

Sin's Doorway

by Manly Wade Wellman

Those days and in that part of the South I tried to keep out of county seats and other towns of any size. Sheriffs and town marshals had a way of rounding up tattered strangers and putting them on chain gangs. That spring I followed a trail, not much more than a footway, between two hills where the live oaks and the long-leaf pine shouldered themselves into thickets. There would be clearings in the hollows beyond, and a cabin or two of simple people. They'd recognized me, I hoped, for someone sad and hungry. I'd be invited to eat corn bread—fried bacon too, if I was lucky, or a stew of squirrel or rabbit. I had not eaten since the morning before, not very heartily then. Feeling faint, I knelt to drink from a little pencil-wide stream. When I rose, my legs were not so shaky.

Then as I tramped downhill between the path's scrub-grown borders, I heard voices singing an old hymn. Around the bend I walked, and came almost among the people.

There were twenty or twenty-five of them, overalled men, and women in homespun dresses and calico sunbonnets, and some shock-headed children. They stood bunched in front of a shabby little clapboard church—I knew it was a church by the tacked-on steeple that housed no bell. Next the church was a grassy burying-ground, with ant-eaten wooden headboards, fenced by stakes and rails. Nobody stood inside the fence. They all faced toward a homemade coffin of whipsawed pine, rough and unpainted.

I hate funerals. I go to as few as I can manage. But I paused to watch this one. Nobody looked sorry or glad, only intent. Beside the coffin stood a tall mountain man in worn black, with a grizzled chin-tuft that lengthened his hawklike face. Perhaps Abe Lincoln would have looked like that, if Wilkes Booth had spared him for twenty more years. That was the preacher, I decided, for as the singing died he began to talk. As my eyes turned toward him, I saw two figures squatting on the ground beyond him and the coffin. For a moment I took these to be old carven images, like figureheads from ancient sailing vessels. They looked weathered and colorless, face, hair, and clothing. One was a bewhiskered male, the other a wrinkled old female. Neither moved, not even their eyes blinked. But their backs were tense, as though slighting the church. I know Southern folklore, and remembered a bit; witches, the servants of devils, always turn their backs to the house of God.

"It was the will and prayer of Levi Brett, our departed—brother—"

The preacher had stumbled over that word as if he had disliked to speak it. "His will," he went on, "that we call at his burial for someone to eat his sins."

I pricked up my ears at that. Sin-eating—the old English had believed in it. There was something about it in *Precious Bane*, a delightful novel I hoped to read again if ever I came among books, and had money to buy them. For pay or for gratitude, a living person assumes the burden of sin borne by a dead one. Then a soul is free to enter heaven, and the sin-eater has years of life in which to expiate that assumed obligation. Once or twice I had heard rumors, just rumors, that some backcountry Americans kept the custom.

The preacher paused again, watching his companions. Nobody stirred, except a couple who swayed a little back, as if they disliked the suggestion.

"Levi Brett gave me money as he died," said the preacher. He produced a wallet. "Here are one hundred dollars. That will go to the one who eats the sin. Also Levi Brett's house on Dravot Ridge."

A hundred dollars in cash must have seemed a fortune to those simple hill folk. A heavy-featured, wide-eyed young man started forward at mention of it. But when the preacher spoke of the house on Dravot Ridge, the young man stepped back among his companions. He shuddered, I think; or perhaps they all shuddered.

I moved toward them. The preacher looked at me. So did something else, that now I saw for the first time.

It lay prone by the coffin, brown and motionless. At first I thought it was a hound, then I thought it was not. It was hound-size, and lean like a hound; but its feet were all wrong, big and furry, and its low, close-drawn way of lying on its belly was more like a weasel. Its eyes did not falter as mine met them. I never saw a dog with ears like those, and the face, what I could see between the wide forepaws, was strange.

"Yes, brother?" the preacher said to me.

"Sir, you ask for a sin-eater," I ventured.

He held the wallet toward me. "A hundred dollars and a house," he repeated. "It is a fine house—so I hear tell."

"The dead man's a stranger?" I suggested.

"Not Levi Brett," mumbled a voice in the group. "Not enough of a stranger, anyhow."

