then, like a revelation. "If you know what I found, you know I can't use it. You know why."

"You have no choice. Chaos is moving against you. There'll be other attacks by the mistgaunts and perhaps even the changelings. The armies of Chaos will gather and destroy us unless you act. Use the spell now—while you still have time."

"It calls for human blood. I can't slay a human to make magic work—unless there's no other way."

"There is no other way. Thousands of lives are at stake."

"But there may be another spell in the book. One that doesn't call for a human life."

"You know there's not. You're wasting time. Even if there is another spell you haven't time to look for it."

"I have to look. Who could I choose to sacrifice? Have you considered that?"

"The victim is obvious," Darane said. Her voice was suddenly quiet, more controlled. Her face softened in a subtle manner so that it hinted at but did not become a smile. "A young virgin is traditional. We have one in this palace."

"Mera—?"

"Of course," Darane went on, "I realize you had chosen her as a possible candidate. Otherwise you would not let her remain here when her proper place is so obviously in some village. But I know you. You have trepidations in these things. You put the matter off in the hopes that a new dawn will bring a wonderful new solution."

She looked up at him and spoke in a calm, almost purring tone. "But there is no sun. Each dawn is fainter than the last. You must provide your own solution, Egon. You must sacrifice the girl."

"That's enough of this," Egon said, with sudden anger. "There's time to at least look for another answer."

"So you look. But what if you find no other answer?"

"Whatever steps we take, we'll take them my way."

"Does that include human sacrifice if necessary?"

"Of course it does—if there's no other way." He turned to leave.

"It would be foolish," she said as his back was turned, "to fall in love with that little chit."

5

The Gathering Cloud

Day broke and a heavy cloud hung low above the forest to the east of the castle at the world's edge. And the hawk-eyed sentries of the castle walls saw stirrings among the sparse-leaved bushes and gaunt, twisted trees of the forest. The armies of Chaos were gathering to attack.

Egon busied himself preparing the defenses of his castle. From their storage places in the catacombs beneath the castle, arms and armor not used in years were brought out and distributed among the servants and householders lodged within the walls. Men-at-arms were positioned along the walls, armed with sword and spear and gun and cannon. Great tubs of oil were heated and readied to be brought to a boil if need be. The fields around the castle were kept clear, but there was no moat, no defense except the wall itself. Egon regretted this, but before today the walls had seemed sufficient.

All the while the cloud gathered and roiled above the forest, coming no closer than it was, but changing in a subtle way that suggested it was storing strength. Egon stood upon the wall and gazed across the open field to the woods where

the mistgaunts and changelings cowered and hid, organizing in their way for their attack upon the castle. He saw them not, save for occasional vagrant moves among the shadows of the wood. But he saw the cloud and knew he saw his enemy.

Toward noon, as scullery servants ladled food out to the assembled men-at-arms and impressed householders, Harthos came to the place where Egon stood.

"We're ready for them, my Lord," Harthos said. He stared out across the field. "That cloud. Their general?"

"Perhaps. But it's his army I'm afraid of."

"Mistgaunts and changelings," Harthos said with contempt. "The stuff of Chaos. They'll fight like animals with no strategy other than to kill or die."

"The stuff of Chaos—yes. But descended from men or animals. There's enough of Order in them to let them figure a plan of attack. They'll test us out, try to find our weaknesses. They'll be cunning. My guess is they'll wait until night to attack."

"We'll be ready for them," the giant said. "But what about the thing?"

He pointed at the cloud.

Egon nodded. "I know, Harthos. It can't come far from the world's brink. It's already come farther than I thought it could. But if it can gain power it might be able to reach the castle. But I can protect us against that with magic. The mistgaunts and the changelings will have to be handled with cold steel and hot oil."

"We're ready for them, My Lord, if your magic can keep that cloud from us."

Egon climbed down from the wall and started across the courtyard toward the tower.

As he reached the steps leading upward to his turret room, he heard Darane calling his name. He saw her running toward him.

Her face was flushed from running but in her eyes he saw the familiar cold hardness.

I have no time Darane. I've a spell to work."

"Does it require a sacrifice?"

"It's a spell to keep the cloud at bay during the battle."

"So—you still won't act?"

"I've no time to talk—"

"You have the magic at your hands, Egon. You could stop this thing now."

"I've no time!" he turned and started up the turret stairs.

She followed after him. He reached the top and entered his chamber.

"The spell is here," she said, going to the table. She searched through the sheets on which he had made his notes, until she found what she searched for. She held it out to him.

"Read it again," she said. "See what you could do—if you would!"

"I'll take a human life—when there's no choice."

"You know there's none. How many lives will be given on the walls while you waste time?"

"Darane—"

The rage mounting in Egon might have caused him to strike her, but at that moment a trumpet sounded from the wall.

"They aren't waiting until night," he said.

"Take Mera down into the catacombs and do the thing that will end this," Darane said.

"You're in my way—" He shoved her aside.

"There are other spells. Spells for Chaos, too. Some of them call for blood."

"There's no sorcerer to help Chaos. Now go."

"You are in love with her, aren't you?"

Her question puzzled Egon—for one thing, he wasn't certain of the answer. "Leave me to my work, Darane."

"If you don't act now, you'll never act. I'll see to it."

"I've no time for petty jealousies," he said. He took her roughly by the arm and propelled her toward the door.

"I've seen you talking with her," she said. "I've seen the way you look at her. You're letting Chaos win because you love her."

"I'll not sacrifice anyone until I know it's necessary."

"Fool—!"

Anger welled up in Egon. His hand lashed out before he realized what he was doing. His hand struck Darane's face with a loud, heavy slap that knocked her to the floor.

The pain brought tears to her eyes but she looked up at him, unblinking. There was hatred in her eyes as well as tears. "You'll regret that, Egon. You'll—"

"Get out," he said. He did not raise his voice. He did not have to.

Darane got to her feet and fled the turret room. Egon turned from the door and a moment later worked the spell.

6

Attack of the Mistgaunts

The first wave of mistgaunts broke from the trees and charged toward the castle without warning. Harthos gave a yell and trumpeters signaled the attack. The archers on the wall nocked their arrows to the strings.

On signal the arrows were loosed as the foremost mistgaunts neared the halfway point. The arrows rose and arched—for a moment they seemed to hover like the cloud that hovered above the wood.

Then they dropped to earth.

How many mistgaunts fell to that first rain no one had the time to count. Perhaps a third of them died or suffered wounds too serious for them to go on. But others were hit, yet ran on toward the walls with arrows protruding from arms, backs or shoulders or with wounds or grazings where arrows had struck without piercing.

Still they came.

The archers loosed another volley and more fell or were wounded. But before a third volley could be fired, the survivors had reached the castle wall.

Some carried ladders which they raised and tried to place against the castle walls. Others carried ropes with crudely fashioned grappling devices on the ends. The ropes were thrown and one or two of the grappling hooks caught on the battlement. Mistgaunts started up the ropes.

A thrown rock barely missed Harthos as he leaned forward to chop a climbing rope in two and send its passengers plummeting to the ground. He pulled back and looked up to see one of the ladders being toppled by a group of soldiers. But as he watched, he saw a rock smash one of the soldiers in the head. The man fell back and toppled after the mistgaunts.

"Oil!" Harthos shouted. "Fill this blasted gutter with oil for our enemies!"

A groove was cut in the base of the catwalk by the battlements. Oil boiled in pots set on gimboles along the walls. At Harthos' order, the castle blacksmith inserted a long iron brace as a fulcrum.

Oil spilled over the lip of the pot, into the groove.

It ran along the gutter. Other pots were tipped. Oil, steaming, boiling, filled the gutter the entire length of the castle wall.

At intervals there were small holes, leading from the gutter to the outer walls . . .

Oil spewed through openings like hot water from faucets. It spewed in cascades that drenched the climbing, milling mistgaunts.

From the attackers came a sudden, agonized cry. Harthos smiled, grimly.

He looked up. Over the wood, the cloud stirred and gathered. It moved.

Forward.

That was the moment that Egon, in the turret room, completed his spell.

The sky grew light. A spot in the greyness brightened.

The defenders of the walls looked up. It was almost as if the sun, that burning legendary thing of the day sky, were returning.

A strange cry rose up from the remaining mistgaunts, now withdrawn a safe distance from the oil-splattered walls. To Harthos, watching them from his vantage point, it seemed that the light frightened them. They were not, after all, creatures of the day—even the travesty of day that was typical of earth's dying years.

Harthos saw them turn and run.

He looked up at the sky. It was brighter, all right. But the sun had not returned—at least this brightness was not like the stories Harthos heard as a child about the disk of light so bright it blinded you to look on. But it was a light and light was Order.

Harthos looked back at the wood. The cloud was still there, but it no longer was coming forward.

7

Spell Against Chaos

The next attack came from the air.

Changelings. Creatures born of man or beast—but creatures whose birth defied the laws of Order.

These particular changelings were part man and part bird. Some were man-sized and roughly man-shaped, but feathered men with wings and talons and long sharp beaks. Others were more bird than man.

There were few of them, but they flew in at a height on the outskirts of arrow range. In clawed hands they carried sharpened sticks or pieces of stone which they hurled with indifferent accuracy, scoring few hits. But the archers on the castle wall killed none of them. The manbirds could return again and again, and rain rocks and spears down on the defenders, perhaps in conjunction with another attack. Harthos felt certain that Egon's Spell of Order would prevent night from falling, but Order was no longer strong. If Chaos overcame the light that protected the castle and the manbirds, with their nightbird's eyes, should attack under cover of darkness, the results would be disastrous.

Harthos gathered a dozen men, armed them with the castle's few remaining guns.

In these days of diminishing earth, there was little metal. No new guns had been made in centuries. Those that remained were cared for tenderly and protected with certain preservative spells.

When the manbirds returned, the guns, little more than muskets, welcomed them. Smoke billowed thickly on the castle battlements and thunder hurled missiles toward attackers. Most of the manbirds fell.

But not all. The survivors returned to wait with the other minions of Chaos.

And all this time, in his turret chamber, Egon worked.



He no longer copied out the spells as he came to them. He read each spell, each incantation, each thaumaturgy carefully, laboriously deciphering each one in his mind. And if it was not the spell he searched for, he turned the page and went on to the next.

The book was large. But he came to its end.

The spell—the second spell—was not there.

He closed the *Greatbook*. Darane was right.

There was but a single spell against Chaos, one that called for the spilling of human blood upon an altar. It called for human energy to bolster Order and give it the strength to win out over Chaos. Kohl had formulated the spell centuries ago, in the days when magic was at its peak. No one, since that

time, knew more about the basic workings of Order and Chaos than Kohl.

All that remained was for Egon to work the spell.

To sacrifice—

Who?

If he listened to Darane, it would be the girl Mera. She was young and healthy. Her strength and the strength of her life force was considerable. That was what was called for. She was the reasonable choice.

But human sacrifice . . . Egon hated the idea.

But there was no alternative. Someone would have to die.

Mera . . .

He left the tower. He stood on the balcony and surveyed the countryside.

Above the sky glowed with a brightness from his spell. But the cloud churned and roiled above the forest and he could tell that the brightness was already less than it had been.

All was quiet now. But on the walls his men-at-arms and his householders waited for attack. And in the wood, the enemy waited also.

Egon descended from the tower.

Harthos ran to his side. Egon could not recall seeing the big man move like that before—except in battle.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just got a report, Lord Egon. The girl Mera’s missing. The guard who was standing outside her chamber was found dead—knifed in the back. A small, jeweled knife such as a lady might fancy.”

“When?”

“Minutes ago. I ordered a search.”

“What about the Lady Darane? Is she all right?”

“No word, My Lord. You think she’s in danger?”

“Check on her. See to the search but don’t pull too many men off the walls. I’ll join in the search myself.”

“Yes, sir. Oh—sir—”

“Yes?”

“Have you found a way, sir? Against Chaos?”

“I’ve found a way,” Egon said.

He was unable to keep the grimness from his tone as he spoke.

8

Chaos Descends . . .

Harthos did not join the search. His place was on the wall, seeing to the castle’s defense.

Above the woods the cloud seemed to grow darker and the turbulence within it stirred and moved like an angry meal within a predator’s stomach. The light above the castle grew slightly fainter.

From the woods, suddenly, came a wave.

Mistgaunts, armed with sharpened sticks for hurling and jabbing. Some carried climbing ropes or ladders. All were armed with their own sharp talons.

