

CALL HIM DEMON

by

Henry Kuttner

Chapter 1: Wrong Uncle

A long time afterward she went back to Los Angeles and drove past Grandmother Keaton's house. It hadn't changed a great deal, really, but what had seemed an elegant mansion to her childish, 1920 eyes was now a big ramshackle frame structure, grey with scaling paint.

After twenty-five years the - insecurity - wasn't there any more, but there still persisted a dull, irrational, remembered uneasiness, an echo of the time Jane Larkin had spent in that house when she was nine, a thin, big-eyed girl with the Buster Brown bangs so fashionable then.

Looking back, she could remember too much and too little. A child's mind is curiously different from an adult's. When Jane went into the living-room under the green glass chandelier, on that June day in 1920, she made a dutiful round of the family, kissing them all. Grandmother Keaton and chilly Aunt Bessie and the four uncles. She did not hesitate when she came to the new uncle - who was different.

The other kids watched her with impassive eyes. They knew. They saw she knew. But they said nothing just then. Jane realised she could not mention the - the trouble - either, until they brought it up. That was part of the silent etiquette of childhood. But the whole house was full of uneasiness. The adults merely sensed a trouble, something vaguely wrong. The children, Jane saw, knew.

Afterward they gathered in the back yard, under the big date-palm. Jane ostentatiously fingered her new necklace and waited. She saw the looks the others exchanged - looks that said, 'Do you think she really noticed?' And finally Beatrice, the oldest, suggested hide-and-seek.

"We ought to tell her, Bee," little Charles said.

Beatrice kept her eyes from Charles.

"Tell her what? You're crazy, Charles."

Charles was insistent, but vague.

"You know."

"Keep your old secret," Jane said. "I know what it is, anyhow. He's not my uncle."

"See?" Emily crowed. "She did too see it. I told you she'd notice."

"It's kind of funny," Jane said. She knew very well that the man in the living-room wasn't her uncle and never had been, and he was pretending quite hard - hard enough to convince the grown-ups - that he had always been here. With the clear, unprejudiced eye of immaturity, Jane could see

that he wasn't an ordinary grown-up. He was sort of - empty.

"He just came," Emily said. "About three weeks ago."

"Three days," Charles corrected, trying to help, but his temporal sense wasn't dependent on the calendar. He measured time by the yardstick of events, and days weren't standard size for him. They were longer when he was sick or when it rained, and far too short when he was riding the merry-go-round at Ocean Park or playing games in the back yard.

"It was three weeks," Beatrice said.

"Where'd he come from?" Jane asked.

There were secret glances exchanged.

"I don't know," Beatrice said carefully.

"He came out of a big round hole that kept going around," Charles said. "It's like a Christmas tree through there, all fiery."

"Don't tell lies," Emily said. "Did you ever truly see that, Charles?"

"No. Only sort of."

"Don't they notice?" Jane meant the adults.

"No," Beatrice told her, and the children all looked toward the house and pondered the inscrutable ways of grown-ups. "They act like he's always been here. Even Granny. Aunt Bessie said he came before I did. Only I knew that wasn't right."

"Three weeks," Charles said, changing his mind.

"He's making them all feel sick," Emily said. "Aunt Bessie takes aspirin all the time."

Jane considered. On the face of it, the situation seemed a little silly. An uncle three weeks old? Perhaps the adults were merely pretending, as they sometimes did, with esoteric adult motives. But somehow that didn't seem quite the answer. Children are never deceived very long about such things.

Charles, now that the ice was broken and Jane no longer an outsider, burst suddenly into excited gabble.

"Tell her, Bee! The real secret - you know. Can I show her the Road of Yellow Bricks? Please, Bee? Huh?"

Then the silence again. Charles was talking too much. Jane knew the Road of Yellow Bricks, of course. It ran straight through Oz from the Deadly Desert to the Emerald City.

After a long time Emily nodded.

"We got to tell her, you know," she said. "Only she might get scared. It's so dark."

"You were scared," Bobby said. "You cried, the first time."

"I didn't. Anyhow it - it's only make-believe."

"Oh, no!" Charles said. "I reached out and touched the crown last time."

"It isn't a crown," Emily said. "It's him, Ruggedo."

Jane thought of the uncle who wasn't a real uncle - who wasn't a real person. "Is he Ruggedo?" she asked.

The children understood.

"Oh, no," Charles said. "Ruggedo lives in the cellar. We give him meat. All red and bluggy. He likes it! Gobble, gobble!"

Beatrice looked at Jane. She nodded toward the clubhouse, which was a piano-box with a genuine secret lock. Then, somehow, quite deftly, she shifted the conversation onto another subject. A game of cowboys-and-Indians started presently and Bobby, howling terribly, led the route around the house.

The piano-box smelled pleasantly of acacia drifting through the cracks. Beatrice and Jane, huddled together in the warm dimness, heard diminishing Indian-cries in the distance. Beatrice looked curiously adult just now.

"I'm glad you came, Janie," she said. "The little kids don't understand at all. It's pretty awful."

"Who is he?"

Beatrice shivered. "I don't know. I think he lives in the cellar." She hesitated. "You have to get to him through the attic, though. I'd be awfully scared if the little kids weren't so - so - they don't seem to mind at all."

"But Bee. Who is he?"