I paused and thought, and tried to decide what sort of thing it was that lay and watched me, there beside the pine coffin. Then I looked back at the preacher. I licked my lips, but my dry tongue would not moisten them.

"I'll do it, if I'm allowed," was what I managed to say. Since I cannot explain how I began to be nervous and frightened so early in the matter, I shall not try. "I'll do it," I said again, more confidently.

"Praise the Lord," a deep-voiced man intoned, and "Amen!" said a shrill woman.

As I walked toward the coffin, the preacher stepped toward me and took my hand in his big, strong bony one. "Let me call a blessing on you now," he said. "Later, you may be glad of a blessing, brother." His eyes searched my face. "You are young, you have a look of light. I pray your soul won't suffer out of reason."

"But you're really concerned for the soul of the dead man," I reminded, and someone said "Amen!" I held out my hand. "Give me the money."

"First repeat," commanded the preacher. "I—and speak your name."

Obediently I did so.

"Do freely," he prompted me, "and before all living things in this world and the next, assume and take to myself the sins that trouble the soul of the departed Levi Brett."

I said it all, and wound up swearing, as he urged, on a holy name. Then he handed me the wallet. It was simply cut and sewn, of some wonderfully soft dark leather. I opened it. Inside were ten ten-dollar bills, of the old large size.

"Levi Brett stands clear of evil," said the preacher to his little flock. "He may enter holy ground. The Lord's name be praised."

They burst into song, another old hymn, and six men moved forward to pick up the coffin by wooden cleats that served as handles.

The preacher led, and they carried it past the stake-and-rail fence into the cemetery where, I now saw, was a ready-dug grave. The hymn finished, and all watched.

From the wallet I took a bill. I spoke to the nearest onlooker, a tussock-bearded old man who looked like photographs of Ambrose Powell Hill.

"I'm hungry," I said. "Faint with hunger. I wonder if you would—"

"Take that double-damned money away," he snapped, and his eyes blazed above the hair on his face. "It's the devil's price for what you done. You're a man of sin, young fellow, purely rotting away with the sins of Levi Brett you eaten just now. I had nothing to do with him, and I'll have nothing to do with you."

I felt weaker than ever, and I began to plead. "Then, if you'll take no money, will you be kind enough to—"

A woman came to the man's elbow. She must have been his wife, a tall, strong hill creature. "Young sir," she said, "I never hoped to turn away a hungry creature. But I can't give you food or comfort, less'n your sin may catch onto me. I daren't say more than I pity you. Go on somewhere, where they'll feed you unbeknownst of what you carry. That way, maybe, they'll not lose grace by you."

"Look," stammered a young girl, pointing. "Levi Brett's critter—"

The brown animal had risen from where it lay, on four legs that crooked strangely. It pointed a long nose at me, like a trained hunting dog that shows the prey to its master.

"You've taken Levi Brett's sin indeed," said the bearded man, and the glare in his eyes filmed over with terror. "That thing lived with him on Dravot Ridge, his only family. When he was took sick at the preacher's house, it came and camped under his window. It laid by his coffin—" He broke off and choked, then spat furiously. "Now it's yourn. Go—please go! Then it'll go with you!"

Everyone drew away from me, toward the fence. Beyond the rails, the coffin-carriers had lowered their burden into the grave, and three of them were spading earth upon it. I felt icy cold, and tried to lie to myself that it was the assault of hunger. I turned away.

Some children began to jabber a little cadenced sneer, to one of those universal childhood tunes:

"Your soul to the devil,
Your soul to the devil,
Your soul to the devil—devil—devil—"

After all, I resolutely said in my heart, they didn't mean that. Maybe this was originally an Irish community. I knew that Irishmen sometimes said "Your soul to the devil" for nothing but a joke. I turned and walked, to get away from staring, repelling eyes.

Beyond the clearing where stood the church and the burying-ground I could see trees, denser thickets than those among which I had walked so far. Two trails led into the depths of the timber, and I turned my steps toward one. Something sounded beside me, pit-pat, pit-pat—the brown animal had joined me. It had a long thin tail, and it seemed awkward on all fours, like a monkey. It looked up at me once, more eloquently than dog or cat could manage, and headed for the other trailhead. I went with it.