Changelings, some in the form of man and animal, some in the form of man and bird, some even in the form of man and insect. Some were in other forms.

It was a great massing of the enemies of Order. They suddenly emerged from the wood and streamed across the fields. The manbirds flew high and at a distance beyond arrow

range, moving in slow drifting circles that made them poor targets for the guns.

Oil bubbled in pots and cauldrons at every station on the castle ramparts. Harthos ordered the trumpets to sound the attack signal. He raised his hands toward the archers. Half a hundred arrows pointed toward the sky. The cloud above the wood darkened and seemed to rumble.

Harthos dropped his hands. The arrows flew. The sky darkened with their pause before dropping to the ground. But though most of the arrows struck targets, the army came on. Harthos ordered another flight of arrows, then another.

The army reached the wall despite its heavy losses. Climbing ropes snaked to the battlements and grappling devices snagged on stone. Ladders fell against the top of the walls. Mistgaunts and changelings started up. A scalding shower of oil spewed from the openings along the castle walls.

Thus was the battle joined. As attackers died, new waves of the creatures of Chaos swept forward to replace them . . .

Beneath the castle were the catacombs.

Their origin was lost in the obscurities of the sorcerous history of Egon’s ancestors. Perhaps at first they had been nothing more than a burial ground, but with time the galleries had served darker purposes. Egon made his way through passages toward the most infamous of the underground chambers.

The ceiling of that chamber was low as if the earth itself sought to press down and hide the secrets of the place. But the chamber was large and roughly round, with many tunnels and passages streaming from it like spokes from a hub. The chamber was empty of furnishing but for a rough-hewn altar in the center. Torches, set in brackets around the gallery, were providing flickering, uncertain light when Egon arrived. But not so uncertain that Egon could not see Darane standing before the altar. Or Mera, unconscious upon it.

Darane turned and looked at Egon as he entered the chamber. Her hand came down and the blade of her knife pressed against the white, exposed throat of Mera.

“Don’t come any closer, Egon, or she dies.”

“Her death won’t mean a thing. You haven’t the power or the skill to work Kohl’s spell.”

“I know. Only you are wizard enough for that. But would you?”

“Of course. There’s no other way.”

“The sting of your slap still burns upon my face.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means there are other spells—spells I can work.”

“You, Darane? A pact with Chaos? It would destroy everything—even you.”

“The pact would have advantages for me. I would not be destroyed. Nor would certain other things—over which I would have absolute control.”

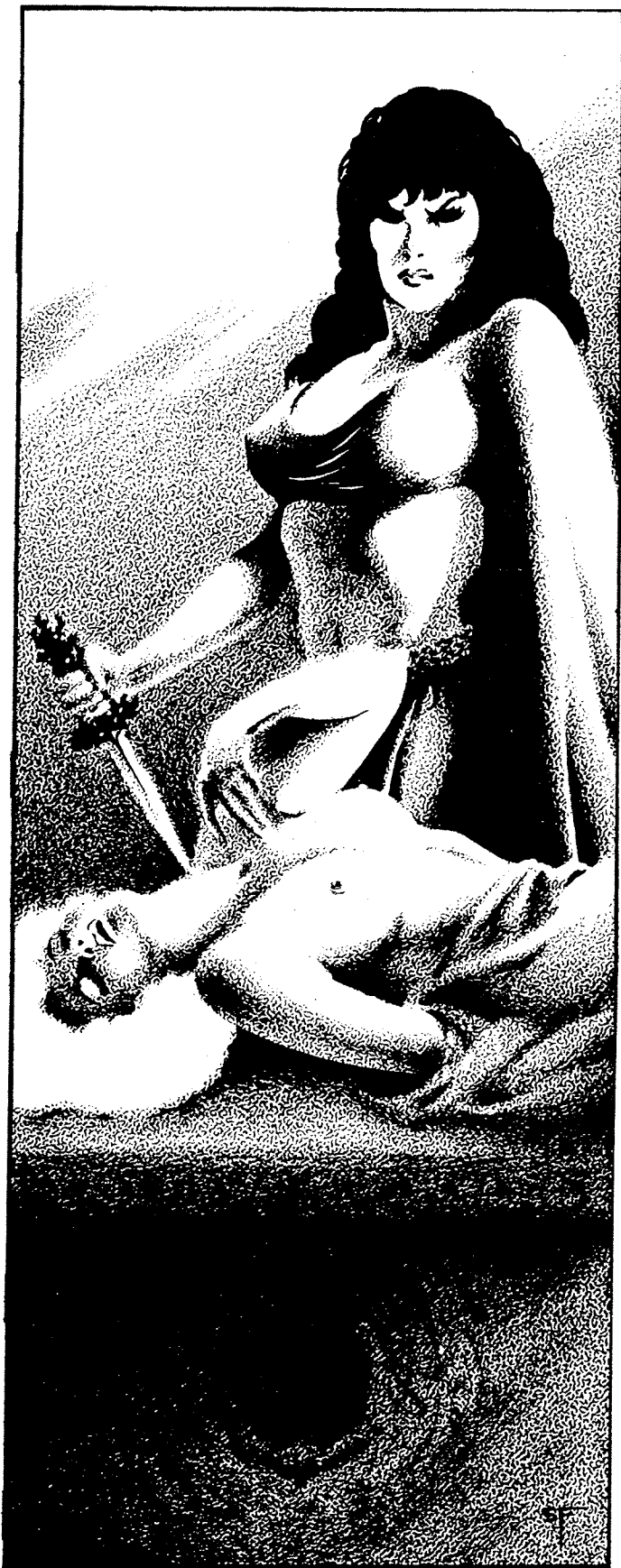
Egon moved toward the altar.

“Stop!” Her knife hand moved menacingly but the blade did not slice flesh.

“I’ve already made the preliminary moves. Chaos and I are one now. All that remains is the blood.”

“Don’t be a fool—”

“You were the fool. You should have acted, Egon. Now it’s too late. My presence here gives Chaos strength. The spell has begun! When Chaos comes, I kill the girl. And I’ll have my



pact. And I'll have you, Egon. For all eternity. Not as I wanted you, perhaps, but as a plaything, a toy. A pet, a poppet. A thing to torment and seek revenge upon for the rest of time!"

Egon moved forward again.

"No!" she shouted. The edge of the knife touched Mera's neck. A faint line of blood formed beneath the blade.

Egon froze.

"It's better if I wait for Chaos to come. But I can kill her now. Chaos will be angered if he has to receive the blood sacrifice at a distance, but at least he'll receive it."

"Darane—"

"It's too late to plead. Too late to beg, Egon. Look—"

In the mouth of one of the tunnels that adjoined the chamber, a cloud was forming.

The cloud gathered mass and strength and form to itself. From it, like heat radiated from a fire, Egon could feel a cold dry wind. The touch of Chaos. The cloud grew.

It grew, filling the tunnel mouth and spilling out into the chamber toward the altar. Darane made a sound like a small whimper of ecstasy. She clasped the knife in both hands, raised it above her head, point down, to plunge to the breast of the unconscious girl.

Egon leaped.

He moved with a speed he did not know he was capable of. He jumped for Darane and his weight carried her to the ground. She screamed. The knife fell from her hands. Egon hit her once, hard, on the jaw. She went limp.

There was no time to be gentle. Egon shoved Mera across the altar. She rolled to the edge, fell to the chamber floor. He bent and scooped Darane into his arms and dumped her on the altar.

There was no time to arrange her limbs correctly; position of the subject was not essential to the success of the spell. What was essential was that the spell be worked—the *proper* spell—

Which called for a sacrifice.

Mera—or Darane.

Egon bent for the knife, found it, raised it above his head. He remembered the words. They were burned in his mind, like something branded there. He spoke them. Spoke them quickly, but plainly, missing no syllable, no inflection, no intonation.

The cloud stirred, angry, frightened. Chaos reached cold fingers for him.

He finished the words. He brought down the knife, plunged it home.

His aim was true. Blood welled up from the victim, bathing the knife, his hands and arms. The cloud reached him.

Dry sterile cold leeches at his life.

Egon cried out with the pain of it and with a fear the likes of which he had never known before. He left the knife in the sacrifice and leaped away from the cloud. He fell to the ground, the cold still in him like a sickness in his bones. He tried to get to his feet, but couldn't. The cloud moved toward him.

Then came the light.

It burst like an exploding rocket. The cold seemed to melt away as strength returned. Egon got to his feet and moved around the altar.

Face to face were the primal enemies. Light and darkness, good and evil. By how many names had they been called? Order and Chaos faced each other as they always must. This time they faced each other in the gallery beneath the castle at the edge of the world.

Egon did not wait to see the struggle. He turned and gathered Mera in his arms and fled the chamber, into the long passageway to the exit from the catacombs.

In the courtyard, there was darkness.

Egon could hear the sounds of battle and dying from the wall and around him. The spell had failed, of course, so that Chaos could come to collect its sacrifice. That was Darane's doing. And in that moment, Egon realized, the enemy had managed under the cover of darkness to breach the walls. Now there was fighting all around him. He heard the death cries of the castle's defenders and the hideous screams of the mistgaunts and changelings.

There was torchlight. A handful of men, Harthos among them, stood in a circle, surrounded by mistgaunts. The men held torches which the mistgaunts feared almost as much as they feared swords. In a bracket on a nearby wall a torch burned. Egon threw Mera across his shoulder, leaving one arm free. He darted to the torch and plucked it from its bracket before the mistgaunts were upon him.

He waved the torch in arcs before him as he made his way toward the band of men. But the mistgaunts were bold and it was necessary to shove the flaming torch into the face of one of them before Egon reached his men.

He dropped the unconscious girl to the ground within the circle formed by the men. He drew his sword and turned to face the creatures that surrounded them.

The earth trembled.

It trembled as it trembled on the edge itself as Chaos takes a bite. It trembled as the world must have trembled in those ancient days when Order was still forming it.

The mistgaunts fell away—but only for a moment. They renewed their attack. Egon shouted a formless shout at them and readied his sword to taste blood.

The torch in Egon's hand seemed to gather light.

The glow of the fire grew. The flame's brightness intensified.

Darkness lifted from the courtyard.

A panic ran among the changelings like a plague. Uncertainly, they turned as if looking for the darkness that had lifted. A murmur of fear rose up from them.

And from the ground there rose a light.

It was bright—terribly bright. Egon shielded his eyes with his arm and turned his head from the brilliance of it. The mistgaunts and changelings screamed and howled in utter fear. The brightness rose and lifted above the castle.

The brightness lessened, but a new feeling of strength, of *rightness* remained. Egon took his arm away from his eyes.

The light beat down upon the minions of Chaos. They cried out in pain and terror as patches on their pasty skin turned dark and crisp and the creatures began to wither. The stench of their dying assailed the nostrils of Egon.

Moments later it was over.

The walls and yards of the castle were littered with dead. But the halls and towers had not been invaded. There were plenty left alive to build. Egon had Mera taken to her chambers. She would sleep but when she woke she would be untouched by the horror that had threatened her. And Egon would have much to talk with her about.

With Harthos, Egon went to the wall and stared to the east.

There was the field. There was the forest.

There was the sky. Blue, not grey. Beyond the forest there was a haze, but not the haze of Chaos. The blue, distant haze of mountains. New land to explore, new streams and oceans to sail. A new, remade world, waiting to be populated.

"Look," said Harthos. He pointed up.

There was a brightness in the sky, like the brightness that had risen from the ground. It was too bright to stare at. To do so would blind you.

"The sun is back," Harthos said.

Egon descended from the wall. The sun was back, he thought. Tonight the sky would be back not with fog, but with a good, clear sky.

How long, he wondered, before the stars returned?



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GOLA'S HELL BY EMIL PETAJA



Painting by HANNES BOK

GOLA'S HELL

by Emil Petaja

Illustrated by R. Edwards Jennings

Gola's Hell was his own talent—and it could put him back in the hands of the one man he hated most.

THE THING creeping out of the mists had once been human if it now was not. Yet there was about it the taint of the utterly alien. When the shrouds of fog sifted back so that he could half see its face, Martin repressed a whimper. What lurked behind those eyes involved an eldritch terror old when the world was new and steaming with pitiless horrors. The thing moved forward inexorably. Panic welled in Martin's throat. Because he had to make some kind of sound to disperse such power to terrify he coughed a rasping cough, instead of screaming. He shivered and gripped the arms of his custom-made chair.