Beatrice turned her head and looked at Jane, and it was quite evident then that she could not or would not say. There was a barrier. But because it was important, she tried. She mentioned the Wrong Uncle.

"I think Ruggedo's the same as him. I know he is, really. Charles and Bobby say so - and they know. They know better than I do. They're littler ... It's hard to explain, but - well, it's sort of like the Scoodlers. Remember?"

The Scoodlers. That unpleasant race that dwelt in a cavern on the road to Oz and had the unconventional ability to detach their heads and hurl them at passers-by. After a moment the parallel became evident. A Scoodler could have his head in one place and his body in another. But both parts would belong to the same Scoodler.

Of course the phantom uncle had a head and a body both. But Jane could understand vaguely the possibility of his double nature, one of him moving deceptively through the house, focus of a strange malaise, and the other nameless, formless, nesting in a cellar and waiting for red meat ...

"Charles knows more than any of us about it," Beatrice said. "He was the one who found out we'd have to feed R-Ruggedo. We tried different things, but it has to be raw meat. And if we stopped - something awful would happen. We kids found that out."

It was significant that Jane didn't ask how children take their equivalent of telepathy for granted.

"They don't know," Beatrice added. "We can't tell them."

"No," Jane said, and the two girls looked at one another, caught in the terrible, helpless problem of immaturity, the knowledge that the mores of the adult world are too complicated to understand, and that children must walk warily.

Adults are always right. They are an alien race.

Luckily for the other children, they had come upon the Enemy in a body. One child alone might have had violent hysterics. But Charles, who made the first discoveries, was only six, still young enough so that the process of going insane in that particular way wasn't possible for him. A six-year-old is in a congenitally psychotic state; it is normal to him.

"And they've been sick ever since he came," Beatrice said.

Jane had already seen that. A wolf may don sheepskin and slide unobserved into a flock, but the sheep are apt to become nervous, though they can not discover the source of their discomfort.

It was a matter of mood. Even he showed the same mood - uneasiness, waiting, sensing that something was wrong and not knowing what - but with him it was simply a matter of camouflage. Jane could tell he didn't want to attract attention by varying from the arbitrary norm he had chosen - that of the human form.

Jane accepted it. The uncle who was - empty - the one in the cellar called Ruggedo, who had to be fed regularly on raw meat, so that Something wouldn't happen ...

A masquerader, from somewhere. He had power, and he had limitations. The obvious evidences of his power were accepted without question.

Children are realists. It was not incredible to them, for this hungry, inhuman stranger to appear among them - for here he was.

He came from somewhere. Out of time, or space, or an inconceivable place. He never had any human feelings; the children sensed that easily. He pretended very cleverly to be human, and he could warp the adult minds to implant artificial memories of his existence. The adults thought they remembered him. An adult will recognise a mirage; a child will be deceived. But conversely, an intellectual mirage will deceive an adult, not a child.

Ruggedo's power couldn't warp their minds, for those were neither quite human nor quite sane, from the adult standpoint. Beatrice, who was oldest, was afraid. She had the beginnings of empathy and imagination.

Little Charlie felt mostly excitement. Bobbie, the smallest, had already begun to be bored ...

Perhaps later Beatrice remembered a little of what Ruggedo looked like, but the others never did. For they reached him by a very strange road, and perhaps they were somewhat altered themselves during the time they were with him. He accepted or rejected food; that was all. Upstairs, the body of the Scoodler pretended to be human, while the Scoodler's head lay in that little, horrible nest he had made by warping space, so he was invisible and intangible to anyone who didn't know how to find the Road of Yellow Bricks.

What was he? Without standards of comparison - and there are none, in this world - he cannot be named. The children thought of him as Ruggedo. But he was not the fat, half-comic, inevitably frustrated Gnome King.

He was never that.

Call him demon.

As a name-symbol, it implies too much and not enough. But it will have to do. By the standard of maturity he was monster, alien, super-being. But because of what he did, and what he wanted - call him demon.

Chapter 2: Raw, Red Meat

One afternoon, a few days later, Beatrice hunted up Jane. "How much money have you got, Janie?" she asked.

"Four dollars and thirty-five cents," Jane said, after investigation. "Dad gave me five dollars at the station. I bought some popcorn and - well - different things."

"Gee, I'm glad you came when you did." Beatrice blew out a long breath. Tacitly it was agreed that the prevalent socialism of childhood clubs would apply in this more urgent clubbing together of interests. Jane's small hoard was available not for any individual among them, but for the good of the group. "We were running out of money," Beatrice said. "Granny caught us taking meat out of the icebox and we don't dare any more. But we can get a lot with your money."

"Neither of them thought of the inevitable time when that fund would be exhausted. Four dollars and thirty-five cents seemed fabulous, in that era. And they needn't buy expensive meat, so long as it was raw and bloody.

They walked together down the acacia-shaded street with its occasional leaning palms and drooping pepper-trees. They bought two pounds of hamburger and improvidently squandered twenty cents on sodas.

When they got back to the house, Sunday lethargy had set in. Uncles Simon and James had gone out for cigars, and Uncle Lew and Bert were reading the papers, while Aunt Bessie crocheted. Grandmother Keaton read 'Young's Magazine', diligently seeking spicy passages. The two girls paused behind the beaded portieres, looking in.

"Come on, kids," Lew said in his deep, resonant voice. "Seen the funnies yet? Mutt and Jeff are good. And Spark Plug -"

"Mr. Gibson is good enough for me," Grandmother Keaton said. "He's a real artist. His people look like people."