As the two of us entered the woods, along the dim green bough-roofed arcade that was the trail, I sagely decided where I had seen something like my companion. Charles R. Knight's paintings, as are to be seen in New York's Museum of Natural History, or in books like Scott's *History of Mammals in the Western Hemisphere*, include several things like that, particularly his restorations of the very early mammals of a million years ago and more. Such things, as I consider them, were developed amorphously, could be ancestors to the monkeys, the dogs, the cats, the hoofed beasts, or to all of these.

I do not want to dwell too long on the specimen that now padded the trail with me. Its snout was long, almost raccoon-like, but its brow bulged in a way that suggested considerable brain volume to go with those expressive eyes. Its forelegs had elbows, its rear legs had knees, and the feet that had seemed like big, hairy lumps bore long toes that could, if necessary, clutch like fingers. I wished it would go away, but did not care to shout or gesture at it.

When I heard human feet behind me, I was relieved, but for a single moment only.

The two who had sat with their backs to the church were following me. As I glanced back, the man waved a skeleton-scrawny arm and the two broke into a run, uncouth but fast, to catch up. Both grinned, showing broken teeth.

"Let them scary folk huddle together and die of the shivers," said the man, breathing hard with his exertions. "We'll see that you get food. Yop, and shelter. That is, we'll see you to your own proper house."

"You did a pure brave thing in taking the sins of Levi Brett," added his companion. "I always say, the young got courage and helpfulness."

I could feel nothing but gratitude in this proffer of help and friendship. In my hand I still carried the bill that I had taken from the wallet, and I held it out.

"Thank you, no," said the man, drawing away. "We're doing it for love," and he flashed his broken teeth in another grin. "You're one of us now."

"You mean, neighbors?" I asked, for I thought they might live on Dravot Ridge.

"Just one of us," said the woman. "Hasn't Parway taken you up?"

She meant the brown animal, which stood close to my side, faced toward them but with eyes ever upon me. So its name was Parway—I suppose that is how to spell it. A long moment its eyes held mine, then it turned and trotted ahead.

"Follow," said the man. "It will lead you home."

The three of us went along. I was glad for what I thought was human companionship. They chatted to me genially enough, asking my name and my home. I gave a false name, and said I had no home.

"You have now," said the old woman, and she and her companion blended their cackles, as at a delicious joke. I like that sort of rudeness as little as anyone, and I spoke sharply:

"You mean Levi Brett's house? The one on Dravot Ridge?"

"Well, yes." The old man made a drawl of it. "Only not exactly. It's yours now, by Levi Brett's spoken will. And it's not a house. It's a gardinel."

That word was strange to me. The world will be happiest if it remains strange to the word. I repeated it, rather stupidly: "Gardinel? What kind of a house is that?"

"A gardinel only looks like a house," the old man informed me, "and it can only be used like a house by a few people. There's lots of gardinels, young fellow, in towns sometimes, and sometimes in off-way country places like this one."

"You ever walked along a street, and seen something like a house not built quite true, that seems to look at you with eyes instead of windows?" demanded the woman, blinking up at me. "Houses generally with nobody living in them, that everybody stays away from?"

Of course I had seen such houses. Everyone has. "Usually somebody tells me such a place is haunted," I replied.

"And usually it's no more than that," she rejoined. "But once in a while it's not a

house, it's a gardinel."

They were having fun with me, or were they? ... The beast named Parway had run ahead, and now it gamboled uncouthly at a bend of the trail some yards ahead. There was light; that meant a clearing of sorts. I walked toward it, and my companions followed at my heels.

The clearing was not large, and lofty trees grew thick around it. In its very center was exactly the sort of house I had been prepared for, with all that mocking mystery of the old man and the old woman.