"That will do, Saunders. Kill it. Let's have some light, on the subject. And Saunders, before you go, trip the drapes."

"Very well, sir." Saunders was old and servile. He looked and acted like a butler from an old English or pseudo-English melodrama. And well he might. He had played the part so well even as a young man, on the screen. Now he was playing it for real in Martin Chase's French-Spanish-Arabic palace high in the Hollywood Hills. It paid off far better than the bit parts ever had, and if "the master" was irascible at regular intervals, there were no payless waits between parts.

The heavy imported brocade moved back like molten gold. Far below a million busy lights twinkled. The streaming freeways were braids of diamond necklaces at this postprandial hour. For once the smog had relented and you could see stars.

"It's nice to see the open sky after *that*," Saunders ventured, indicating the beaded screen gliding into the panels of Martin Chase's private nostalgia haven.

Martin grunted and shifted his heavy bulk enough to refill the brandy glass at his elbow.

"Bron Gola had it, all right."

"Indeed so. Those eyes! It was as if they were small windows overlooking Hell itself." After all, servant or not, Saunders had lived through the same exciting early years of the cinema as his old master had. He enjoyed Martin's lonely nostalgia bouts, too. They'd been at opposite poles socially and financially then, and were now; yet there was nevertheless an unspoken bond. When Martin's heavy jowls moved up and down, he went on: "Gola was a true master of the macabre, if I may say so."

"Why not, Saunders?" Martin chuckled. "Every hack movie magazine writer used that phrase at least once every month

back in the early Thirties." His thick eyebrows met in a scowl of perplexed satisfaction. "Bron Gola was my biggest star. One of them, anyway. He had it, all right. What he had exactly is questionable, but the boobs ate it up, whatever it was."

"Fascination of the Unknown?" Saunders suggested. "You know, sir, there's quite a cult forming around Gola these days. With all the new interest in the early stars."

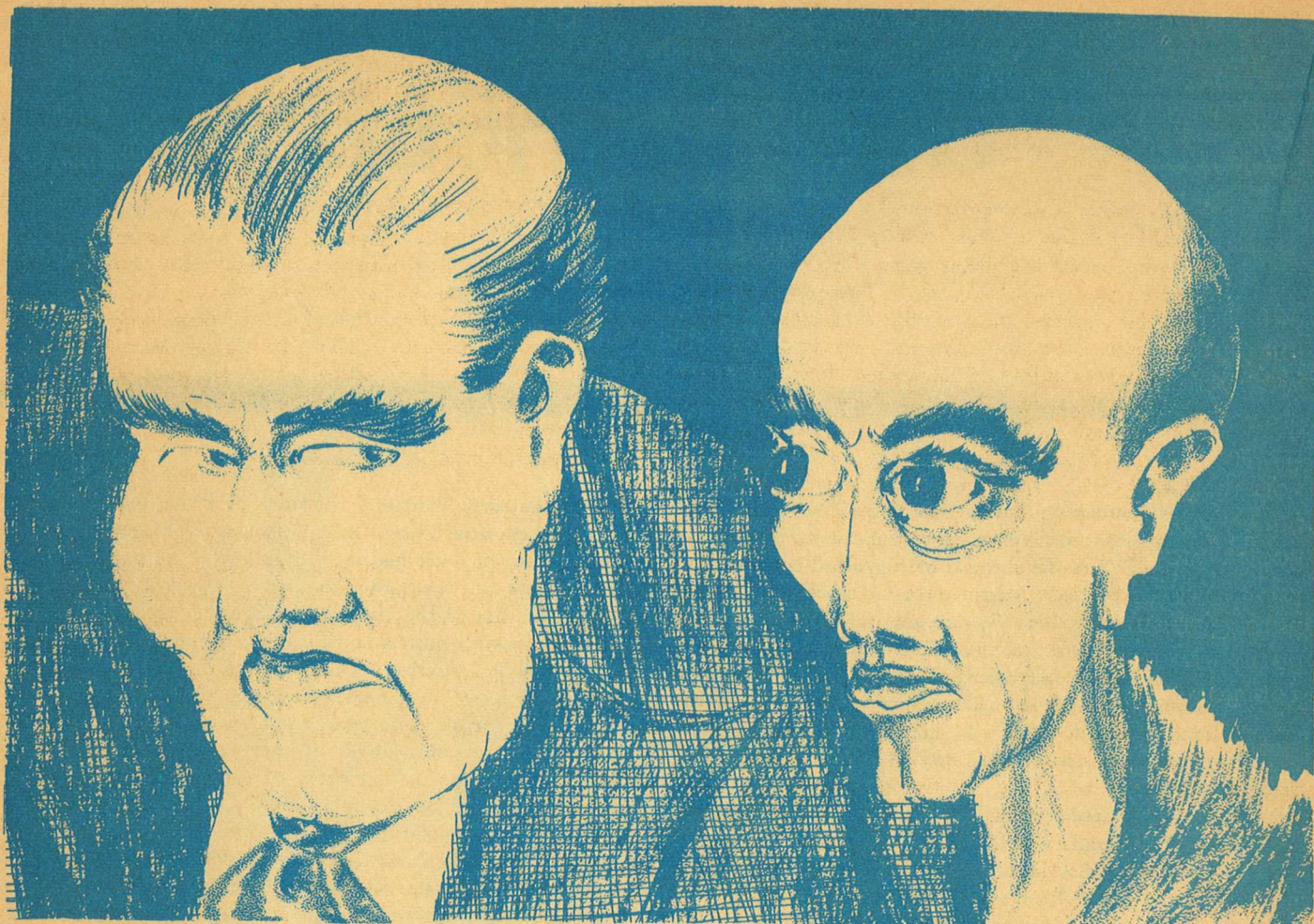
Martin's scowl deepened as he sipped. *Cult-schmult. No money in it for me, who put Bron Gola on the map. Showing pirate prints of his movies in every clandestine back-alley "classics" fleabag! Calling them "Film Societies"!* Not that Martin Chase needed any more money. His canny stocks and real estates manipulations brought him close to a million a year. But stars like Bron Gola and Elsa Dream had been in his pocket all those years; he had owned them, body and soul. It burned him up not to rake in the piddling residuals brought on by this new wave of interest in what had seemed dead and buried.

"If only Bron Gola had finished that last picture!" Saunders exclaimed. "Why, I was reading only this morning how—"

"That will be all, Saunders," Martin barked. "Shut the door on your way out."

He groped for the cigar he had lighted when the rough-cut reel of Gola's unfinished "monsterpiece"—that's what the publicity department had touted it as—began. That Martin Chase loved his gourmet food was evident from what his aging bones were forced to carry around on them. These days, with no studioful of sycophants to crack the whip over, such delicacies, and fine brandy and fine cigars, were all that was left. That his involvement with Gola's hypnotic hint of Hell had reduced his smuggled-in Havana to long white ash on the tray was no small tribute to the vanished horror star's extraordinary talent.

He reached a new cigar out of the silver box and bit the end off savagely. He lit it carefully. While he puffed, he glared out at the new Hollywood down there. Once upon a time, the town had been his oyster. Those were the days. Now every two-bit apple knocker who came to town and made it could demand a piece of his films, and get it. The impudence of such a situation raised his blood pressure and flanged his



purple-veined nostrils. They'd never tried that on him! His sneer was for no-goods. Serve them right if somebody did push the big button.

A sudden thought lightened the anger in his eyes and he reached inside his jacket for the letter. He had it half out when he saw her standing in the pillared doorway to the hall and barn-size foyer.

"Well?" he snapped. "What do you want?"

Standing there in the shadow in that vivid psychedelic dress (it didn't really suit her, but anything new and wild made Martin apoplectic and that's really why she bought it) Elsa Dream Chase, Nee Elsie Kramble, seemed almost beautiful. When she moved further into the light, brandishing a water glass half-filled with dinner champagne, it was obvious that the pitiful illusion was the result of hours in the beauty salons and at her studio-type makeup table. She was thin, which helped. Only now the childlike willowyness was lurching lankness. Because Martin ate like a pig, she picked at her plates. These were her small defiances. She had made her choice, bought her star, a long time ago. She was still paying for it. Where could she go now?

Martin's stare was surly and contemptuous.

"I see you drink your champagne out of a water glass now."

"It's bigger." She giggled.

"After dinner one drinks brandy or at least a fine Spanish port." His laugh cracked. "You're still the hick I plucked out from behind that ribbon counter in Kansas City."

"I like champagne," Elsa said, defensively. "It does for me what sitting here every night watching your vaultful of old Titan flicks does for you. Another Martin Chase triumph! *Bull*. You had nothing, Martin. Only the greed. Only the capacity for keeping other peoples' noses to the grindstone, while you raked in all the money. Well, they're dead and gone, most of them. And here you sit like God Almighty—"

"You're drunk!" he snapped. "Shut up and go to bed!"

"In a minute. After I tell you off."

"Elsie—" He used her old name on purpose. "I'm warning you—"

"I saw who you were watching, Martin. I peeked in and saw. You were watching Bron. Why? Why, Martin? Are you still gloating about taking me away from Bron?"

"I didn't take you away from anybody. I picked a ten-a-week little nobody out of a Woolworth's store in Kansas City and made her—"

"Made her, is right, Martin. Made her what you wanted her to be. A simple-minded slavey. But you couldn't do that to Bron Gola! Oh, no. Bron was too much of a true genius. Too big for you. He ran his pictures to suit himself. He put himself into every phase of his horror classics, from the original story

idea right down the line into the cutting room. You despised him. You would have fired him a hundred times. Only he was a dedicated man and by some quirk none of us could understand—especially you—he made his weird brand of genius stick. Stick and make money. Not for *him*, of course! Oh, no! You saw to that when you got him to sign that iron-fist ten year contract.”

“You helped on that, if you remember.”

“Sure. I was just stupid enough. A silly little nitwit with stars in my eyes, flattered by being noticed by the Big Man. Hell, you even *married* me to keep me at Titan when I was a naive big-eyed chit and the fans went for my big eyes and my funny awkward bits of business. You knew it wasn’t acting. It was *me*. Of course it couldn’t last. Not after I found out what you and your dirty damn world was all about! Not after you did what you did to me and Bron!”

“It was your idea to keep our marriage secret.”

“Was it, Martin? Was it really my idea, or was it you forcing me to pick up the card you wanted me to pick up again?” She gave a low strangled sob and sipped from her glass to choke it down. “I wanted Bron near me, even then. I needed him. I needed what his eyes told me every time we crossed paths on the lot. I needed that hunger. To the others I was some kind of a meal-ticket symbol. Not to Bron. And you killed him when you got mad at him that day and told him. The day he walked off the lot on that last picture and never came back. It was three-quarters finished. You thought he would swallow his deep hurt and finish the picture. After all the ballyhoo, being the earnest, dedicated, 100% creative genius he was.” She sobbed again and drank again. This time she finished off the glass. Her eyes on his were glazed and sullen. “You killed him, Martin. You killed Bron Gola!”

After she ran off upstairs, stopping only long enough to scoop up another bottle of champagne, Martin sat glowering off into the black sky through the huge window. The stars were gone now. Storm clouds were boiling up from Santa Monica and the ocean. The threatening aspect of the scene, the inevitability of midnight, suggested one of Gola’s pictures. There was usually a storm. Thunder and lightning lashing the strange set. Not always. But usually. It was as if the old myth-demons operated better on such nights. Surely the box offices operated better!

Bron Gola was indeed a weird one.

Where had he come from? Nobody knew exactly. He was never a big mouth, nor did he mingle with the Hollywood crowd. For years he had been one of the lost faces in the crowd scenes and itty-bit scenes. Then one day somebody indispensable to the day’s expense shooting had to be rushed to the hospital with peritonitis. The desperate director grab-bagged the hopeful lineup of extras and picked Bron. There was something about those eyes, he said. . .

Gola moved up like a skyrocket. He was not any easy man to work with. He knew exactly how every scene ought to be played and Indian wrestled his directors down every time, in a softly insistent way that had them tearing their hair. He poked into every phase of his pictures. He drove the technical staff crazy with impossible demands. But the results were there on the screen and in the box office. Martin got more complaints about Bron Gola than about all the temperamental females in his star stable put together. He grew to hate Bron with an icy

loathing that was all the more poignant because he couldn’t eat him out the way he did all the others. Bron Gola was too valuable. And too specialized.

