

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

JANUARY, 1949

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use
of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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Food for Demons

BY E. EVERETT EVANS

THE CLASS was breaking up now. There was a currying and a scraping, and a babble of cheerful young voices. Professor Fergus Judson pretended to be fumbling with some papers on his desk.

Yet the moment the way was clear he shuffled to the door, and started to slink towards the nearest exit.

At the last moment, he saw Professor Roberta Tooker coming along the hall, and beyond her, also approaching, was Professor Abe Caldwell. Judson moved quickly back to get out of sight, but the woman saw him, and hurried up to him.

"Fergus," she said, and there was concern in her throaty voice, "what's the matter with you these days?"

"Uh . . . I'm not feeling well, Roberta," he mumbled, then started past her.

She made no effort to stop him. From the door he glanced back, and saw that she was still watching him thoughtfully. A moment later Caldwell reached her side, and stopped to speak to her. Judson went out sighing. They made a pleasant looking couple.

At thirty-five Roberta Tooker was the woman who fitted most of the dreams he had had during twenty-five scholarly years. He, at forty-four, considered himself a little too old for her . . . but still there had been times when he had hoped.

That was over. For six weeks now he had been possessed, *literally possessed*, by a demon. It seemed incredible, it was fantastic, but he no longer doubted. Even as he walked slowly along beneath the beautiful old elms, he could feel the weight of it inside him. It was a pressure along his nerves



and in his mind, that put a sag in his shoulders and slowed his step.

It had taken just six weeks to tinge his black hair with grey, to elongate the planes of his strongly built face, to put a droop on his mouth. Six weeks of mental torture to strip forty pounds from his body. Weeks in which he had learned to hate the *thing* within him with a hatred that consumed his strength and drained his energy.

Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

Food for humans, food for non-humans—two quite different things

He must free himself—that was the purpose that burned like molten lava inside him—free himself of the horror he had brought into existence. It had been no cosmic accident of time or space that had brought this rapacious demon to him six weeks before. Judson alone had made the entry possible. His was the fault. But the effect, seemingly beyond his control, now threatened everyone within the little college town.

And yet, that moment in which he had conquered the mystery of the archaic incantation, he had known only elation. Slowly, clearly, sonorously, he'd let the cryptic syllables roll forth. Carefully, meticulously, he'd enunciated each word, each phrase that was written in faded ink on the mildewed page before him. His heavy face glowed pink and damp with the effort to be exact and precise in every orthoëpic intonation.

The incantation completed, he'd waited. At first with expectation. Then, as the moments dragged, with disappointment. There'd been no flash of blue fire, no smell of brimstone, no noise or thunder-clap. Nothing but a great silence and failure.

"*Oh, I wouldn't feel that way!*"

THE words had come so clearly that Professor Judson had started from his chair. He'd peered quickly around the shadow-filled room, then plunged across the carpet to the wall-switch. With a *click!* he'd flooded the room with light. But there was still nothing, no being, no shape. He was alone . . . and yet a voice not his own had spoken to him.

"Naturally you cannot see that which is not matter, and which, moreover, is within your own mind and body." The voice was flat and grating. Some of the elation that had flooded the Professor's being fled before that harsh and menacing over-tone. He sank bonelessly into his chair.

"Inside me?" he stammered. "In-inside me!"

There was a dry chuckle—it seemed as real as that—inside his head.

"It's the safest place, you'll agree," came the smug response. "But enough of this talk." The voice became impatient, demanding. "You will lead me at once to the

dwelling of some savant whose mind is . . . ah . . . worthy of my attention. *I hunger!*"

Before he could speak, before he could think, Judson had felt himself *impelled* out of the room, out of the house. He was not even allowed to get his top-coat against the evening chill. And then he was walking swiftly along a dim-lit street. As he'd walked there was a stirring in his mind, and an unpleasant mumbling. Judson had had the curious feeling that something was turning the pages of his book of knowledge and memory. Names kept coming to the fore of his consciousness . . . Hendryx Snyder . . . Babbitt . . . and each time a muttered rejection, "No, not good enough." Wheater "Ah, that's the one!"

Judson knew that a decision had been made. By this time he was running along the shadowed, quiet streets. He saw just ahead the home of Doctor Levane Wheater, head of the department of Philosophy. He felt himself slowing.