I was never to decide what it was made of. Living wood, perhaps, hard and massive; or living rock, very living rock. On its solid walls were marks as of carving tools. Its two windows had sills that were of one piece with the house front, and the low-drawn roof, that was like a hat pulled down to the eyelike windows, was of a different color but seemed to be part of the same piece too. The doorway had not been cut oblong, but irregular, rather like a cave-mouth, and all was dark inside. Parway padded up to the threshold, looked back once to me and darted in. At once a dim light went on, as if Parway had kindled it. My uneasiness was braced by angry mystification. Like the proverbial fool rushing in, I followed Parway.

"I have been waiting for you," said a deep, cultured voice, and there sat a human figure on a blocky stool.

The one was a man of indefinite age, with everything forked about him—his little divided beard, his joined and upslanted brows, his spiked moustache, hornlike points of hair at his brow. These things were probably makeup to a certain extent—Satan himself wouldn't have been so lavishly theatrical. The face was gaunt and mocking, with eyes as brilliant as Parway's; but to look intelligent, there would have to be more forehead. He held out a hand, which I had the instinct not to grasp. His gaunt figure was wrapped in a sort of gray gown.

"You'll be wondering," he said to me, "just what is expected of you."

"I do indeed," was my reply. "If you'll be good enough to tell me—"

"Tell me first," he said gently, "how much you know."

I cleared my throat, and wished for a drink of water. "I came to where they were burying someone called Levi Brett. It seemed he couldn't go into a proper grave until someone, by the old custom, assumed his sins. I did so, because I was poor and hungry, and there was a sum of money offered. Levi Brett's sins must have been considerable, because nobody wanted anything to do with me. And I let myself be led here, simply because it seemed easier than to go somewhere else. That's the sum of my knowledge to date, and I'd like to know more."

"Ah," said the man with the forked beard, "you deserve to know more, for the sake of the important things you're to do."

I took time to look at other things than his face. The inside of the house was not properly angled. Walls curved, and junctures at ceiling and floor seemed blunt. There were beams and rafters interestingly tacked on, like ribs enclosing the body

cavity of a disemboweled carcass. Beside the stool on which my new acquaintance sat there was only a desk, covered with papers. In a corner Parway had slumped down into that strange prone position of rest, eyes glued to me. I had a sense of growing disgust, as though I smelled something rotten.

"Permit me," said the man with the forked beard, "my name is Dravot, of the family for which Dravot Ridge is called. And you?"

I gave him the name I had invented for the unsavory couple outside in the clearing. He nodded.

"Let me be simple, though I doubt if the situation can ever be simplified enough to be explained in ordinary words. Levi Brett was—shall we say—brilliantly unusual? Or unusually brilliant? He knew many things, of the sort that weaklings of the ordinary world call forbidden or horrific. This dwelling is the repository of much knowledge. I know relatively little, for I was only his—well, his secretary, his aide. And the two outside are, frankly, stupid underlings. But let us not belittle their courage in accepting Levi Brett's acquaintance and leadership."

"You promised to be simple, and you're not," said I. "Was Levi Brett some sort of sorcerer or wizard? Is that why the people at the church hated his sin?"

"That is exactly the explanation that will do for the moment," smiled Dravot, as if in applause. "You will know better and better, as if dimensions are added to your mind. You have gifts, I daresay, that he lacked. You will carry on what he strove for, the bringing of people hereabout to our way of interesting truth."

I had actually forgotten my hunger. About me was a close warmth, a sweaty smell that seemed to go with the carcass-cavity form of the apartment. "I take it that Levi Brett did not make many converts to your beliefs," I said.

"It was deliberately that he set up in this community," said Dravot. "Knowledge that supernatural powers exist is part of the Southern Hill culture. But with that knowledge goes fear. For many years Levi Brett did his wonders, and he attracted only me and the two out there. We know what power is possible, but the others refuse to know or even to surmise. They hated him. And even I—a native, of a respected family—haven't dared go among them for years."

"Levi Brett turned against all these things you tell about," I said suddenly. "He died at the preacher's, and left money to buy someone to take over his sins."

There was a sudden storm of cackling laughter from outside, where the old couple were listening. Dravot laughed too, and pointed his finger.

"Ah, ah, ah," he said, "that took in the fools, but I thought you'd see. Must I explain that too?"

"You must," I told him, "and seriously. I don't like to be laughed at, Mr. Dravot."