The door banged open and Uncle James appeared, fat, grinning, obviously happy from several beers. Uncle Simon paced him like a personified conscience.

"At any rate, it's quiet," he said, turning a sour glance on Jane and Beatrice. "The children make such a rumpus sometimes I can't hear myself think."

"Granny," Beatrice asked, "where are the kids?"

"In the kitchen, I think, dear. They wanted some water for something."

"Thanks." The two girls went out, leaving the room filled with a growing atmosphere of sub-threshold discomfort. The sheep were sensing the wolf among them, but the sheepskin disguise was sufficient. They did not know ...

The kids were in the kitchen, busily painting one section of the comics with brushes and water. When you did that, pictures emerged. One page of the newspaper had been chemically treated so that moisture would bring out the various colours, dull pastels, but singularly glamorous, in a class with Japanese flowers that would bloom in water, and the Chinese paper-shelled almonds that held tiny prizes.

From behind her, Beatrice deftly produced the butcher's package.

"Two pounds," she said. "Janie had some money, and Merton's was open this afternoon. I thought we'd better ..."

Emily kept on painting diligently. Charles jumped up.

"Are we going up now, huh?"

Jane was uneasy. "I don't know if I'd better come along. I -"

"I don't want to either," Bobby said, but that was treason. Charles said Bobby was scared.

"I'm not. It just isn't any fun. I want to play something else."

"Emily," Beatrice said softly. "You don't have to go this time."

"Yes I do." Emily looked up at last from her painting. "I'm not scared."

"I want to see the lights," Charles said. Beatrice whirled on him.

"You tell such lies, Charles! There aren't any lights."

"There are so. Sometimes, anyhow."

"There aren't."

"There are so. You're too dumb to see them. Let's go and feed him."

It was understood that Beatrice took command now. She was the oldest. She was also, Jane sensed, more afraid than the others, even Emily.

They went upstairs, Beatrice carrying the parcel of meat. She had already cut the string. In the upper hall they grouped before a door.

"This is the way, Jane," Charles said rather proudly. "We gotta go up to the attic. There's a swing-down ladder in the bathroom ceiling. We have to climb up on the tub to reach."

"My dress," Jane said doubtfully.

"You won't get dirty. Come on."

Charles wanted to be first, but he was too short. Beatrice climbed to the rim of the tub and tugged at a ring in the ceiling. The trap-door creaked and the stairs ascended slowly, with a certain majesty, beside the tub. It wasn't dark up there. Light came vaguely through the attic windows.

"Come on, Janie," Beatrice said, with a queer breathlessness, and they all scrambled up somehow, by dint of violent acrobatics.

The attic was warm, quiet and dusty. Planks were laid across the beams. Cartons and trunks were here and there.

Beatrice was already walking along one of the beams. Jane watched her.

Beatrice didn't look back; she didn't say anything. Once her hand groped out behind her; Charles, who was nearest, took it. Then Beatrice reached a plank laid across to another rafter. She crossed it. She went on - stopped - and came back, with Charles.

"You weren't doing it right," Charles said disappointedly. "You were thinking of the wrong things."

Beatrice's face looked oddly white in the golden, faint light.

Jane met her cousin's eyes. "Bee -"

"You have to think of something else," Beatrice said quickly. "It's all right. Come on."

Charles at her heels, she started again across the plank. Charles was saying something, in a rhythmic, mechanical monotone:

'One, two, buckle my shoe,

Three, four, knock at the door,

Five, six, pick up sticks -'

Beatrice disappeared.

'Seven, eight, lay them -'

Charles disappeared.

Bobby, his shoulders expressing rebelliousness, followed. And vanished.

Emily made a small sound.

"Oh - Emily!" Jane said.

But her youngest cousin only said, "I don't want to go down there, Janie."

"You don't have to."

"Yes, I do," Emily said. "I'll tell you what. I won't be afraid if you come right after me. I always think there's something coming up behind me to grab - but if you promise to come right after, it'll be all right."

"I promise," Jane said.

Reassured, Emily walked across the bridge. Jane was watching closely this time. Yet she did not see Emily disappear. She was suddenly - gone. Jane stepped forward, and stopped as a sound came from downstairs.

"Jane!" Aunt Bessie's voice. "Jane!" It was louder and more peremptory now. "Jane, where are you? Come here to me!"

Jane stood motionless, looking across the plank bridge. It was quite empty, and there was no trace of Emily or the other children. The attic was suddenly full of invisible menace. Yet she would have gone on, because of her promise, if -

"Jane!"

Jane reluctantly descended and followed the summons to Aunt Bessie's bedroom. That prim-mouthed woman was pinning fabric and moving her lips impatiently.

"Where on earth have you been, Jane? I've been calling and calling."

"We were playing," Jane said. "Did you want me, Aunt Bessie?"

"I should say I did," Aunt Bessie said. "This collar I've been crocheting. It's a dress for you. Come here and let me try it on. How you grow, child!"

And after that there was an eternity of pinning and wriggling, while Jane kept thinking of Emily, alone and afraid somewhere in the attic. She began to hate Aunt Bessie. Yet the thought of rebellion or escape never crossed her mind. The adults were absolute monarchs. As far as relative values went, trying on the collar was more important, at this moment, than anything else in the world. At least, to the adults who administered the world.