"All right," said the demon. "That's near enough."

Fergus Judson came to a halt. He could feel the thing stirring in his mind, and a sharp lancination of ecstasy coursed through him. He almost blanked out. When he came to full consciousness again, he was striding along the walk, but *away* from Doctor Wheater's home.

"What—what happened?" he'd whispered.

"*I fed!*" was the satisfied answer.

That night was six weeks behind him. He had wanted to forget it, but it was ever present in his thoughts. He'd worked as he never worked before—long hours to occupy his mind and drug his body—yet still his crime pointed an inexorable finger at him. Now all its maliciousness had been made hideously vivid to him again. Yesterday, for the second time, the demon had stirred to life—and fed!

Professor Judson's unpleasant reverie ended as he left the campus and crossed the street to his home.

AT NINE o'clock that night Professor Fergus Judson sat alone in his crowded, book-lined study. The reading lamp on the desk beside him was focussed on the aged and musty manuscript he was studying. The

pale glow that barely reached out to the man threw the rest of the room into weird deepening shadows. In that dim light Judson seemed but a caricature of a man—tall, gaunt, ungainly, with spectre-like face and bony hands. He was aware of the change that the past six weeks had wrought, but pride in his personal appearance was no longer important to him.

With a sigh, now, he looked up from the manuscript. The alphabet that he'd worked out appeared flawless, and yet, in translation, the result seemed gibberish. Yet there was one fact that stood out as important. Of the one hundred and sixty-nine words the page contained, one—"sufrani"—was repeated thirteen times. *Thirteen*—metaphysically powerful. And the total wordage was *thirteen squared*—a grand cycle!

The ringing of his doorbell brought the thought to an end. Slowly, he pushed back his chair and climbed to his feet. The bell rang again, more insistently this time. Judson quickened his step; but when he reached the door he opened it reluctantly.

Roberta Tooker slipped past him into the hall. With a half-smile she shook back the kerchief that covered her dark hair.

"I was afraid you weren't going to let me in," she said.

He looked at her wordlessly. He was shocked, yet not surprised. He should have guessed that she would come.

She moved past him into the study and sank down into a chair. Her eyes frowned at him.

He had time to stiffen to her presence and to realize that he might have to tell her the truth in order to get rid of her. It was vital that she leave before her visit registered strongly enough on his mind so that the demon would notice it when it awoke a month and a half hence.

"Roberta," he said in the firmest voice, "I want you to leave at once."

She leaned back in her chair. "Throw me out," she challenged with a faint smile. "No, Fergus, I've come to find out what's wrong. You may as well tell me now."

Judson didn't argue. Swiftly he told her of his research and of the ancient incantation he had discovered. "Naturally," he said wearily, "I felt that science demanded it of me, so I tried the ritual."

Roberta's brows were knit. She seemed puzzled. "And it worked?" she asked.

Watching the changing expression on her face, Judson almost gave up. He glanced around the room. The soft rug; the hard wood of the desk and chairs; the oak-paneled walls; the hundreds of books—so real, so normal, so ordinary. And it seemed to him that he knew no words that could possibly fit the other reality inside him. Then he remembered how important it was that she leave. He made the attempt.

When he had finished, she stood up. Her face was a study. "This demon," she said: She repeated the word under her breath, "demon", and her expression grew thoughtful. Then she sighed and said aloud, "You say it feeds? On what?"

He had been holding that back, watching her struggling against a pitying disbelief. Now, reluctantly, he told her. "It's the life essence or mind essence that it wants. The latter, I think, because it insists on going after men of great intelligence. But when it has fed life, too, is gone." He sighed drearily. "First, Dr. Wheater, then yesterday in the classroom, Dr. Harlan. Roberta, I'm a sickened man."

Once more he realized that he had strained her credulity. She was twisting her kerchief in her hands, on which the knuckles stood out whitely. He said gently, "Don't you think that you'd better go now?"

She came over to his desk, and stood looking down at the manuscript he had been studying.

"Is there no"—she hesitated—"no counterspell?"