"Forgive me, then. We'll be good friends later. But to explain. Levi Brett knew he must die. He hoped for a son to inherit his knowledge and work, but, for many decisive reasons, he never fathered one. He only pretended to repent—he sought out the preacher deliberately when he felt his last hours upon him. That old ceremony of

sin-eating made you his heir, my young friend. You take over his possession, his knowledge, his work. Good fortune to you."

I gazed at him, uncomprehending. He waved his hand at the papers on the desk.

"Some of these things you may read, but not all. Paper wouldn't contain them. The knowledge, I say, is in this house. Sleep here, dream here. Levi Brett's knowledge will grow within you."

I shook my head. "This has gone far enough," I said. "I dislike practical jokes. For you, as I see it, there is only one way to teach you manners."

Stepping forward, I lifted my fist. I was going to hit him.

He did not move, but Parway did. The lithe, strangely made body swooped in front of me. The long jaws opened, and triangular teeth, lead-colored and toxic-seeming, grinned at me. I stopped dead, staring.

"Parway disagrees," said Dravot. "Meanwhile, if you think this is all a joke, how do you explain Parway?"

"Some sort of freak or hybrid," I said lamely.

Parway glared, and Dravot chuckled.

"He understands. He is not complimented, and I don't blame him. Parway has an interesting origin—you'll have read of such things, perhaps. Old demonologists called them familiars."

I had heard the word. Strange entities, given as companions and partners in evil to such persons as contracted to serve hell ... but nobody had imagined anything like Parway.

"Suppose you think these things over," Dravot went on, rather patiently. "I'll leave you. It's evening. I wish you joy, young sir, on your first night in your new quarters."

He got up and strode away. The two outside followed him from the clearing. Light was dying there, but strengthened inside. I saw its source, a great candle in a wall bracket, a candle black as tar that burned with a strong white light like carbide.

My early faintness returned to me, and I sat on the stool. If I could but have some food ...

And there it was, on the desk at my elbow.

Parway looked from me to the well-filled tray. Had he brought it from somewhere? I could not see clearly at first, then stared. One steaming dish held a sort of pilaf. Another cutlets half-hidden in savory sauce. There was a crusty loaf with fruits baked into it, a massy goblet of yellow metal that held dark liquor. In a deep bowl nestled fruits I did not know, but their colors were vivid and they gave off a delicious odor.

I started to reach for the tray, and paused, for my hand trembled so violently. That was when something—somewhere—betrayed its eagerness clumsily.

For the tray edged toward me on the table, as if it crawled on slow, tiny legs.

I sprang up, sick and dizzy with startled fear. The movement of the tray ceased abruptly, but I had seen. I would not have touched the food then, not though final starvation was upon me. I kicked out at the desk and upset it, tray and all.

The tray vanished, and the dishes, before they struck the flat, dull, solid floor. Parway looked at me bitterly, then reproachfully, and slunk to a corner. I sank back on my stool, wondering furiously.

That feast that had come at my mind's silent bidding had vanished when I rejected it—there was precedent for such things in the history, or pretended history, of magic. Did not the witches gorge themselves luxuriously at their meetings, which the scholars call sabbats? Was not such gorging a kind of infernal sacrament, which bound the eater to his nasty worship? I congratulated myself on my refusal.

For now I was believing the things that had been told me.

The night that closed in would be chill, I knew, but inside the room the air grew warmer, if anything, and closer. Parway, still crouched in the corner, gazed at me expectantly. I hated that steady stare, direct but not honest. Turning my head, I saw the papers spilled from the overturned desk. Stooping, I lifted one.

The first word my glance caught was "gardinel," and at once I began to read with deepest interest:

"They may be small or large, conventional-seeming or individual, according to the words said and the help asked. Choose the place where one will grow, mark the ground plan, scatter the meal of the proper plant, and say—"

There was considerably more, but I would do humanity a disservice to write it here, even if I remembered correctly. Suffice it to say that it spoke of houses, or things like houses, being rapidly grown from nothingness like a sort of fungus. I remembered what I had heard earlier on the trail to Levi Brett's lair, the words of the old man: *A gardinel only looks like a house, and it can only be used like a house by a few people.* Was I to be one of such people? Had my declaration that I assumed Levi Brett's sins made me a creature of sorcery, whether I wanted it or not?