While Emily, alone and afraid on the bridge that led to - elsewhere ...

The uncles were playing poker. Aunt Gertrude, the vaudeville actress, had unexpectedly arrived for a few days and was talking with Grandmother Keaton and Aunt Bessie in the living-room. Aunt Gertrude was small and pretty, very charming, with bisque delicacy and a gusto for life that filled Jane with admiration. But she was subdued now.

"This place gives me the creeps," she said, making a dart with her folded fan at Jane's nose. "Hello, funny-face. Why aren't you playing with the other kids?"

"Oh, I'm tired," Jane said, wondering about Emily. It had been nearly an hour since -

"At your age I was never tired," Aunt Gertrude said. "Now look at me. Three a day and that awful straight man I've got - Ma, did I tell you -" The voices pitched lower.

Jane watched Aunt Bessie's skinny fingers move monotonously as she darted her crochet hook through the silk.

"This place is a morgue," Aunt Gertrude said suddenly. "What's wrong with everybody? Who's dead?"

"It's the air," Aunt Bessie said. "Too hot the year round."

"You play Rochester in winter, Bessie my girl, and you'll be glad of a warm climate. It isn't that, anyway. I feel like - mm-m - it's like being on stage after the curtain's gone up."

"It's your fancy," her mother said.

"Ghosts," Aunt Gertrude said, and was silent. Grandmother Keaton looked sharply at Jane.

"Come over here, child," she said.

Room was made on the soft, capacious lap that had held so many youngsters.

Jane snuggled against the reassuring warmth and tried to let her mind go blank, transferring all sense of responsibility to Grandmother Keaton. But it wouldn't work. There was something wrong in the house, and the heavy waves of it beat out from a centre very near them.

The Wrong Uncle. Hunger and the avidity to be fed. The nearness of bloody meat tantalising him as he lay hidden in his strange, unguessable nest elsewhere - otherwhere - in that strange place where the children had vanished.

He was down there, slaving for the food; he was up here, empty, avid, a vortex of hunger very nearby.

He was double, a double uncle, masked but terrifyingly clear ...

Jane closed her eyes and dug her head deeper into Grandmother Keaton's shoulder.

Aunt Gertrude gossiped in an oddly tense voice, as if she sensed wrongness under the surface and was frightened subtly.

"I'm opening at Santa Barbara in a couple of days, Ma," she said. "I - what's wrong with this house, anyhow? I'm as jumpy as a cat today! - and I

want you all to come down and catch the first show. It's a musical comedy. I've been promoted."

"I've seen the 'Prince of Pilsen' before," Grandmother Keaton said.

"Not with me in it. It's my treat. I've engaged rooms at the hotel already. The kids have to come, too. Want to see your auntie act, Jane?"

Jane nodded against her grandmother's shoulder.

"Auntie," Jane said suddenly. "Did you see all the uncles?"

"Certainly I did."

"All of them? Uncle James and Uncle Bert and Uncle Simon and Uncle Lew?"

"The whole kaboodle. Why?"

"I just wondered."

So Aunt Gertrude hadn't noticed the Wrong Uncle either. She wasn't truly observant, Jane thought.

"I haven't seen the kids, though. If they don't hurry up, they won't get any of the presents I've brought. You'd never guess what I have for you, Janie."

But Jane scarcely heard even that exciting promise. For suddenly the tension in the air gave way. The Wrong Uncle who had been a vortex of hunger a moment before was a vortex of ecstasy now. Somewhere, somehow, at last Ruggedo was being fed. Somewhere, somehow, that other half of the double uncle was devouring his bloody fare ...

Jane was not in Grandmother Keaton's lap any more. The room was a spinning darkness that winked with tiny lights - Christmas tree lights, Charles had called them - and there was a core of terror in the centre of the whirl. Here in the vanished room the Wrong Uncle was a funnel leading from that unimaginable nest where the other half of him dwelt, and through the funnel, into the room, poured the full ecstatic tide of his satiety.

Somehow in this instant Jane was very near the other children who must stand beside that spinning focus of darkness. She could almost sense their presence, almost put out her hand to touch theirs.

Now the darkness shivered and the bright, tiny lights drew together, and into her mind came a gush of impossible memories. She was too near him. And he was careless as he fed. He was not guarding his thoughts. They poured out, formless as an animal's filling the dark. Thoughts of red food, and of other times and places where that same red food had been brought to him by other hands.

It was incredible. The memories were not of Earth, not of this time or place. He had travelled far, Ruggedo. In many guises. He remembered now, in a flow of shapeless fissions, he remembered tearing through furred sides that squirmed away from his hunger, remembered the gush of hot, sweet redness through the fur.

Not the fur of anything Jane had ever imagined before ...

He remembered a great court paved with shining things, and something in bright chains in the centre, and rings of watching eyes as he entered and neared the sacrifice.

As he tore his due from its smooth sides, the cruel chains clanked around him as he fed ...

Jane tried to close her eyes and not watch. But it was not with eyes that she watched. And she was ashamed and a little sickened because she was sharing in that feast, tasting the warm red sweetness with Ruggedo in memory, feeling the spin of ecstasy through her head as it spun through his.

"Ah - the kids are coming now," Aunt Gertrude was saying from a long way off.