He shook his head. "This is part of the same holograph, and it may be one," he explained. "But it doesn't seem to be in the same language, and I'm beginning to think that it's beyond my powers. I keep trying. . . ." He broke off. "Roberta, I beg you, go! It's dangerous for you here!"

She gave him a long look, then without a further word turned and left the room. There was the sound of a door closing. Roberta was gone..

THE next afternoon, when Professor Fergus Judson opened the door into the little courtroom he knew at once that he was late—the inquest into the untimely

death of Doctor Willis Harland had already begun.

He saw, almost immediately, Roberta Tooker and Abe Caldwell, seated near the center of the room. It startled him. Had Roberta told Caldwell? It seemed almost unbelievable that she could have done so, that she could thus have violated his confidence. But why else should they be here, together?

Judson sank into a rear corner seat, and made himself as inconspicuous as possible. The preliminaries were apparently over, for the Coroner was just calling Dr. Hobart Preston, who had performed the autopsy, to the stand. It was quickly established that he was head of the department of surgery at the State University, which qualified him as an expert. Then the Coroner began his questioning.

"Just what did you find in the autopsy, Doctor Preston?"

"That's just it. I couldn't find a single unusual feature to show why Doctor Harlan should have died. He seemed in very good health generally—only the little usual weaknesses here and there that are to be expected in a man of his age, I would say that his heart was unusually sound; I could find no signs of cancer, no stomach or other digestive ailments, no blood clots or internal bleeding, no brain injury."

"You mean, then," the Coroner asked, "that there is nothing to indicate that this was more than an ordinary death from causes unknown?"

"Just so, as far as I could determine."

"Thank you, Doctor Preston. You may step down. Call John Stover to the stand."

When sworn in, Stover disclosed that he was one of Dr. Harlan's students, and had been present at that fatal lecture. "The Doctor was right in the midst of his discourse, talking in his usual forceful way," Stover testified. "Suddenly he broke off in the middle of a word. His face showed astonishment, then pain, and he dropped to the floor as though he had been poleaxed. When we rushed up to the rostrum, he was dead."

The room was hushed. Muted sounds were coming in through the opened windows. Judson sat with lowered eyes, listening intently.

Dr. Preston asked permission to take the stand again. "There was one odd thing which I didn't mention before," the noted doctor explained. "I don't know if or what it means, but every individual cell seemed to be dead, especially those of the brain. They seemed to have deteriorated with unusual rapidity."

"Yet this was not the result of an injury to the brain?" the Coroner interrupted.

"No, I'm quite sure that it was not. It is what occurs normally after death, yet usually after a much longer period, when the body itself begins to disintegrate."

There was a stir in the audience, and a tall figure stood up. "Mr. Coroner, may I ask the Doctor a question?"

Fergus Judson snapped to attention at the sound of that voice. It was Caldwell.

"Yes," the Coroner agreed, "if it is pertinent to this inquiry."

"The Doctor has intimated that no science we know can account for this death," Caldwell said, speaking slowly and clearly. "I should like to ask the Doctor, then, if this death could have been caused by a demon?"

The famous surgeon on the stand looked startled, hesitated, then flushed scarlet. "Certainly not!" he snapped.

Judson heard an angry murmur from the audience. He saw that Roberta was pulling on Caldwell's arm, attempting to make him sit down and keep quiet. Her face was impatient, angry.

The Coroner rapped his gavel. "This is not the place for such levity," he said severely.

Caldwell remained perfectly calm, then turned to leave the room. He spied Judson, and for a moment his stride paused, as he looked sardonically straight into the eyes of his rival. Then he stalked out of the courtroom.

Judson had his answer. Roberta had told.

THE next few weeks were ones of increasing torment to Fergus Judson. His health deteriorated; he became listless and absent-minded so that his work at the college suffered severely. Students and colleagues looked at him curiously every time he crossed the campus or came into the lecture room.

Roberta was plainly avoiding him. Just

as he had tried to evade her when he first found himself possessed by the demon, so now she took to slipping into other rooms, to turning corners when he was approaching.

But one day at the beginning of the fifth week they came face to face on the campus. She smiled at him and held out her hand. Judson eagerly took the outstretched hand . . . and started to feel the folded paper in it. Roberta did not speak. With a quick, sliding motion she freed her hand and was past him.