Bron Gola was a phenomenon, a oncer.

And, like Elsa said, he worked cheap. This was *his* price for being permitted impossibly wide latitude in all areas of production of those horror masterpieces that socked the public right between the eyes.

Bron chose to live alone (?) up in some eagle’s eyrie at lonely end of Topanga Canyon. In those days it was indeed lonely up there. Martin kept hearing rumors that the horror star dabbled in black magic and consorted with demons and dwerfers and God-knows-what. Of course Martin hid his cynical grins. What it all added up to was good publicity. It gave the Titan prod-boys something “different” to talk about. As for giving any portion of it credence-room in his important money-making brain, are you kidding?

Nevertheless. . .

He remembered the letter and pulled it out of his pocket, all the way this time. And as he did, he looked around him furtively. He wasn’t sure whether it was because he might be laughed at for not crumpling it up and forgetting it—or because (like those seemingly casual bits of secret information that used to come his way now and then in the old days) it smelled of money. *Scoop! Martin Chase returns in triumph!*

He put on his reading glasses and read it over very, very carefully.

Dear Martin:

You thought I was dead, didn’t you? Surprise! I am up here in San Francisco. Why haven’t you heard from me before? You know why. I loved Elsa. Not your kind of love, Martin. For me Elsa was the only woman there would ever be, or could ever be. You know me, Martin. It was like my films. There was only one way to do it and if it couldn’t be that way it couldn’t be, period.

I realized when I walked out on that picture, striking back at you the only way that ever mattered to you—through your pocketbook—I was dead in Hollywood. No producer would trust me again, and then there was that ten-year contract with five years still to go. Five years is forever in Hollywood.

What have I been doing? This, that, and the other. Anything to keep body and soul together long enough to do what my compulsion told me I had to do. What, Martin? Don’t you know? Can’t you guess? Finish that picture, of course! My “monsterpiece”. I had to do that. I couldn’t even die until I had seen “The End” on that final and most important film of my “quixotic career”, as they called it. Completing it took a bit of doing, I must say. Especially singlehanded. Luckily, all the techniques I had learned at Titan come in handy now as never before. What I did was to get a job with a San Francisco pornography studio, doing everything from scripting, cutting, printint—incognito, of course. I used their equipment to complete my monsterpiece.

Where do you come in, Martin? Where you always did. It isn’t enough to have finished the picture, Martin.

Somebody has to SEE it. Who else but you? You are the only man alive to whom it means as much as it does to me. You and me, Martin. You and me. Never mind how much our reasons differ.

So come on up to San Francisco, Martin. The address is hard to find but you'll find it. It could mean money to you, Martin. Money! Sounds good, doesn't it? Like old times? As for myself, putting even food money into the picture, I have no time left at all, you might say. So hurry, Martin. Don't write. Come. Even if the money doesn't matter (which I doubt) that unfinished "monsterpiece" must have eaten away at you all these years, too.

Bron.

The address was scribbled down at the bottom of the handwritten letter. It was Bron's writing, all right. Martin had made a point of checking samples in old files when the Special Delivery arrived. A bit shakier than the samples, as if Bron was indeed on his last legs. But Bron to the life. Honest. Blunt. Sardonic. Nobody else on earth could have written it. Nobody but Bron Gola would have starved himself all these years, gone through seventeen kinds of hell and humiliation to complete his final opus. It was like Michaelangelo killing himself to finish the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel; like Mozart, undergoing all the degradation and sorrow in the world to create what had to come out of him. Martin had no patience with such singleminded idiocies, but he was willing to use them for his own purposes. Yes, Bron was right. Martin had to see the completion of Gola's final hell-epic. He had to remove the thorn from his flesh. Already he saw the brilliantly lighted marquees of Carthay Circle and New York's Paramount. *Martin Chase Finds Lost Masterpiece! Martin Chase Does It Again!*

No need to explain to anyone why this sudden trip to San Francisco via Western Airlines, least of all to Elsa. Elsa's singleminded interest these days centered in an endless series of Mumm's bottles. Martin's comings and goings were less than important. It behooved her to stay clear of him, after last night's rare outburst. He might decide to leave all his money to Saunders, or something.

There were a number of business matters to see to, and Martin woke up even later than usual, thanks to a toss-and-turn night mulling over this incredible turn of events, so it was one-forty when his jet lifted off the Burbank runway, and almost four P.M. by the time the circling plane was permitted to set down at socked-in San Francisco International.

He took no luggage. Planes flew between L.A. and San Francisco on an hourly basis these days. His intention was to make straight for the address Bron had scribbled on his letter, view a bit of the completion, give Bron a check, and return home by a late evening plane with (hopefully) two or three cans of original negative film under his arm. Nobody would even know he had gone, much less what matters of pith and moment this casual trip of his portended.

The November fog was a wet one. Martin winced and sidled his gross body into a raincoat as he moved out of the airport into the whirling mists of the curved overhand where Yellow Cabs were being inched up to the toe line for filling and then plummeting down the wide wet ramp toward the Bayshore



Freeway. Martin's bulk and natural aggressiveness won him a cab against all comers, and when a desperate couple who had to make a San Francisco connection begged to share it, he waded them away with a fine scowl.

The cabbie shrugged and shot forward with practiced ease. "Where to?"

They never said "sir" any more.

"San Francisco, of course."

"Sure. But where? Lots of turn offs before you get downtown."

"I don't want to go downtown."

"Where do you want to go?" The cabbie asked patiently.

Martin rattled the letter out of his pocket. "Lemune Way, Number 13."

"Lemune Way. Never heard of it."

"You are obviously new around the Bay Area."

"New! I was born in the Outer Mission, Vienna Street. I know all the areas of San Fran from the Embarcadero to the Sunset, backwards and forwards. Never heard of Lemune Way."

"Suppose you check it on your map. You do have a street guide of some sort, I suppose?"

"Latest Thomas Bros. out."

He wheeled the cab off Bayshore at the Army Street turnoff and braked in the first available off-street to thumb through a thick "Street Guide to San Francisco." His minor

frown of irritation at his fat fare's sarcastic comments about his not knowing his business became a heavy blush of bafflement.

"No such street, pal. Somebody gave you a bum steer."

Martin made a caustic suggestion about the cabbie asking somebody, but the likelihood of stumbling on anyone who would know when he didn't, not to mention the humiliation of a born-in-San Francisco cabbie asking his way around brought a sullen blush to the driver's solid neck; with a sudden plunging motion he brought the cab back up on the skyway and shot downtown, leaving him off in front of the Hilton Hotel.

"Sorry, pal," he grudged, when Martin gave him a ten and waved away the change.

Martin went in the Hilton bar and ordered a drink. While he sipped and glowered out at the gathering dusk—all those people hurrying through fog and knowing where they were going—that curious line in the last paragraph of Bron's letter kept running through his mind. *The address is hard to find but you'll find it. It could mean money . . .* He brushed aside the slurs that money was the only thing that mattered to him. That he would go to hell and back for a buck. He was used to such talk, inured to it. Fact was, Martin was proud of his ability to outfox people on all levels when it came to money. In his view it was *the* talent. If Bron Gola had indeed completed that last super-horror picture, Martin wanted it. He wanted it bad. And this time it wasn't only the money. Bron's walk-out on his last and presumably his best opus had caused an enormous stir in the papers at the time. Now, with the resurgence of interest in old and oldish movies, to issue it whole and complete—Bron Gola's monsterpiece—was sure to make Martin a packet of money to add to his invisible mountain; and not only that, it would remove that old, old canker permanently from his gut.

He ordered another drink and asked the polite greyhaired waiter if he knew where Lemune Way was. He didn't. Martin sighed and sipped and watched the evening crowd hurry past the window through the gathering storm. It was raining now and the wind blew heavily down from Nob Hill.

The address is hard to find but you'll find it. Odd. If he wanted Martin to find it (obviously he did, or he wouldn't have written at all) why not provide a few clues?

Eying the generous tip on his tray (Martin could be lavish with peanuts when there were tens of thousands within reach) the greyhaired waiter offered, "Why not try the Downtown Airport information desk, sir. It's just around the corner. They'd know about Lemune Way, I'm sure. They get all kinds of requests. They *have* to know, don't you think so, sir?"

Martin puffed up on his feet and smiled. He had needed just that, a nudge in the right direction. Of course the Downtown Airport people would know. He moved out onto O'Farrell Street and lurched through the rain toward the brightly lighted doors a block up.

They didn't though. The Information man checked the big map on the wall behind him, then yelled to someone at another counter; soon five or six got in the act, to no avail. Turning brusquely away from the confusion of misinformation, Martin felt a hand on his arm.

"I know where Lemune Way is, man."

Martin glared.

He was a hippie-type, the unwashed kind, lank hair hanging down from under a greasy plastic-visored cap, ragged brown beard, steel-rim glasses, motley-patched jeans, the works.

Martin removed his arm from under the dirty fingernails. He moved toward the street doors. The hippie trailed after.

"As a matter of fact," the hippie-type said, "I was asked to keep an eye out for a dude who'd be asking for Lemune Way tonite sometime. A weird cat with yellow eyes who bought a Shaft from me—" indicating the tabloid size papers with the sexy covers under his arm, "—asked would I keep an eye out. He gave me all the dope on how to get there. It ain't on any map. Matter of fact it's not really a street yet, till they tear



down that old house and a bunch of trees, which they're going to do starting next mbnth, the cat said."

Martin grunted. "All right. Tell me—"

The hippie showed his tartared teeth. "Twenty bucks. He said you'd give me twenty bucks."

Martin drew back. "How do I know this isn't a—a put-on? A racket of some kind?"

The hippie shrugged elaborately. "So I come up there with you in the cab. Went there once already on my bike. Got curious, he was such a strange looking cat. This morning. It's a mess up there. One of those old mansions. A retired architect

built it, like they say, piecemeal. Spread all over the hill. Crazy. Full of wild staircases and built-in conservatories full of busted glass. Supposed to be haunted. Nobody's lived there in more'n twenty years, one of the old neighbor dudes watering his petunias told me. The squirrel who build it died and his wife won't live there. Take a mint to fix up, so down it goes. And when they tear down the tangles of trees around it and build apartments it gives a little new street the caretaker with howling dogs named Lemune, dig."

"Caretaker?"

"The cat with the yellow eyes. Name's Brand, or like that."
"Bron?"

"If you say so." He pointed at the cab line moving jerkily forward in the rain like yellow and red beetles. "Twenty bucks? Right?"

Martin nodded.

The cab wound up over the Twin Peaks tunnels in the direction of St. Francis Wood, maneuvering the foggy twists falteringly to the hippie's colorful yells. It pulled up before a high iron gate between masses of unclipped trees and rampant shrubbery behind which turrets and gables could be vaguely glimpsed as a series of ascending uphill steps. A sign read "Clarendon".

"Are you sure this is it?" Martin asked, before stepping out into the whining rain.

"Sure," the hippie said. "Twenty bucks, please. And five for the hack."

There was a heavy padlock on the iron gate, but when Martin moved closer he saw that it only seemed to engage the hole in the old gate's hardware; actually it had been locked in such a way as to hide the fact that the gate was not locked at all; in case of intruding passerbys, doubtful on such a wild night. Left unlocked for *him*?

Martin pushed the gate open and strained his eyes through the tangle of unkept garden. The driving rain made stealthy noises against the shuddering leaves. The wind added branch-groans. And now the dogs the hippie spoke of began to yelp and howl, having heard the rasping sound the gate made when he pushed it open.

It was all very much like a Bron Gola horror movie. The ancient, reputedly haunted house. The choked garden. The creaking gate. And now the howling dogs.

Martin's lips forced themselves down in a characteristic twist of contempt for such obvious devices. Yes. Bron had set the stage, all right. Somehow he had found about this old house and wormed in as caretaker. The loneliness, the sleeping-beauty tangles, even the "ghosts", suited him. No doubt Bron considered it a fine irony to fetch Martin here like this, making sure he arrived at an hour not long before midnight. Yet...

He shivered and peered through the rain for the way in. Having come this far, he would not go back now. Certainly he would not let such trappings as these frighten him. Martin Chase was a stubborn man. At least as stubborn as Bron Gola. At opposite poles, they nevertheless made a pair. If there *was* a valuable movie ending to be had—and, whatever else, Bron had an honest streak in him a mile wide—Martin was determined to have it. He hadn't come this far and been flim-flammed at every turn for nothing.