Jane heard her dimly, and then more clearly, and then suddenly Grandmother Keaton's lap was soft beneath her again, and she was back in the familiar room. "A herd of elephants on the stairs, eh?" Aunt Gertrude said.

They were returning. Jane could hear them too now. Really, they were making much less noise than usual. They were subdued until about half-way down the stairs, and then there was a sudden outburst of clattering and chatter that rang false to Jane's ears.

The children came in, Beatrice a little white, Emily pink and puffy around the eyes. Charles was bubbling over with repressed excitement, but Bobby, the smallest, was glum and bored. At sight of Aunt Gertrude, the uproar redoubled, though Beatrice exchanged a quick, significant glance with Jane.

Then presents and noise, and the uncles coming back in; excited discussion of the trip to Santa Barbara - a strained cheeriness that, somehow, kept dying down into heavy silence.

None of the adults ever really looked over their shoulders, but - the feeling was of bad things to come.

Only the children - not even Aunt Gertrude - were aware of the complete emptiness of the Wrong Uncle. The projection of a lazy, torpid, semi-mindless entity. Superficially he was as convincingly human as if he had never focused his hunger here under this roof, never let his thoughts whirl through the minds of the children, never remembered his red, dripping feasts of other times and places.

He was very sated now. They could feel the torpor pulsing out in slow, drowsy waves so that all the grown-ups were yawning and wondering why. But even now he was empty. Not real. The 'Nobody-there' feeling was as acute as ever to all the small, keen, perceptive minds that saw him as he was.

Chapter 3: Sated Eater

Later, at bedtime, only Charles wanted to talk about the matter. It seemed

to Jane that Beatrice had grown up a little since the early afternoon. Bobby was reading 'The Jungle Book', or pretending to, with much pleased admiration of the pictures showing Shere Khan, the tiger. Emily had turned her face to the wall and was pretending to be asleep.

"Aunt Bessie called me," Jane told her, sensing a faint reproach. "I tried as soon as I could to get away from her. She wanted to try that collar thing on me."

"Oh." The apology was accepted. But Beatrice still refused to talk. Jane went over to Emily's bed and put her arm around the little girl.

"Mad at me, Emily?"

"No."

"You are, though. I couldn't help it, honey."

"It was all right," Emily said. "I didn't care."

"All bright and shiny," Charles said sleepily. "Like a Christmas tree."

Beatrice whirled on him. "Shut up!" she cried. "Shut up, Charles! Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

Aunt Bessie put her head into the room.

"What's the matter, children?" she asked.

"Nothing, Auntie," Beatrice said. "We were just playing."

Fed, temporarily sated, it lay torpid in its curious nest. The house was silent, the occupants asleep. Even the Wrong Uncle slept, for Ruggedo was a good mimic.

The Wrong Uncle was not a phantasm, not a mere projection of Ruggedo. As an amoeba extends a pseudopod toward food, so Ruggedo had extended and created the Wrong Uncle. But there the parallel stopped. For the Wrong Uncle was not an elastic extension that could be withdrawn at will. Rather, he - it - was a permanent limb, as a man's arm is. From the brain through the neural system the message goes, and the arm stretches out, the fingers constrict - and there is food in the hand's grip.

But Ruggedo's extension was less limited. It was not permanently bound by rigid laws of matter. An arm may be painted black. And the Wrong Uncle looked and acted human, except to clear immature eyes.

There were rules to be followed, even by Ruggedo. The natural laws of a world could bind it to a certain extent. There were cycles. The life-span of a moth-caterpillar is run by cycles, and before it can spin its cocoon and metamorphose, it must eat - eat - eat. Not until the time of change had come can it evade its current incarnation. Nor could Ruggedo change, now, until the end of its cycle had come. Then there would be another metamorphosis, as there had already, in the unthinkable eternity of its past, been a million curious mutations.

But, at present, it was bound by the rules of its current cycle. The extension could not be withdrawn. And the Wrong Uncle was a part of it, and it was a part of the Wrong Uncle.

The Scoodler's body and the Scoodler's head.

Through the dark house beat the unceasing, drowsy waves of satiety - slowly, imperceptibly quickening toward that nervous pulse of avidity that always came after the processes of indigestion and digestion had been completed.

Aunt Bessie rolled over and began to snore. In another room, the Wrong Uncle, without waking, turned on his back and also snored.

The talent of protective mimicry was well developed ...

It was afternoon again, though by only half an hour, and the pulse in the house had changed subtly in tempo and mood.

"If we're going up to Santa Barbara," Grandmother Keaton had said, "I'm going to take the children down to the dentist today. Their teeth want cleaning, and it's hard enough to get an appointment with Dr. Hover for one youngster, not to mention four. Jane, your mother wrote me you'd been to the dentist a month ago, so you needn't go."

After that the trouble hung unspoken over the children. But no one mentioned it. Only, as Grandmother Keaton herded the kids out on the porch, Beatrice reached behind her without looking, fumbled, found Jane's hand, and squeezed it hard. That was all.

But the responsibility had been passed on. No words had been needed. Beatrice had said plainly that it was Jane's job now. It was her responsibility.

She dared not delay too long. She was too vividly aware of the rising tide of depression affecting the adults. Ruggedo was getting hungry again.

She watched her cousins till they vanished beneath the pepper-trees, and the distant rumble of the trolley put a period to any hope of their return. After that, Jane walked to the butcher shop, and bought two pounds of meat. She drank a soda. Then she came back to the house.