He opened the paper and read: "Prof. William Newlon, leading authority on dead languages, Centreville University." And underneath that, "your next victim."

Judson sank weakly onto a nearby bench. *Select the victims for the demon!* That was no better than murder! How could Roberta . . . he could not complete the thought.

Neither, he found, could he dismiss the concept from his mind. Slowly, unwillingly, he began to see a modicum of logic in the plan she must have in mind.

Newlon was in his eighties, had retired from active teaching and writing. Since it had become apparent that Judson could not prevent the demon from feeding when and where it willed, it was possible that she was right in suggesting that he try to steer it towards selected men who had lived their lives, who had the weight of years upon them, rather than younger men who were still in their prime of usefulness to the world.

So, Judson was in Centreville on the day when the demon next awoke. When he felt that sinister probing of his mind, he concentrated upon Professor Newlon; held insistently to the thought that this man had tremendous mental abilities and knowledge. After the sadistic orgy of devouring, Judson felt the demon mentally patting him on the back. "Now, that's the proper spirit. Co-operate with me and we'll get along fine. I can do things for you, you know. You're beginning to get sensible."

It soon became apparent that Roberta was keeping careful track of the weeks. Shortly before each feeding time she would make it a point to contact Judson briefly, although she carefully avoided him at all other times. There would be the inevitable

slip of paper containing the name and address of some aging but still noted authority of dead languages, anthropology or orthoëpics.

Judson began, too, to notice that his own knowledge was increasing immensely. It was apparent that the demon was unable—or did not bother—to isolate to itself the information it gained.

Most important, each of the new minds was giving Judson additional knowledge which he needed and at once put to work at the deciphering of that parchment whose translation was his most urgent work at this time. Now it was becoming clearer to him where he had made his mistakes in the original translation, clearer what the aged manuscript really was.

HE SAT musing one evening. Was *this* Roberta's plan? For a moment he let his thoughts rest, not on her plan, but on the woman herself, and his dreams of her. But quickly blanked out such thoughts as best he could. They must never take any unnecessary chances of the demon becoming aware of her, of her keen mind:

He switched his thoughts to Abe Caldwell. He was certain that the man knew about his secret, was using that knowledge not only to further his own suit with Roberta Tooker, but also to discredit Judson. On their occasional meetings, Caldwell merely looked at Judson with a sneering smile. But one day he stopped squarely in front of him.

"Fergus," he said coldly, "it would be advisable for you to stay away from Miss Tooker, in view of the fact that you have," he tapped his head, "a tenant. It isn't safe for her."

Judson glared back at him, but didn't trust himself to reply. Yet the fact that his rival had warned him away from Roberta gave Judson a brief yet ecstatic hope. Caldwell must believe that they were frequently together. Apparently, then, Roberta had not given the man her complete confidence.

"I ought to set the demon after Caldwell," Judson ruminated bitterly. "But I just can't do it. Perhaps Roberta does love him, perhaps he can make her happy. I love her far too much to dare tamper with her possible happiness in any way."

FERGUS JUDSON grew more uneasy and perturbed as the months crawled by. It seemed impossible that he was not becoming suspect . . . nor were his fears unjustified. It came when he had just turned away from the house where the demon had completed its sixth feeding. He had not gone a block down the still, night-shaded street when a police car drew up alongside the curb, and two uniformed men sprang out to confront him.

"You Professor Fergus Judson?"

"Yes," surprised.

"Professor James Locksley just died. You'll have to come along with us."

At the station it was soon apparent that the police were baffled. There was no evidence of murder in this death. Yet they had had an anonymous note warning them to be on the lookout for Judson if any member of the college faculty died. And they had found him less than a block away. They questioned him for long hours, but could get nothing from him in the way of direct evidence.

As he returned home, freed at last of their questionings, Fergus Judson knew that he had Abe Caldwell to thank for what he had just suffered. Knew, too, that Caldwell had done his worst and was no longer important. Now Judson had worse worries.

For when Judson had been taken to the police station the demon had not yet fallen into that strange digestive stupor that claimed it after each feeding. It had stayed awake, a silent witness to the questioning, had sometimes prompted the answers which Judson was forced to make, had established a mental control that made it impossible for the Professor to make a complete confession of the guilt he felt so keenly, as he would gladly have done; as he tried so valiantly to do.