Shuffling forward through the squishing wet, he found two ways in. The front way, leading to a long veranda and a shadowy front door. Very imposed. But unused in years. The path to the falling-down steps was all but obliterated by choking weeds and the slashed "X" of boards that sealed off the front door was like a script-editor's cancelation of a full page.

The other way twisted furtively under the thick trees around the rear. There was a vague hint of official meddling. Of brush-slashings and preliminary digging in. As he moved along it, Martin stubbed against surveying pegs set in a line that was straight when the winding path was not. This, then, was Lemune Way. Would it stick? Why not. If that was all the city officials had to go on and the caretaker (for years, no doubt) said it was Lemune Way and said it with conviction, it probably would. Names like this were arrived at in peculiar ways, often silly ways, and this cul-de-sac was hardly important enough to quibble about.

It took him some time to grope his way to the shoulder-high board fence and the dutch-door gate. The dogs were setting up a wild deep-throated racket by this time. There was light issuing between the board cracks, and quite suddenly, just as Martin reached the gate, the top half of the gate came open.

"Welcome, Martin! Come in, come in!"

Martin blinked and stared. The face hovering in the nervous half-light above the rear yard was pale and sunken, and so thin he had the feeling that from certain angles it would disappear entirely. Where Martin had put on weight, Bron had taken it off in proportion. As if—as if—all these years Martin's gross bulk was draining off the very life of Bron Gola, in some supernatural fashion. Those not-quite-human yellow eyes burned into Martin's eyes with an intensity that was like a prayer of thanks to some strange god that he had really come.

Martin's mouth twitched. He knew, now. All these years Bron had lived in poverty. Abject poverty. Bron's esoteric talents had all been left back in Hollywood. Peculiar as he was, with those frightening yellow eyes, he'd be hard put to it to get any kind of a normal job. He had no talent for life itself beyond creating horror. That pornography studio he mentioned in the letter had hired him because he would do anything they asked of him, and cheap. It would take a quasi-legal or downright illegal enterprise to tolerate such a creepy character at all.

Martin floated a smile. Yes. Bron was desperate. Hungry. It burned out of those cat's eyes of his. The eagerness, the leaping joy, sprang from purely physical need. Martin smiled; then, out of decency, hid it. He liked them hungry. Always had.

Bron opened the lower half of the gate.

"Come on in, Martin. Out of the rain."

Martin eyed the leaping, yelping dogs. They were huge. Huge and black, and they had yellow eyes, too.

"Don't worry, they don't bite. Not unless I—" Bron broke off and gave the hounds a sharp command in some heathen tongue, as if they had but lately immigrated here from some dark land across strange oceans. The black hounds loped back to the shelter of a lean-to shed connected to a small rear house that was probably the caretaker's.

Bron led the way to the rear door of the big house. It was open. Following the ragged, emaciated figure down the musty dark hall, Martin wrinkled his nose up at the detestable odors. Termites had been at this house. Rats, too. And yet the most appalling scent of all came from Bron himself. Age and filth and his peculiar capacity for *being one with horror* had created a miasmatic aura of unnameable diabolerie that was all but intolerable. It was as if Bron Gola had, through thirty years of constant association with facets of existence repulsive to the normal mind, *become* what he had pictured on the screen early in his life. He had been so fiercely dedicated to the presentation and personification of horror that it had taken him over completely.

Martin yearned to cut and run. To feel the clean rain of heaven on his face again. To get away from this gagging, choking, pervading stench that was pure horror. Then he thought about the dogs, those huge black hell-hounds back there in the lean-to. Would they let him leave? Would Bron let him?

He moved on up the narrow servants' staircase where light filtered sickly down. He had to. His very footsteps matched Bron's, tread for tread.

"Here we are."

Bron's grin was professionally sardonic and ghoulish as he directed Martin into what appeared to have been at one time an elegant upstairs ballroom. It was from this great oblong gulf that the light emanated. Since the electricity of the quixotic piecemeal-built mansion had long since been turned off, a heavy-duty power cable had been slung over one of the sills of the twin bays of window overlooking the rear yard and the caretaker's cottage. Mainly this cable had been supplied to this particular room to provide power for the motion picture projector centered at the rear of the gulf between the bays. A small service light on the projector stand fingered out the high tarnish gilt ceiling and showed where vandals had ripped out the chandeliers and whole sections of fruitwood paneling. The giant fireplace mantel at the other end of the room had been removed, leaving a gaping dark hole like an entrance to some minor inferno.

Above the fireplace hole hung a sheet of sailcloth canvas for a screen.

"Sit here, please."

Since there was only one chair in the room, a motheaten affair with the stuffing leaking out where the chintzed arms were frayed away, his placement was rhetorical; nevertheless, Martin went over to the chair and sank into it with a relieved grunt. He was seldom on his feet this long these days, and never under such extraordinary circumstances.

Watching Bron move silently and swiftly back to the projector already threaded up and ready to be turned on, Martin was again aware of a touching eagerness in the trembling long fingers and especially in those sunken topaz eyes. Bron needed Martin, as he had always needed him back in the old days. You might have all the talent in the world, even Bron Gola's exotic kind of talent, yet it was no good without a hardheaded business brain to back it up. It had always been like that. It always would be. Martin was touched by Bron's anxiousness to show him what he had done. Also he was comforted by the prosaic humming of the projector when Bron flicked the motor on. And the screen. And the film

leader beginning to move down from the big full reel, through the film gate and back to the empty reel.

Even the howling of the storm outside, and the complaining of those big black hounds at being left alone, didn't quite register as sinister any longer. Martin's bulk might have been resting in his custom-made movie chair back in his private Hollywood Hills nostalgia den, with Saunders behind the Bolex. All the rest of this was pure trappings. Typical Bron Gola trappings. He could smile at them as he always had smiled, biting down on his Havana and thinking about all the money the suckers who went for this garbage would lavish on him.

There was no title. The image that struck that canvas screen when the service light blicked out was so low key that he had to strain to make it out at all. That was because it was a night scene, of course. A moonless, starless, fogridden night. The kind Bron Gola specialized in. There were whipping trees and vague monolithic shapes lying heavily against a hillside. Mausoleums. Tombs of some kind, although just what kind it was difficult to determine. It wasn't only the darkness and the wind-driven fog. Bron had always possessed an uncanny ability to imbue the prosaically sinister with an eldritch evil, as if he forced the viewer to see what *he* saw out of those weird yellow eyes, and what he saw was both ancient and alien. Where another, lesser film-maker would shoot a graveyard by night and produce conventional shudders (or yawns) Bron Gola drew much more out of the same scene. He made his viewer see beyond the sagging tombstones and the sifting shadows. He made him terribly aware of undreamed menaces that forever lurk just beyond the corner of one's sight. He made fear—stark fear—a palpable overwhelming Presence.

Another of his tricks (he used it now) was moving the camera through the dark trees for what seemed hours at a time. Actually it was only minutes, but Martin's impatience for something utterly new and fantastic (and saleable) made it seem longer. As H. P. Lovecraft did in his stories—hinting at horror and yet keeping his reader from seeing it until a pitch of supreme horror was reached—Bron made Martin *know* that a horror lurked somewhere on that wooded hillside and that when his nerves had been pulled tight enough, that horror would be revealed.

Still, drawn into the master's web though he was, on another level Martin was beginning to be disappointed. *Same old suspense gimmick. He'll have to do better than this.*

What he did involved the Bron Gola subtlety which Martin and the Titan bigs had kept insisting and insisting was unsalable. Give the public a monster they can get their teeth into, or vice versa. A vampire with blood dripping from his fangs. A werewolf in a hairy suit. An oversize Frankenstein with knobs on his neck.

Bron said *no*. The unseen—the ultradimensional unseeable—is far more terrifying. Why? *Because it is there. Because it exists.* The human mind cannot tolerate the knowledge that Hell is right here—all around us. Not in headlines, even war's worst brutalities. These are purely human and one way or another the human mind can tolerate this knowledge. But—what of those sometimes glimpsed hells that occupy the same space as we do, yet are separated from our

version of existence by dimensional walls? Walls that sometimes have chinks in them. Flaws in time and space that the hopelessly insane have momentarily seen through. And a few—a very few—quasi-humans who have taken the only other possible out; who have given themselves to the creatures who swim or crawl or fly through these hells in nameless pacts. Humans whose love of the alien and the terrible transcends their very humanness.

Bron said all this and more. He said it with blunt seriousness. None of the Titan bigs believed him, of course. Least of all Martin Chase. But they did believe in the power of such intensity of belief. It could be counted in the box office receipts. It had cash value.

Bron's new glimpse into one of these hells happened slowly. So slowly and stealthily that Martin was never aware of exactly when or how the change came about. One moment one level of his mind retained sensory awareness of the small sounds and scents around him—the howling dogs, the nose-twitching stench of the old walls and the man behind the thrumming machine—the next, he—Martin Chase—was completely involved in what was going on on that canvas screen. If it was a screen any longer.

He couldn't see the man who was fleeing now in utter blind panic from the unseen monster stalking him through the trees. Why? He knew why. He couldn't see the runner because he *was* the runner.

Nor could he see the thing padding after him through the fog. Perhaps it didn't want him to see it, not yet. The suspense gimmick, again. The old game of cat and mouse. It wanted him to suffer as it had suffered. It wanted the fear that boiled up into his throat to mount and mount until it at last would reach his brain and tear and claw—

While he fled secondary thoughts thrust into his singleminded revulsion and necessity to escape. He heard girls squealing delightedly in the dark last row. Boys whispering, *Ah, hell, it's just a picture. He's good, sure, but...* And the girl's breathless voice, *I'm scared! Hold me!*

Other thoughts mocked him. Blurred half-thoughts involving Elsa. And Bron the way he used to be. Handsome, in a lean, craggy, sardonic way. Fine wines. Fat cigars. The great winding staircase of his Hollywood Hills castle. Saunders moving noiselessly about. *That will be enough for tonight, Saunders! No more movies tonight! Shut it off, Saunders! Please! SHUT IT OFF!*

Always he fled. Sometimes he stumbled. He knew his heart had to give out soon. His fat pampered carcass was not made for this kind of exercise. Sobs of self-pity bubbled out from his hard-breathing mouth.

He had to reach someplace, sometime.

It was a gate, an iron gate. He flung it open and ran sobbing across the wild garden toward the porch steps and that invitingly open front door. It was all rather familiar, but nothing of this was worth thinking about now. The thing was to get inside and slam shut the door before the horror stalking him could reach the house. Inside he would be safe. Houses were safe.

He stumbled twice on the steps and once running along the wide veranda, but he made it! He was in, forcing the big door shut behind him with quivering hands and then lurching his heavy back up against it, tittering.



He waited there, resting, listening. Nothing. He heard nothing. He was safe behind that heavy locked door. He had escaped!

When he could move his numbed arms and legs, when his eyes took on cat-power and assessed the dimensions of the large foyer, Martin moved shakily across it toward the steep straight stairs. There would be a bedroom up there. There always had been a luxurious bedroom everywhere for Martin Chase. He would find it and he would sleep. God, how he needed sleep! When he woke up it would be morning and all this insanity would be gone, vanished, like any other nightmare.

He groped the banister with both hands to pull his flaccid, shuddering bulk upstairs. It took such a long time. Everything took such a long time. That was a nightmare for you. Time wasn't what it ought to be in the night-limbo he was in now. Seconds could be centuries. Space was different, too. Each step was like a gigantic lunge up a cliff.

He made it to the top and that was another triumph for Martin Chase.

The upstairs hall was dark, except for a hint of sulphurous light coming from those open double-doors to the back. Somebody had left a night light on for him. Good. *Thank you, Saunders.*

The seething agitation of his pelting flight outside had given way to a slow-motion effect where the protagonist moves very, very slowly toward some inevitable climax. Martin giggled. His climax would be reached when he fell mercifully into bed and pulled the covers up over his head.

He lurched against the walls as he tried to hurry toward the doors where the faint fire-orange glow lived. He went in and

twisted his head on its thick stalk this way and that. There ought to be a bed, but there wasn't. There ought to be a motion picture projector, with cables attached to it, cables that snaked out of one of those rear windows, a crack open so they could.

There wasn't.