She felt the pulse beating out faster.

She got a tin pan from the kitchen and put the meat on it, and slipped up to the bathroom. It was hard to reach the attic with her burden and without help, but she did it. In the warm stillness beneath the roof she stood waiting, half-hoping to hear Aunt Bessie call again and relieve her of this duty. But no voice came.

The simple mechanics of what she had to do were sufficiently prosaic to keep fear at a little distance. Besides, she was scarcely nine. And it was not dark in the attic.

She walked along the rafter, balancing, till she came to the plank bridge. She felt its resilient vibration underfoot.

'One, two, buckle my shoe,
Three, four, knock at the door,
Five, six, pick up sticks,
'Seven, eight -'

She missed the way twice. The third time she succeeded. The mind had to be at just the right pitch of abstraction ... She crossed the bridge, and turned, and -

It was dim, almost dark, in this place. It smelled cold and hollow, of the underground. Without surprise, she knew she was deep down, perhaps beneath the house, perhaps very far away from it. That was as acceptable to her as the rest of the strangeness. She felt no surprise.

Curiously, she seemed to know the way. She was going into a tiny enclosure, and yet at the same time she wandered for a while through low-roofed, hollow spaces, endless, very dim, smelling of cold and moisture. An unpleasant place to the mind, and a dangerous place as well to wander through with one's little pan of meat.

It found the meat acceptable.

Looking back later, Jane had no recollection whatever of it. She did not know how she had proffered the food, or how it had been received, or where in that place of paradoxical space and smallness it lay dreaming of other worlds and eras.

She only knew that the darkness spun around her again, winking with little lights, as it devoured its food. Memories swirled from its mind to hers as if the two minds were of one fabric. She saw more clearly this time. She saw a great winged thing caged in a glittering pen, and she remembered as Ruggedo remembered, and leaped with Ruggedo's leap, feeling the wings buffet about her and feeling her rending hunger rip into the body, and tasting avidly the hot, sweet, salty fluid bubbling out.

It was a mixed memory. Blending with it, other victims shifted beneath Ruggedo's grip, the feathery pinions becoming the beast of great clawed arms and the writhe of reptilian liveness. All his victims became one in memory as he ate.

One flash of another memory opened briefly toward the last. Jane was aware of a great swaying garden of flowers larger than herself, and of cowed figures moving silently among them, and of a victim with showering pale hair lying helpless upon the lip of one gigantic flower, held down with chains like shining blossoms. And it seemed to Jane that she herself went cowed among those silent figures, and that he - it - Ruggedo - in another guise walked beside her toward the sacrifice.

It was the first human sacrifice he had recalled. Jane would have liked to know more about that. She had no moral scruples, of course. Food was food. But the memory flickered smoothly into another picture and she never saw the end. She did not really need to see it. There was only one end to

all these memories. Perhaps it was as well for her that Ruggedo did not dwell overlong on that particular moment of all his bloody meals.

'Seventeen, eighteen,

Maids in waiting,

Nineteen, twenty -'

She tilted precariously back across the rafters, holding her empty pan. The attic smelled dusty. It helped to take away the reek of remembered crimson from her mind ...

When the children came back, Beatrice said simply, "Did you?" and Jane nodded. The taboo still held. They would not discuss the matter more fully except in case of real need. And the drowsy, torpid heat in the house, the psychic emptiness of the Wrong Uncle, showed plainly that the danger had been averted again - for a time ...

"Read me about Mowgli, Granny," Bobby said. Grandmother Keaton settled down, wiped and adjusted her spectacles, and took up Kipling. Presently the other children were drawn into the charmed circle. Grandmother spoke of Shere Khan's downfall - of the cattle driven into the deep gulch to draw the tiger - and of the earth-shaking stampede that smashed the killer into bloody pulp.

"Well," Grandmother Keaton said, closing the book, "that's the end of Shere Khan. He's dead now."

"No he isn't," Bobby roused and said sleepily.

"Of course he is. Good and dead. The cattle killed him."

"Only at the end, Granny. If you start reading at the beginning again, Shere Khan's right there."

Bobby, of course, was too young to have any conception of death. You were killed sometimes in games of cowboys-and-Indians, an ending neither regrettable nor fatal. Death is an absolute term that needs personal experience to be made understandable.

Uncle Lew smoked his pipe and wrinkled the brown skin around his eyes at Uncle Bert, who bit his lips and hesitated a long time between moves. But Uncle Lew won the chess game anyway. Uncle James winked at Aunt Gertrude and said he thought he'd take a walk, would she like to come along? She would.

After their departure, Aunt Bessie looked up, sniffed.

"You just take a whiff of their breaths when they come back, Ma," she said. "Why do you stand for it?"

But Grandmother Keaton chuckled and stroked Bobby's hair. He had fallen asleep on her lap, his hands curled into small fists, his cheeks faintly flushed.

Uncle Simon's gaunt figure stood by the window.

He watched through the curtains, and said nothing at all.

"Early to bed," Aunt Bessie said, "if we're going to Santa Barbara in the morning, children!"

And that was that.

Chapter 4: End of the Game

By morning Bobby was running a temperature, and Grandmother Keaton refused to risk his life in Santa Barbara. This made Bobby very sullen, but solved the problem the children had been wondering about for many hours. Also, a telephone call from Jane's father said that he was arriving that day to pick up his daughter, and she had a little brother now. Jane, who had no illusions about the stork, was relieved, and hoped her mother wouldn't be sick any more now.