"I won't have this," I said. "I'm going."

Rising, I started for the door, but again Parway moved before me. His teeth bared, he crouched low on his rear haunches and lifted his forelimbs. His paws spread their toes like clumsy hands to strike or grasp, and I could not find the resolution to attack him.

"What do you want?" I demanded, as if he would understand. And he did understand, and pointed with a paw, to the scattered papers. One blew toward me, or I thought it blew. Perhaps it crept of itself. I did not touch it, but bent to read the writing:

"Prepare the mind to receive knowledge. Empty yourself of your own thoughts. Then—"

My eyes read those words, and in the same moment my ears heard them—whether from without or within, how shall I say now? It's all very well to accuse me of hysterical imagination; but if it's easy to be cool and analytical in such a crisis, try it yourself some time. What I do remember well is the script on the page, crabbed but clear and black, and the quality of the speaking, deep and harsh and metallic, like the voice you would expect from Frankenstein's monster.

I straightened up and turned away, muttering a curse. Probably I should have spoken a prayer instead. Empty myself of my thoughts—and what would take their place? The thoughts of another, the things Levi Brett had known, thoughts which still crowded, bodyless, in this awful room and waited for a mind into which to slide themselves. Then I'd be Levi Brett.

I did not want to be Levi Brett. I did not want the knowledge with which his thoughts were freighted. Anyone, even a skeptic, could see how fatal that would be. "You take over his possessions, his knowledge, his work." Dravot had told me that. I would live in this house that wasn't a house, eat foods of which I knew not the name that came from I knew not where. My companions would be Dravot, Parway, one or two of the God-forgotten among the natives. I wanted no such legacy. How to reject it, and remain what I had been, a starved and wretched wanderer?

The food, I remembered, had vanished. That was because I had refused it. Perhaps I had a clue to the procedure. I turned toward Parway.

"Go away," I commanded. "Go away, and let this house—what they call a gardinel—go, too. And everything else. I reject it."

Parway showed his teeth. This time he smiled, worse than any human being could manage. He laughed too—no, someone outside laughed. Dravot was lounging just outside the door.

"Show grace," he bade me, tauntingly. "You can't turn back from us now. Accept. How else can we have you for our chief?"

"I'm no chief of yours," I said. "I refuse to be."

"Too late." He pronounced the words with satisfaction that was downright smug. "You can't give back what you've taken. From now on you'll live here, think here, work here. Open your mind, and cease to be a fool."

From the darkness beyond him came a patter of voices. The disgusting old couple had come back with Dravot, and they prayed. I'd rather not repeat the prayer, or the names it invoked. I put my hands over my ears.

"I'll not listen!" I shouted. "Let me out of here!"

Jumping to the threshold, I struck at Dravot. He bobbed easily out of danger, and I started into the open after him. At the same time something clawed and clutched at me from behind—the paw of Parway. It scrabbled and wriggled like a knot of gnawing worms, indescribably filthy. Then, I thank heaven, my ragged old jacket tore in the grasp he fastened upon it, and a moment later I was out in the clearing.

I wanted to run, but I knew I must not. I could not endure another seizure from

behind. Anyway, the horrid old man and woman stood at the head of the lane through the thick-grown trees. Abruptly I threw off the remains of the torn jacket and kicked them aside. With both hands I caught a stub of dead branch and wrenched it free from its parent stem. I poised it like a club. There was a strange flowing into me of resolution and rightness.

"Come on now," I challenged Dravot. "I'll flail the grin off of your face. Bring those two swine with you, and Parway if he dares. I'll fight you all four."

But they did not come. They stood where they were—Dravot nearest, the two oldsters by the trailhead, Parway squatting uncouthly in the lighted doorway. Their four pairs of eyes gazed at me, glowing greenly, like the eyes of frightened flesh-eating animals.

"You're not being fair," Dravot stammered, and I found the strength to laugh at that.