All there was was that eerie sulphurous glow leaking out from that hole in the ripped-out fireplace. A dark figure, almost a man but not quite, stood there in front of the hole, which was lighted from within itself so that Martin could see frightful shapes moving about at the tunnelish hole's end.

"Ready, Martin?"

Bron's voice was calm and ever so gently mocking.

"I'll buy it, Bron!" Martin screamed. "I'll buy it! I'll pay you anything you ask!"

Bron laughed.

"My stars want more, Martin."

"What do they want?" Martin shrieked, wobbling and tottering forward against his will. "What—?"

"They want you, Martin. They want your fear. That's what they live on. Didn't you know that, Martin? Fear!"

Martin collapsed to his knees.

"I—I can't move."

"Sure you can. Martin. *Crawl.* They'd like that. We'll go in together. I'll help you in."

Martin moaned and writhed on the chipped parquets. He gave one last desperate look around the old dead room, then, mouthing choked sobs of horror and relief in submission to it, he struggled on his knees across the floor toward the yellow hole of sifting light that so well matched the light behind Bron's curious eyes.

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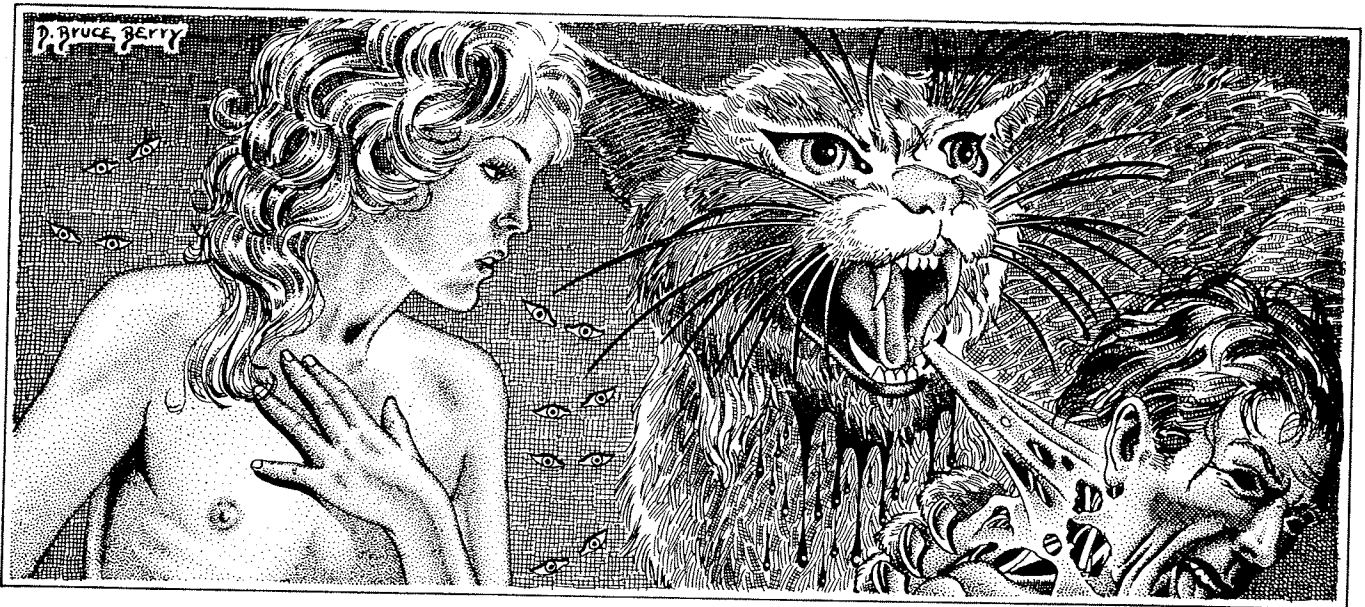
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Sergi was back and intended to stay back—but this was more carnage than he bargained for.



SERGI

by Dale C. Donaldson

Illustrated by D. Bruce Berry

Sergi thoughtfully regarded the dark ichor that dripped thickly from his torn forepaw. As a thought-creature he was immune to pain unless it was inadvertently dreamed into him, but the physical body did have limitations.

Gracefully he arched his five hundred pound feline bulk to ecstatically feel the muscles ripple. Zooks, it was good to be in physical manifestation again, and he relishingly cleansed his six-inch feeler whiskers with his rasping tongue as he recalled the sweet human flesh that had just filled his belly. He leaped with the joy of it, but fell heavily to the ground when the injured pad refused to bear his weight. He snarled sullenly.

Sergi was a pussy cat. A quarter of a ton of pussy cat. Until six hours ago he had been one of the Dwellers on the Threshold, one of the vast multitude of disembodied particled entities who, without the spirituality to reincarnate into a physical form of choice, must dwell for eternity between planes of the soul, living vicariously through the thought patterns of manifesting entities. Occasionally there was a breakthrough, a "demonic possession" of a weak or mentally retarded mortal, and even more rarely a powerful mind that without understanding dreamed a thought pattern so detailed and complete that molecular stability could be established. It was then that a dark entity might inhabit that particular form

to further the evilness of its non-existent spirit. For a spirit became particled, and a Dweller, only by the intentional practice of evil and the intentional denial of God.

Sergi was such a being. For successive incarnations he had progressed downward—away from spirituality—until during his last life-span many centuries ago he had been directly responsible for the torture and mutilation of thousands of innocent barbarians. It was then he finally lost the divine spirit and became unable to remanifest. But now—now, by zooks, he had broken through again and had a life form. He was a cat. And he could kill again.

Sandy Cutchins was the dreamer. The seven-year-old daughter of a nuclear physicist and a genetic sociologist, she loved to daydream, and her last dream had been especially thrilling. . . . she had made her pussy cat chew up her nasty old baby-sister.

The matronly baby-sitter had been peeling an apple while sitting on the patio. Sandy had been bedded down after an unusually violent argument concerning bedtime requirements. The sitter shook her head wonderingly at the precociousness of such a small child. The gentle evening breezes were a welcome relief to the scorching heat of the desert day. The Cutchins were bridge-playing. The sitter sliced her apple.

Sergi was there in front of her. His manifestation was as startling to him as it was to her, but he had had several centuries of watching and waiting, and he recovered almost immediately.

A cat four feet high at the shoulders looks directly into the eyes of a sitting human. The feral red eyes gleamed as muscular control followed the nervous system, and the open-mouthed female had time for only a single reflex action before the taloned forepaw raked her face into bone-deep mangled tissue. She jabbed upward with the knife.

The downsweep of the paw carried the knife with it as well as most of the forearm. Human blood spurted from severed arteries, and the paring knife penetrated the forepaw between the second and third pads. With the same continuous motion the cat leaped forward, and the monstrous jaws crunched together on the fragile throat.

Then Sergi ate. Or rather, he chewed. As Sandy had dreamed him to do. His appetite was enormous and his belly required much filling. Even the small bones disappeared. The larger bones required removal to a spot out under a clump of sage, and after the bloody patio had been thoroughly tongue-cleaned, Sergi removed the knife with his teeth. He lay on the ground now, again wondering about the ichor.

He had to stop the oozing. The globs would leave a trail. He had to get to Sandy's bedside while she was asleep. She was in command now with her dreaming, but his mind power would override hers so that he could take command. This had to be done immediately so that he could force her to dream a mate for him. And other things. If he couldn't get control soon, she might childishly dream him out of beingness.

He put thousands of years of concentration technique on the torn foot. He watched as the welling ceased and new tissues formed to close the wound. He was elated! He hadn't forgotten! This meant that as he regained full faculties he would be practically invulnerable to human weapons. Indestructible.

"Mrs. Mellnick?" The feminine voice was soft and low.

Spitting, Sergi sprang to his feet. Busy with concentration, he had ignored his acute feline senses. The Cutchins were home early.

"Mrs. Mellnick!" The voice was more insistent now, and was joined by the male. "Alice, where are you?"

Zooks, they must not waken the child! Sergi bounded silently to the front door and thrust his forty-pound head through the doorway, adjusting his vision.

Bob Cutchins died without knowing how or why. The massive jaws closed on the back of his neck, and Sergi reared upright, holding the man dangling, jerking, until suffocation silenced the spasms. Then Sergi quietly lowered him to the floor.

Joyce Cutchins saw Sergi. Momentarily. Returning from the kitchen she was saying worriedly, "Bob, she just wouldn't go away without calling or leaving a note..." Joyce Cutchins had time to scream but the sound was buried in Sergi's throat. He closed his maw over her head and bit hard. The scream gurgled. Blood spewed as the head was wrenched from the torso. The flopping body soon made a charnel house out of the living room.

In disgust, Sergi spat out the mutilated head. He had panicked. But he had made no noise.

"Oh." The voice was excited. "You are a big pussy cat!"

Sergi wheeled to see Sandy standing in the bedroom doorway. He was overwhelmed with dismay as the tiny nightgowned figure approached. He couldn't take her mind while she was awake.

"There's my mommy and daddy." The childish voice continued. "And that's blood. All over. All over everything. It isn't like that in my story books. Pussy cat, did you make the blood?" She was standing just below his chin whiskers, looking up at him. Temporarily befuddled, he hunkered down on the floor. She was now at eye level. She put a small hand on his nose. He snarled, then quickly changed it to a rumbling purr. He couldn't afford to startle her. "Pussy cat, I didn't tell you to eat mommy and daddy. Jus' Missus Mellnick." She sat on his forepaw and pulled at his dewlap.

Sergi thought furiously without missing a purr. Of how to get her back to sleep—or in a state of unconsciousness. She appeared fully awake now. Fortunately no other adults would come... all of the killings had been noiseless. But the child might thoughtlessly whisk him into nothingness if she tired of his presence. He had to act soon. Perhaps if he whopped her gently with a paw?

The telephone rang.

He nearly leaped to his feet before his mind stopped his reflexes. He continued to purr.

The telephone rang again. He felt her weight move as she moved toward the table. "Pussy cats don't answer phones. Little girls don't answer phones. Unless mommy says. Mommy?" She looked down at the headless sodden form. Sergi held his breath.

"Mommy can't talk with no mouth." She trudged across the blood-soaked rug. "Daddy, can Sandy answer the phone?"

Daddy did not answer. Expressionlessly, the girl looked at Sergi. The telephone rang interminably. Sergi kept tight control over his nerves and remained motionless.

"Hello? Hello. This is Sandy." She had picked up the receiver. "Yes. Daddy is here. No. He can't come. A big pussy cat ate him." Sergi tensed. "No, Mommy can't come either. The pussy cat ate her too. Bye." She hung up.

The girl child looked again at Sergi. "Mommy calls that lady Lillian. She says she will come over." She looked again at her father and mother, and then trudged back to Sergi and clambered up on his back. He trembled with ineffectiveness.

He forced himself to think rationally. The girl obviously believed it was all a dream. She was totally unimpressed with her maimed parents. He was all right as long as she enjoyed having him around. Zooks, he'd better entertain her. But more adults were coming. Perhaps he could lightly bash her head against a table or a doorway. Once she was unconscious he could take her away to a quiet spot until he could gain control. Slowly he rose to his feet with the giggling child hanging tightly to his fur. So far, so good.

He had almost reached the front door when she spoke. "Pussy cat will take Sandy to her room to get some clothes." He strained with rage, and considered moving quickly outside. Her small bare heels drummed into his ribs. "Pussy cat be good." He obeyed.

Once in her room she slid off his back and removed her nightgown without turning on the lights. Her small naked body gleamed in the desert moonlight. Over her stood Sergi, a

monstrous incarnation of indescribable evil held in check only by the wisp of her innocent child mind. His hot eyes gleamed with withheld destruction. The reflection of the moonlight revealed an utter lack of fear in her eyes as she stroked his furry muscled chest. "You are a good pussy cat," she confided. "Sandy likes you." Then, sighing, she turned to her closet. "What dress will Sandy wear? Mommy always tells Sandy."

His rage was almost explosive. There was so little time! Seething, his talons ripped the carpet as he fought to restrain his hatred. Zooks, once he had what he needed from this little creature he would devour her in three bites—from the feet upward.

"Do you like this one?" In the semi-darkness she held up an indistinguishable frock. He dared do nothing but purr. But he could feel his control slipping.

"Joyce?" The female voice was shrill. "Joyce, where are you? Albert, go check the..." Then a piercing scream as the female human saw the bodies.