A conclave was held in Bobby's bedroom before breakfast.

"You know what to do, Bobby," Beatrice said. "Promise you'll do it?"

"Promise. Uh-huh."

"You can do it today, Janie, before your father comes. And you'd better get a lot of meat and leave it for Bobby."

"I can't buy any meat without money," Bobby said. Somewhat reluctantly Beatrice counted out what was left of Jane's small hoard, and handed it over. Bobby stuffed the change under his pillow and pulled at the red flannel wound around his neck.

"It scratches," he said. "I'm not sick, anyway."

"It was those green pears you ate yesterday," Emily said very meanly. "You thought nobody saw you, didn't you?"

Charles came in; he had been downstairs. He was breathless.

"Hey, know what happened?" he said. "He hurt his foot. Now he can't go to Santa Barbara. I bet he did it on purpose."

"Gosh," Jane said. "How?"

"He said he twisted it on the stairs. But I bet it's a lie. He just doesn't want to go."

"Maybe he can't go - that far," Beatrice said, with a sudden flash of intuition, and they spoke no more of the subject. But Beatrice, Emily and Charles were all relieved that the Wrong Uncle was not to go to Santa Barbara with them, after all.

It took two taxis to carry the travellers and their luggage. Grandmother Keaton, the Wrong Uncle and Jane stood on the front porch and waved. The automobiles clattered off, and Jane promptly got some money from Bobby, and went to the butcher store, returning heavy-laden.

The Wrong Uncle, leaning on a cane, hobbled into the sun-parlour and lay down. Grandmother Keaton made a repulsive but healthful drink for Bobby, and Jane decided not to do what she had to do until afternoon. Bobby read 'The Jungle Book', stumbling over the hard words, and, for the while, the truce held.

Jane was not to forget that day quickly. The smells were sharply distinct; the odour of baking bread from the kitchen, the sticky-sweet flower scents from outside, the slightly dusty, rich-brown aroma exhaled by the sun-warmed rugs and furniture. Grandmother Keaton went up to her bedroom to cold-cream her hands and face, and Jane lounged on the threshold, watching.

It was a charming room, in its comfortable, unimaginative way. The curtains were so stiffly starched that they billowed out in crisp whiteness, and the bureau was cluttered with fascinating objects - a pin-cushion shaped like a doll, a tiny red china shoe, with tinier grey china mice on it, a cameo brooch bearing a portrait of Grandmother Keaton as a girl.

And slowly, insistent, the pulse increased, felt even here, in this bedroom, where Jane felt it was a rather impossible intrusion.

Directly after lunch the bell rang, and it was Jane's father, come to take her back to San Francisco. He was in a hurry to catch the train, and there was time only for a hurried conversation before the two were whisked off in the waiting taxi. But Jane had found time to run upstairs, and say good-bye to Bobby - and tell him where the meat was hidden.

"All right, Janie," Bobby said. "Good-bye."

She knew she should not have left the job to Bobby. A nagging sense of responsibility haunted her all the way to the railroad station. She was only vaguely aware of adult voices saying the train would be very late, and of her father suggesting that the circus was in town ...

It was a good circus. She almost forgot Bobby and the crisis that would be mounting so dangerously unless he met it as he had promised. Early evening was blue as they moved with the crowd out of the tent. And then through a rift Jane saw a small, familiar figure, and the bottom dropped out of her stomach. She knew.

Mr. Larkin saw Bobby in almost the same instant. He called sharply, and a moment later the two children were looking at one another, Bobby's plump face sullen.

"Does your grandmother know you're here, Bobby?" Mr. Larkin said.

"Well, I guess not," Bobby said.

"You ought to be paddled, young man. Come along, both of you. I'll have to phone her right away. She'll be worried to death."

In the drug store, while he telephoned, Jane looked at her cousin. She was suffering the first pang of maturity's burden, the knowledge of responsibility misused.

"Bobby," she said. "Did you?"

"You leave me alone," Bobby said with a scowl. There was silence.

Mr. Larkin came back. "Nobody answered. I've called a taxi. There'll be just time to get Bobby back before our train leaves."

In the taxi also there was mostly silence. As for what might be happening at the house, Jane did not think of that at all. The mind has its own automatic protections. And in any case, it was too late now ...

When the taxi drew up, the house was blazing with orange squares of windows in the dusk. There were men on the porch, and light glinted on a police officer's shield.

"You kids wait here," Mr. Larkin said uneasily. "Don't get out of the car."

The taxi driver shrugged and pulled out a folded newspaper as Mr. Larkin hurried toward the porch. In the back seat Jane spoke to Bobby, her voice very soft.

"You didn't," she whispered. It was not even an accusation.

"I don't care," Bobby whispered back. "I was tired of that game. I wanted to play something else." He giggled. "I won, anyhow," he declared.

"How? What happened?"

"The police came, like I knew they would. He never thought of that. So I won."

"But how?"

"Well, it was sort of like 'The Jungle Book'. Shooting tigers, remember? They tied a kid to a stake and, when the tiger comes - bang! Only the kids were all gone to Santa Barbara, and you'd gone too. So I used Granny. I didn't think she'd mind. She plays games with us a lot. And anyhow she was the only one left."