Now, on the way home, the demon prosecuted its own inquisition of Judson. Slowly, relentlessly, it turned the man's mind inside out in the process of finding out what was back of all this sudden inquiry into the relationship between Judson and these many deaths.

Fight and struggle as he might, Judson was powerless before the uncanny mental abilities of the demon.

"So you've told the whole story to

this Professor Roberta Tooker?" Judson flinched under the exquisite pain. "And . . . this woman has as great a mind as any in this community? Hmm, it is seldom that I get a really fine female mind for food. It should be most interesting. I shall use her as one of my little repasts." There was a last spasmodic but deliberate stricture, then Judson was released from the torture.

A week later, when he was sure that the demon was sleeping soundly, Judson made it a point to waylay Roberta, and demanded that she listen to him a moment. He rapidly related the recent events, the scene with the demon.

"So you see, Roberta, you are definitely on its list. But here is something that I feel may help. It is the translation of that ancient manuscript you saw. I was stuck on it until after I began *knowing* more after each of my demon's feedings. That was your plan, wasn't it? Well, now I feel positive that I have a correct translation. I believe it will protect you, keep it and study it carefully."

He hurried away, lest the demon notice their meeting. Nor did he see Roberta, close-up, until about a month later, when she passed him swiftly, without speaking, but once more a piece of paper was slipped into his hand. On it he read an address, but no name. He shook his head, wondering.

WHEN the demon awoke a week later, it demanded to be taken to Roberta Tooker's home. Then Fergus Judson rebelled.

"I won't go near her!" he stormed. "I'll kill myself before I'll let you have her!"

He tried to open the drawer of his desk where his revolver lay, but the demon seized his motor nerves, and his hand would not move.

"You fool!" the demon sneered. "How can you stop me? Don't you yet realize my powers? Haven't you even realized that I don't need you as my carrier—that having been evoked I can now transfer to any body I desire? I've felt a bit of gratitude to you for opening the Way, but don't try my patience too far, or I'll feed on your own not-too-unintelligent mind, and find another host. Now, no more idle arguments. Take me to Roberta Tooker—this instant!"

Raging but impotent, viciously scourged with sadistic mental whips, Judson was impelled out of his house. As his unwilling feet dragged along, the shrill, sneering laugh of the demon rang and echoed through his mind.

But suddenly a desperate calm came over Professor Fergus Judson. "Now!" he thought, "*now or never!*" He stood stock-still in the middle of the sidewalk, and began repeating the words of incantation of which he had given Roberta a copy. In spite of the attempts of the demon to interrupt him—it almost seemed as though its power was in abeyance to some extent while he was saying the words—Judson's voice grew more and more steady and unhurried. He fumbled once, but recovered and went on. Word by word he recited it.

Finished, he waited. There was silence. For a long, long minute the whole world seemed still and hushed. Even the demon seemed to be holding its breath in expectant dread.

Then a raucous bellow of contemptuous laughter seemed to split Judson's head. He reeled, as a blinding mushroom of coruscating light flamed behind his eyes. "What are we wasting time for?" the demon shrieked triumphantly. "You can't even stop me that way! Come on, get going!"

Beaten, Fergus Judson was propelled along the elm-shaded street. The usually beautiful lawns and flower-beds seemed sere and lifeless; the comfortable, cheerful homes but empty and tumbled shadows. Closer they came to Roberta's home. Each step was still fiercely contested, yet Judson knew the certainty of defeat.

Stopping at last on the walk leading to the house, Judson waited for the now-familiar orgiastic thrill that told him the demon was feeding.

But none came! Instead, he felt the rising, furious anger of his tenant. He sensed that it was unable to find Roberta's mind within the house.

At the demon's insistence, Judson rang the bell. The maid, when she appeared, informed him that Miss Tooker was away. "She goes away ever six weeks now," she stated. "I think she visits her folks."

"Pretty smart," the demon growled. "Well, it really doesn't matter. We'll get

her another time. Now, go to the address she gave you."

Fergus Judson was stunned to find that the demon knew about the slips of paper. But he was being forced along the street, still resisting with every force of ingenuity, of will, and of mind—but futilely.