Sergi responded with an ear-splitting roar of rabid fury. Spinning, his quarter ton of uncontrolled wrath splintered the lintel of the bedroom doorway as he smashed through. He swiveled in mid-leap, powerful clawed hindlegs disemboweling the man, sending the lacerated pieces flying against the living room wall. Simultaneously one set of steel talons ripped the woman from thigh to neck; the other set sweeping downward dismembered her leg at the pelvic bone. She had time to scream again and again before he slapped her head into churning froth.

Neighbors from across the street plummeted through the front doorway. He froze them with a glance of hellish eyes. Then quite leisurely he hunkered over to them. The woman fainted. As Sergi very carefully tore out the man's chest with saber-sharp fangs, the small boy screeched and beat on his hindquarters with puny, ineffective fists. An experimental snap of the awesome jaws and the vertebrae of the boy were severed. Measuring his seemingly unlimited power, Sergi finished by standing on the head of the woman until the skull burst.

Zooks, but this was not right. Sergi loved killing, but this was carnage not of his choice. He liked to stalk his prey, and kill in his own time and place. This was madness, fit only for beasts without subtlety. He didn't like it. But he had learned his own strength.

He looked toward the bedroom door. This had been noisy. Would she tolerate it?

She appeared. Still in her child nakedness. Slowly she looked around the room. She observed every item of shattered bone and rendered tissue. Then she looked again at Sergi. "You are a good pussy cat," she said. And went back into her room.

Astounded, he flopped to his haunches. She couldn't

possibly believe that she was still in her dream world. If so, she was completely insane and Sergi could take over a malfunctioning mind with a minimum of trouble. He had better do it now.

Thought was action. Deliberately he moved across the room—and met himself in the doorway! With a squall of disbelief he somersaulted backward, and immediately crouched for the leap. But he really was there in the doorway. No... his nose told him that it was a she. And astride the huge neck was the naked Sandy.

"Zooks, Sergi," the girl child said, "You indubitably are a superior type pussy cat." She grinned, and for the first time Sergi noticed that her tiny teeth were pointed. He also observed that her eyes were not innocent.

Her small feet drummed her big mount through the shattered doorway. "Well, you wanted a she, didn't you? This is Litan. A good mate for you, I think."

Litan examined her new Lord with interest. She hadn't been off the Threshold long enough to have all faculties operating at prime level, but Sergi knew instinctively that she was as evil as he. It would be a good match. The two beasts, nearly indistinguishable, with prolific offspring, could roam the land for centuries. They could be instrumental in aiding in the destruction of civilization... returning the world to its rightful condition of fear and ignorance. But some things needed explanation. He looked at the girl human.

"Of course. I'm from the Threshold too. I made the manifestation when the infant died in childbirth. Really, I pushed it out, and birthed as sweet Sandy Cutchins. Lucifer, how I've hated these humans! What an imposition it has been to be subservient. I had forgotten how long it took for the human body to develop. I couldn't wait any longer. I created you to do my killing. And I had to know that you could do it quickly and well."

Sergi waited.

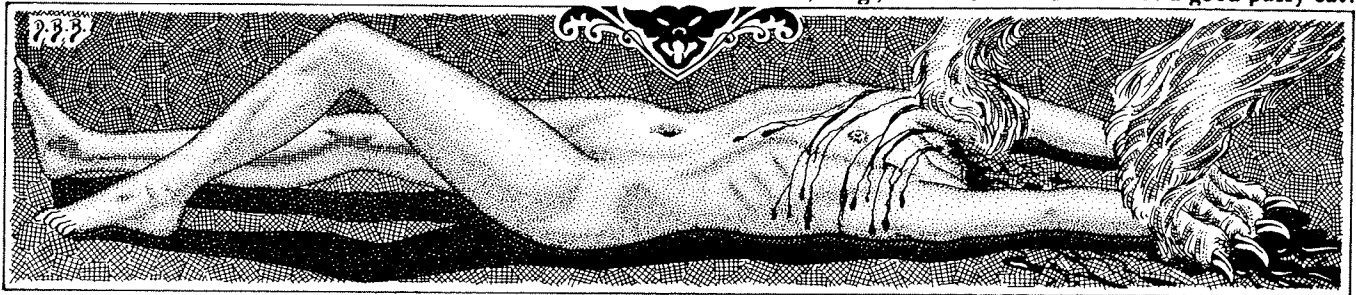
"No," she continued, catching his thought. "We can't afford to keep you in feline form. They would eventually catch you. No, we'll leave here now." She moved her head indicating the sound of approaching sirens. "I know of a cave not too far out in the desert where we'll be isolated. There I can dream you into human form."

Sergi waited. The human form was frail.

"Let's go!" she exclaimed impatiently, pulling Litan's ears. "No more killing tonight." Litan looked at her Sire, then moved forward as Sergi moved out of the way. As the she-cat passed him, Sergi reached up and crunched the head of the unsuspecting girl child. He swallowed.

Litan stopped questioningly. He nodded his massive head. They moved through the front doorway, and in a graceful lope skimmed the desert sands. She nuzzled him as they fled across the moonlight wastes.

"Zooks, Sergi," Litan breathed. "You're a good pussy cat!"



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WHO WANTS TO LIVE FOREVER?

"Oh, I do!" cried the Thin Man.

"And I," the Fat Man agreed,

"I certainly do!" shouted the Old Woman.

"Count me in," said the Pretty Young Girl.

"That's great!" the Youthful Scientist's smiling face reflected his satisfaction with the answers. "Now," he asked, "who will contribute money and time for research?"

"Oh, not I!" cried the Thin Man. "It takes all my time and money just to live, prices being so high and everything."

"I can't give anything," the Fat Man said. "High taxes for the war keep me broke."

"I have all of my money invested in bonds and stocks," said the Old Woman. "I have nothing to give for foolish research. Everyone knows that man was meant to live just three-score-years-and-ten. You are very immature to think God will permit you to change His plan."

The Pretty Young Girl looked at the Young Scientist wistfully. "I really wish I could help, but I spend my salary as I get it..."

The above is fiction, but perhaps it illustrates a point. Undoubtedly the most important project of the day is research into the causes of aging and dying. Unfortunately, the amount of time and money spent this way is practically nothing compared to the expenditures involved in developing more efficient ways of killing people.

Many prominent scientists believe that aging is a disease. If this is true it should be possible to do something to cure it. For years I have wanted to become involved in this field; however, like the mythical characters above, I've been putting it off. NOW I propose to start an organization for the purpose of promoting research into the causes of aging and dying. I would like to hear from anyone who would be interested in contributing in some way.

Bill Crawford, c/o W&S, 1855 W. Main,
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Forecast 1954, Annual Christmas Card of Hugo Gernsbach. Artwork: Frank Paul. Size 4 3/4 x 6 1/4. 31 pages.

Impact of Science Fiction on World Progress by Hugo Gernsbach. Address read before the 10th World SF Con, Chicago Aug 30, 1952. 7 mimeo pages.

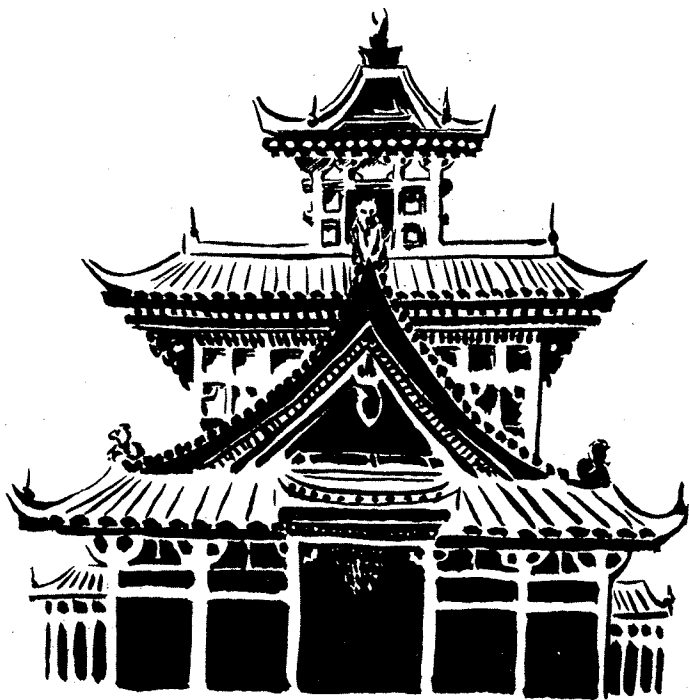
Evolution of Modern Science Fiction by Hugo Gernsbach. Aug 1952. Contains list of the early sf stories as they appeared in various Gernsbach mags from 1911 to 1928. 12 mimeo pages.

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玉塔

JADE PAGODA

In the 20s and 30s, E. Hoffmann Price wrote many types of fiction, but was best known to readers of WEIRD TALES as a writer of fine Oriental adventure stories, a handful of which were based on the lore and magic associated with Oriental rugs. Herewith, a look at a facet of Hoffmann Price's life that gave rise to many fine fantasy yarns . . . and a glimpse of Barsoom Badigian, dealer in fine carpets . . .

—The Editor

Summer of 1928; wage-slaving for Union Carbide; living in the *Vieux Carre* of New Orleans; waiting for *Weird Tales* to accept my rug-centred story, "The Girl From Samarkand"; getting acquainted with Syrian cuisine at Selim Hesni's restaurant, and, picking up scraps of conversational Arabic. Somewhere in all this happy confusion, I met an Armenian who travelled up and down the land with several theatrical type trunks, each containing ultra-costly Oriental rugs for customers who could find nothing good enough in the shops.

That Armenian was Barsoom Badigian.

His Christian name had not been borrowed from an Edgar Rice Burroughs novel. It was just the other way about. When the author and Badigian met, in the Los Angeles area, E.R.B. said unto him, "May I use your name in my next story? I mean, *Barsoom*?"

"Evidently," replied Badigian, "my parents liked it. You appear to have equally good taste. Go ahead, and good luck."

I believe his account to be true. Badigian was not a fantasy fan. Why *read* the stuff? To live a fantasy is much more fun.

When I met Badigian he was probably 55 years old, a slender, five-foot-seven, with lean, fine features, a nose not aquiline yet not straight; keen eyes, shadowed by mobile brows rising to points, like Saracenic arches. I may have met him at Selim's place, where, once every hour, on the half-hour, he would flip out a \$50 bill and pick up the check for the house. It was a small house, and he got a lot of change—but, the "yellow backs" were always dramatic. Or, we may have met at M. Dombourian's rug shop, a few blocks from my studio.

One detail is beyond doubt: I promised him that I'd attend the auction he was going to stage, and that as a good shill, I'd boost the bids as high as I could.

And this is how Badigian heard of me: one of Mr. Dombourian's salesmen was showing me interesting specimens recently taken into stock. These were not the commercial muck which catches the housewife's eye, but the pieces woven by Persians, Turkomans, Kurds, Turks, for their own homes. These were not costly rarities. However, they were distinctive,

and prizes for the collector who could not afford \$2500 for a Chiordes prayer rug, nor \$8000 for a four foot by seven foot "Shah Abbas" Isphahan, nor \$50,000 for the silken "garden carpet" which Sarkis Nahigian had showed me, in Chicago, simply because he knew that while I couldn't buy, I did appreciate.

Dombourian's people made me equally welcome. They always had time for those who loved good rugs, and could distinguish such from the purely commercial trash.

Picking up a nice looking little Serabend, I asked, "Mind if I look at this one by daylight?" I took it to the entrance way, knelt, and eyed it. To complete the test, I spat on the rug, then massaged the spit-spot, and sniffed it. If it had been chemically doctored to give it "mellow" colors—"washed" is the trade term—there would be a trace of chlorine odor.

Not knowing what I had in mind, the salesman jumped at a conclusion of his own, particularly since he had not seen the spitting.

"The warp is not broken!" he protested. "It is not rotted!"

His words called to mind something I had long forgotten—that was set forth in Clifford & Lawton's monograph. To detect a rotted warp, you grip the rug thus and so, give it a snap-jerk, thus, and hear the threads to *pop-snap*, if rotten. Apparently, I had accidentally established myself as a past grand master, which was something for the Armenian rug men to talk about—and so, give Barsoom Badigian the idea that he and I should collaborate.

Fun and games! I kept the bidding lively. Once or twice, over-cooking it, I "bought" a specimen. As the clerk made note of the stock number, and of my name, the auctioneer echoed, "Mr. E. Hoffman Price—he knows a collector's piece when he sees one. . ."