"But Bobby, a kid doesn't mean a kid like us. It means a baby goat. And anyhow -"

"Oh!" Bobby whispered. "Oh - well, anyhow, I thought Granny would be all right. She's too fat to run fast." He grinned scornfully. "He's dumb," he said. "He should have known the hunters always come when you tie a kid out for the tiger. He doesn't know anything. When I told him I'd locked Granny in her room and nobody else was around, I thought he might guess." Bobby looked crafty. "I was smart. I told him through the window. I thought he might think about me being a kid. But he didn't. He went right upstairs - fast. He even forgot to limp. I guess he was pretty hungry by then." Bobby glanced toward the swarming porch. "Prob'ly the police have got him now," he added carelessly. "It was easy as pie. I won."

Jane's mind had not followed these fancies.

"Is she dead?" she asked, very softly.

Bobby looked at her. The word had a different meaning for him. It had no meaning, beyond a phase in a game. And, to his knowledge, the tiger had never harmed the tethered kid.

Mr. Larkin was coming back to the taxi now, walking very slowly and not very straight.

Jane could not see his face ...

It was hushed up, of course, as much as possible. The children, who knew so much more than those who were shielding them, were futilely protected from the knowledge of what had happened. As futilely as they, in their turn, had tried to protect their elders. Except for the two oldest girls, they didn't particularly care. The game was over. Granny had had to go away on a long, long journey, and she would never be back.

They understood what that meant well enough.

The Wrong Uncle, on the other hand, had had to go away too, they were told, to a big hospital where he would be taken care of all his life.

This puzzled them a little, for it fell somewhat outside the limits of their experience. Death they understood very imperfectly, but this other thing was completely mystifying. They didn't greatly care, once their interest faded, though Bobby for some time listened to readings of 'The Jungle Book' with unusual attention, wondering if this time they would take the tiger away instead of killing him on the spot. They never did, of course. Evidently in real life tigers were different ...

For a long time afterward, in nightmares, Jane's perverse imagination dwelt upon and relived the things she would not let it remember when she was awake. She would see Granny's bedroom as she had seen it last, the starched curtains billowing, the sunshine, the red china shoe, the doll pin-cushion. Granny, rubbing cold cream into her wrinkled hands and looking up more and more nervously from time to time as the long, avid waves of hunger pulsed through the house from the thing in its dreadful hollow place down below.

It must have been very hungry. The Wrong Uncle, pretending to a wrenched ankle downstairs, must have shifted and turned upon the couch, that hollow man, empty and blind of everything but the need for sustenance, the one red food he could not live without. The empty automaton in the sun-porch and the ravenous being in its warp below pulsing with one hunger, ravening for one food ...

It had been very wise of Bobby to speak through the window when he had delivered his baited message.

Upstairs in the locked room, Granny must have discovered presently that she could not get out. Her fat, mottled fingers, slippery from cold-creaming, must have tugged vainly at the knob.

Jane dreamed of the sound of those footsteps many times. The tread she had never heard was louder and more real to her than any which had ever sounded in her ears. She knew very surely how they must have come

bounding up the stairs, thump thump, thump, two steps at a time, so that Granny would look up in alarm, knowing it could not be the uncle with his wrenched ankle. She would have jumped up then, her heart knocking, thinking wildly of burglars.

It can't have lasted long. The steps would have taken scarcely the length of a heartbeat to come down the hall. And by now the house would be shaking and pulsing with one triumphant roar of hunger almost appeased. The thumping steps would beat its rhythm to it, the long quick strides coming with dreadful purposefulness down the hall. And then the key clicking in the lock. And then -

Usually then Jane awoke ...

A little boy isn't responsible. Jane told herself that many times, then and later. She didn't see Bobby again very often, and when she did he had forgotten a great deal; new experiences had crowded out the old. He got a puppy for Christmas, and he started school. When he heard that the Wrong Uncle had died in the asylum he had to think hard to remember who they meant, for to the younger children the Wrong Uncle had never been a member of the family, only a part in a game they had played and won.

Gradually the nameless distress which had once pervaded the household faded and ceased. It was strongest, most desperate, in the days just after Granny's death, but everyone attributed that to shock. When it died away they were sure.

By sheer accident Bobby's cold, limited logic had been correct. Ruggedo would not have been playing fair if he had brought still another Wrong Uncle into the game, and Bobby had trusted him to observe the rules. He did observe them, for they were a law he could not break.

Ruggedo and the Wrong Uncle were parts of a whole, indissolubly bound into their cycle. Not until the cycle had been successfully completed could the Wrong Uncle extension be retracted or the cord broken. So, in the end, Ruggedo was helpless.

In the asylum, the Wrong Uncle slowly starved. He would not touch what they offered. He knew what he wanted, but they would not give him that. The head and the body died together, and the house that had been Grandmother Keaton's was peaceful once more.

If Bobby ever remembered, no one knew it. He had acted with perfect logic, limited only by his experience. If you do something sufficiently bad, the policeman will come and get you. And he was tired of the game. Only his competitive instinct kept him from simply quitting it and playing something else.

As it was, he wanted to win - and he had won.

No adult would have done what Bobby did - but a child is of a different species. By adult standards, a child is not wholly sane. Because of the way his mind worked, then - because of what he did, and what he wanted -

Call him demon.

CALL HIM DEMON

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