FINALLY they arrived at the house whose address Roberta had furnished. It was a little house, painted white, set deep in its wooded acre. Judson sank ever more deeply into a desponding gloom as he trudged wearily along the willow-lined driveway. He stopped at the foot of the steps leading up to the verandah.

Suddenly he grew aware that the demon was vastly disturbed, uneasy. This uneasiness grew even while Judson was being impelled up the steps and into the house, which he entered without even bothering to knock.

Roberta Tooker stood in the living room doorway, dressed entirely in white, figure tense but a very slight smile on her lips. Judson had a distinct awareness of the demon's surprise at sight of her. It seemed disconcerted and puzzled that it had not—still could not—sense the presence of her mind.

Roberta gazed at Judson with tense earnestness. "You've got to say that repeated word, Fergus!" she said in a piercing tone. "I can't pronounce it correctly. I've spoken the entire incantation, except for that word. And I know it's working—something powerful is protecting me already. But it apparently has to have that name-word to materialize completely. Fergus quick, say the word!"

"W-word?" stuttered Judson.

He could feel the demon squirming and writhing, trying frenziedly to blank out his memory. Its desperation was terribly obvious. "I'll feed on your mind!" it thundered. "Get out of here—fast!"

The Professor knew a compulsion, felt his legs moving frantically. Yet the demon's very panic heartened Judson. He threw himself on the floor. "I'll not go!" he snarled.

Heartened and aided by her love, by her own considerable abilities, he was fighting again, with all his strength, with all his will, trying to increase his power with a

direct negation of the demon's ability to control or harm him. His hands tried to hold onto the rug, then the living room furniture, the doorway, the hall rug. There was a slaverous threshing inside his mind, and then—horrible sensation—the unmistakable gnawing at the fringes of his mentality.

Judson nearly fainted. Still, as from a great distance, again and again he heard the shrill demanding of Roberta's voice:

"Fergus, oh, Fergus darling, speak the . . . word!"

"Word?" he thought numbly. He had believed there were no difficult words in the incantation, at least not for him. And the thirteen-times repeated word, about which Roberta seemed so intense, was particularly easy if you understood that the "u" was more of an "ae" sound, deriving as it did from . . .

He stopped there. "SUFRANI!" he shouted.

IT WAS was an illusion of substance, a shadow in an unlighted world. It was a whisper where there was no sound, a movement in a motionless dimension.

It was born, It was created, It was self-conceived, It was a product of evolution—terms meaningless because mutually exclusive. And still, somehow, incomprehensibly yet intrinsically true.

It was a thought, an idea, a concept, a perception, and an apperception.

It was Being, and It was non-Being. It was Positiveness, and It was Negation. It was Matter, and It was Void.

It was micro-cosmic, and It was Macro-Cosmic.

Time and Space had no meanings as far as It was concerned. So there was no way of telling when or where It first came to

Consciousness. It might have been a million million eons ago, it might have been Today. It might have been in some unknown and unknowable dimension or far universe, it might have been HERE.

Its knowledge was starkly inconceivable, yet It was greedy and thirsty for more and greater knowledge. Everything everywhere everywhen was of interest to It. And as Its knowledge increased, so did Its great powers.

Nor was It hungry only for knowledge. Suddenly, It received a summons!

ALMOST instantaneously, as *the word* left Professor Fergus Judson's lips, a great peace came to him. The torture, the lashing pain ceased, and he was suffused with a sublimity, a greatness, an awed wonder as though the whole cosmos had unfolded itself to his innermost understanding. For a grandeur instant it seemed as though he possessed all knowledge. There was an ineffable blessing of deep content and repose, of knowledge that he had been healed mentally, physically and psychiatrically; an assurance that he would be no longer troubled.

Then he was alone.

The demon had vanished, utterly gone, and he knew that it could never return. So, too, had departed as tracelessly that that mighty . . . *Essence* which had come so fortuitously at their summons.

Professor Fergus Judson saw then the face of Roberta Tooker bending over him, her eyes bright with happy tears, her lips soft and tremulous. He fumbled for her hand. Their lips touched. And then, sighing, his head slipped down again to the rug.

Contentedly, he slept.