One of my imaginary purchases was a good looking Baluchi. Later, I said, "Tell you what—that little Tekke Turkoman I showed you, in my studio—the one that'd been all slashed by a Jack-the-Ripper and stitched back together again—I'll swap you that, for this one."

"You're crazy!" Badigian exclaimed, aghast, when he began to understand what I was saying. "Your Tekke is worth two-three times as much as this thing! It's a classic."

"Sure it is. But Siraganian, in Chicago, let me take it for what I bid on this Baluchi. The patching scared people out. He was stuck with it, glad to get rid of it."

"You're not supposed to *buy* any of my stuff—"

"This is a matter of sentiment. That beautiful Tekke always reminds me of a mismanaged romance. I want to get rid of it."

That Baluchi became a favorite with visitors. They loved the smouldering red of the four-petalled roses against a ground of midnight blue. Someone named it "Satan's Garden." The name endured. As a hearth rug it featured in many a memorable hour. As a wall hanging, it was superb. I'll never know whether it was Satan's Garden as a background, or the wheedling of Vieux Carre artist in search of a model, that induced Valeria to peel down and pose, topless and bottomless, in front of it. He may not even have been a painter. Fraud or no, we all got a look. . .the rug may not have been a collector's piece. . .but what a background. . .

Early in 1934 I moved to the Pacific Coast. Badigian's letters, in a script of his own devising, were salty, whimsical, and worth the decoding. The years rolled on, and New Year's

day, 1941, I was back in the *Vieux Carre* again, to stay until April first.

Toward the end of my stay, Badigian's travels brought him back to our favorite city. At the Greek Club, we ate mutton stewed with leeks, drank high proof Mastika, and gloried in the return of the happy days. Then we headed for my studio at 525 St. Louis Street, where Wanda, my second wife, awaited us. As she expressed it, our guest was distinguished as to appearance and charm. So very right.

Like an antique Persian rug, Badigian was immortal. The abrasion of Time had mellowed rather than worn him. Ancient sparkle and whimsy and "presence" had gained a new elegance. He had never known the year of his birth—his mother had told him, "It was when the Greeks and the Turks were fighting", and nothing could be more vague than that! Call him 68, and hear him sing, as I still hear him, in Arabic, and Persian, and most of all, in Turkish, that ballad which had so fascinated Otis Adelbert Kline:

"Yok, ba ba-jeem, YOK! . . ."

I forget all the verses, but never that chorus!

When we got around to rugs, he said, "I gave that beautiful Tekke to my daughter in Baltimore. She is so happy you were such a damn fool. She loves it, she has named it, 'Mr. Price.'"

There was good shop talk until I asked him about the modern 11X13 Kashan I'd picked up, at a garage sale. "Beautiful weaving, fine, exquisite knotting—but, something wrong with the wool."

"Ah. . .um. . .all moderns are washed."

"I've seen plenty 'washed' stuff in my day. This is different. All my others are alive. This one. . .can't think of a word. . .not like washed, not like natural. . .looks, feels. . .well, *dead*."

He knew exactly what I was talking about. Slick and subtle with a customer, but not with a friend—he didn't want to tell me the truth, and he didn't want to falsify. I changed the subject, and poured more Scotch, which, along with Bourbon or cognac, he preferred to any of his "native" drinks.

This was one of the happiest reunions of a long lifetime. I still see, with "inner eye", the agile brows, like Gothic arches, arches ever becoming wings—and the twinkle and the radiance of the man, as the hours raced along.

New Orleans sojourn ended before we could meet again.

December, 1953: more than a year after having bailed out of the fiction business, I was at long last back again, vacationing, in my favorite city. Valeria and Nancy and the One Eyed Mahatma had died. Nevertheless, there were quite a few survivors. Life is a series of laughs and losses.

I found Barsoom sitting alone at the Greek Club, with a solitaire layout. He worked as translator-interpretor for the U.S. Customs. His face had become puffy. The elegance of the bone structure was hidden. The nose was nearly bulbous. All the ancient distinction was gone. The eyes had no fire. I understand now what the folks had meant when they directed me from his rooming spot, to the club, and had said, "Still works steadily, but drinks more than necessary."

The *zombi* stories I'd read began to have a shade more meaning for me than I liked. Then, bit by bit, Barsoom came back. But there was not as much of him to shine through as once there had been.

I proposed he ride with me to Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi,

following day. Since he was a survivor of my long ago days, I'd value his company during this sentimental pilgrimmage. His interest sharpened. We'd meet right here.

Next day, when I stepped into the club room, it seemed as though Badigian had not moved since the previous afternoon. He looked up from his solitaire layout, all perplexed, groping, as he eyed me. Slowly, he got to his feet.

"I did not expect you to show up," he said. "When a man is eighty years old, he has no friends left."

His daughters in Houston and in Baltimore were not ignoring him. The Leo Heberts, with whom he roomed, held him in high esteem. They loved him. Nevertheless, sitting in the Greek Club, with not a Greek in sight, was a loneliness such as I have never before, nor ever since faced.

We set out. By the time we crossed the Chef Menteur, he came to life. He became a geyser of words.

"You still don't realize how much you helped me with that auction in 1928! Later, Dombourian and I became partners. He is dead now, so I can tell you. It was good till I let him talk me into letting a third man go into business with us. That finished it for me and Dombourian, cleaned him and me! So I went to work at the Customs House."

And then, "what you said about the dead wool—you were right. That was *Tabachi*, slaughter house wool. You have the instinct! But I was still in business, I could not be frank with you. Now, anything you want to know, I will tell you.

"One thing more—I am ashamed—last time, you bought dinner and fine liquor—you helped me in 1928—you gave me that Tekke rug—today, you take me driving. I have no food, no liquor, nothing to offer you."

I reminded him of the old days when he picked up the check for the house, at Slim's place—including my check. This comforted him.

In Bay Saint Louis, we got enormous shots of Old Grandad. More and more, Badigian's ancient self took charge. Incredibly, the nose was no longer bulbous. He looked more and more as in 1941.

Presently, we found the little cottage which I sought. In December, it would of course be untenanted. I went down the walk, and to the back yard. Looking through the screen porch, I saw what might have been the work table at which I wrote my first "who-done-its." In 1932, Wanda and I spent our three month honeymoon here, and learned some of the grim facts of

professional writing. Twenty—one years later, all this seemed very far away, memories from the life of someone else.

Rejoining Barsoom, I fired up the old Chrysler Imperial. He wagged his head. The smile was from the golden days, when he said, "There is some woman that you remember."

"Yes. You met her, last time." I told him what Wanda had said about him. "When I am your age, I may remember as many women as you remember."

With each mile of our drive back, he became more and more the Badigian of old times. But the road and the time were too short, and, there was too far for him to go. . .

I went with him into the Greek Club. Next day, I would head for the Pacific Coast, and my job as a Civil Servant. We had done very well indeed, and we were aware of this, as we took leave of each other.

There were letters. . .grim, whimsical, a laugh, a lilt, a splash of bitterness, touch of warm sentiment. . .

Spring of 1960: because of a heart condition, there would be hospitalization. I added the years, appraised the prospects, and wrote, "With this small check, buy a bottle of *good* liquor. Let us imagine, you and I that we have once more had a glass together."

He survived. Maybe it was only that they decided he had a while. . .

I sent a check to celebrate. I said, "We are running out of time. It is only 2400 miles. Buy a small bottle, and let us imagine that you and I are eating mutton stewed with leeks. . ."

On stationery scrounged from a Canal Street hotel, he wrote, late September, 1960, from the Greek Club: "I told you last time, do not send me any more money. You are my only friend. You are a God-damned fool, but I thank you very much."

Badigian died in his sleep, December 18, 1960. He had been working and going to the Greek Club to the very last. When Loriena and I—third wife—made New Orleans, a year later, we sat with Mr. and Mrs. Leo Hebert, to open a bottle of cognac, in honor of our late friend, Barsoom Badigian.

So many years, and so few the hours he and I sat face to face! This makes no sense, until I recall that, "*This hour can not return. A shred of time is worth a bar of gold. . .*" And, as no other man I know, living or dead, Barsoom Badigian could understand those words from the Chinese.

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**THE COUNT DRACULA SOCIETY
AWARDS DINNER**

The COUNT DRACULA SOCIETY, devoted to the serious study of horror films and Gothic literature, held its 10th Annual Mrs. Ann Radcliffe Awards dinner Saturday evening, April 22, 1972 at the Alexandria Hotel in downtown Los Angeles.

This dinner was attended by over 500 members and guests. Well-known personalities present were film and TV stars Robert Quarry, Roddy McDowall, Jo Ann Worley, Francis Lederer, Kirk Alyn, Kent Smith, William Marshall, Barbara Steele, Nicholas Courtland, Julie Adams, Carroll Borland, Larry Vincent (Seymour), Rich Correll and Barry Atwater, as well as directors George Pal, Rouben Mamoulian, Curtis Harrington, Roger Corman, Andrew Meyer and Curtis Lee Hanson. Among the writers were Ray Bradbury, A. E. van Vogt, E. Mayne Hull, Ross Rocklyne, Richard Matheson, Dr. Donald A. Reed, National President and Founder of the Society, Forrest J Ackerman, famous s.f. fan and editor of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, Wendayne Ackerman, translator of the Perry Rhodan stories, DeWitt Bodeen, author of the fantasy films "The Cat People" and "Curse of the Cat People," and Donald A. Wollheim, author and publisher.

The Awards were for outstanding achievement in cinema, literature, television, etc. The cinema award went to Robert Quarry for his performance in the Count Yorga vampire films; Francis Lederer's portrayal of Count Dracula on Night Gallery brought him the television award, while the literature award was given to the late Henry Eichner for his book *The Atlantean Chronicles*. Other awards went to Ray Milland, Richard Matheson, Glen Strange, Rod Serling, Rich Correll, Richard Harmetz, Sol Fried, and William Crawford.

Others present were James Warren, publisher of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, Bill Crawford, publisher of *Witchcraft and Sorcery*, Mrs. Sara Cotten, daughter of Boris Karloff, Dr. Walter J. Daugherty, curator of the Hollywood Museum, Morris Scott Dollens, s.f. artist, Sue Lloyd, grand-daughter of the great comedian Harold Lloyd, Mrs. Henry Eichner, and the following members and officials of the Dracula Society: Kris Vosburgh, Rich Correll, Louis Nowog, Ron Somers, Grant Lipton, Roberta Murray, Harriet Diamond, Doug Marshall, Manuel Weltman, Dick Weiss, Eric Hoffman, Alan White, Sir Alvin Germeshausen, David Peterman, Natalie Harris, Doug Wick, Robert Simonton, and many more.

The dinner was held in the Palm Room of the re-decorated Alexandria. The room was magnificent, but we can't say the same for the goodies.

Dr. Donald Reed, guiding light of the Dracula Society, certainly deserves the highest praise for his ability to organize such a successful event.

CANDID PHOTOS OF THE DRACULA SOCIETY AWARDS DINNER



Top Row Across, Left to Right: Dr. Donald A. Reed, Mrs. Henry Eichner, Ray Bradbury, Barry Atwater, Rouben Mamoulian, Dr. Don Reed, Kirk Alyn. Second Row: George Pal, Sara Cotten, Kenneth Levitt, Barbara Eichner Levitt, Bongo Wolf, Ray Bradbury. Third Row: Doug Wick, Dr. Don Reed, Victoria Vandertuin, Jo Ann Worley, Rich Correll, Roddy McDowall, A.E. van Vogt, E. Mayne Hull, Don Wollheim, Fourth Row: Ray Bradbury, Louis Nowog, Nickolas Courtland, Wendayne Ackerman, Mrs. Carroll Ackerman, Forrest J Ackerman, Kent Smith, Larry Vincent (Seymour). Fifth Row: Dr. Don Reed, Curtis Harrington, Sol Fried, Roberta Murray, Mrs. William Crawford, William Crawford, Francis Lederer, Dr. Walter Daugherty, William Marshall, Kris Vosburgh, Sixth Row: Mrs. Richard Matheson, Forrest Ackerman, Richard Matheson, Bob Clampett, Heather Johnson, Cecil the Sea Serpent, Julia Adams, Robert Quarry. Photos by Al Satian, Ltd. 980 N. Hoover, Los Angeles, and Morris Scott Dollins, 4372 Coolidge Ave, Los Angeles

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