"Fair!" I echoed. "Fair, after you tried to trick me into this devilry?" I lifted the stick. I felt strong.

"He did it," mouthed the old man beyond Dravot. "Chance, or some butt-in power from somewheres—he grabbed a hazelnut branch!"

"But we called lightning to blast it dead!" quavered the voice of the old woman.

"It stood because, dead or not, we couldn't touch it," Dravot flung at them. "Shut your mouths, or he'll guess."

I had guessed. Hazelnut, I had armed myself with hazelnut, a tree of force against ill magic. What says Albertus Magnus? I've looked it up since, and found it in his writings, not once but in many places. *Cut a hazelnut stick, and therewith strike the witch or wicked being ...* Something like that ...

"You're all dirt," I raged at them, "and I'll plant hazelnut over any of you that dares face me."

Dravot had sidled forward, but kept out of reach of my stick. His foot gingerly touched my torn jacket, kicked it toward me. "It's yours," he said. "Take it back."

"Let it lie," I replied, wondering why he insisted on such a thing at such a moment.

"Take it back," he repeated, and lifted the rag on his toe. For an instant light from the doorway picked out something, the dark wallet of Levi Brett that protruded halfway from a pocket.

"I won't," I snapped. "That money is one of the things I want to give back."

"He knows!" squealed the old woman, and the old man slapped his skinny hand over her mouth. Dravot cursed her in words that made my scalp tingle. With a kick of his foot, he threw the jacket at me. It soared like a tatter-winged bat.

I struck at it with my club. It caught on the end and flapped there for a moment, then went sailing back, full into Dravot's face.

He screamed, as shrilly as the old woman could have managed, and pawed at the fabric with his hands. It had wrapped itself around his face like a net. I heard his muffled pleading that someone set him free, but nobody moved. The old man and woman had run away up the trail, and Parway drew back inside the house-thing. I stepped close to Dravot and began to beat him.

"Why didn't you take the money, if taking it meant such great power?" I yelled as my stick thumped on his swaddled head. "You were afraid—of what? Things too evil for you?"

He tried blindly to defend himself. His outflung hand once grasped my stick; but he let go at once, with a howl as though electric current had run through him.

"Parway! Parway!" he cried, and Parway emitted the one sound I heard from him in all the incident. It was like a sound, human in quality but wordless. Dravot, still pawing at the clinging coat around his face and head, turned and stumbled in the direction from which Parway's voice had come.

"I rejected that money," I called after him, "and it has fastened on you. Now you can't let it go. Suffer from your own sins and those of Levi Brett!"

As Dravot reached the threshold, Parway ran from him, back inside. I saw him as he lurched against the wall, and he jarred the great black candle from its bracket. Dravot stumbled blindly, sprawled through the door, and lay still there. He must have fainted.

The candle no more than struck the floor when flames burst and bloomed like flowers from a stage magician's trick rosetree. Something in the construction or material fed those flames like suet. They sprang and spread everywhere. Parway, cut off by them from the one exit, scrambled back into a corner that would not long remain unkindled. Dravot lay, still motionless, even when tongues of fire lapped eagerly across him. The fire was dark, giving off oily wisps of smoke. I retreated, toward the lane up which the old couple had run away.

I departed, feeling my path in the dark with the hazelnut stick. I tried to rationalize, even though the matter was not rational.

Everything had centered around Levi Brett's bribe-money, which had doomed me when I accepted, which freed me when I thrust it away. The evil had been desperate when Dravot, as unprepared as I, came in contact. It had fastened upon him like a snake.

What now happened to him, in the heart of the burning, meant that I was spared the curse. I groped along as swiftly as I could. After moments, I heard a noise, a long, quavering whoop or wail—not Parway, certainly not Dravot. The house, the thing called a gardinel—if it lived, could it feel? If it felt, could it scream its pain of fire?

I made myself run. I kept running until I was beyond earshot. Then I slowed to a walk again.

My weakness and hunger returned, and I had to brace my spirit to endure them. I

must keep going until morning. By then I might have come to some other district among the hills, where nobody would guess that for an hour I had been in the grip of cursed magic. People would see me for a starved stranger, and offer me something to eat.

The End