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THE ALTAR

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

"Hello. Is this the West Ambrose police station? . . . My name is Mrs. Robert Slater. My husband failed to come home this evening and it's after nine o'clock — He couldn't have missed every train, and besides, he would have telephoned me to — Don't be insolent! Robert has never taken a drink in his life!

"Acting strangely? Well, as a matter of fact, he seemed a bit upset last night over some strange cults he says have moved into town. But I fail to see — Very well, please call me back."

WITH a sprightly gait, Mr. Slater walked down Maple Street toward the station. There was a little bounce to his step this morning, and a smile on his clean-shaven, substantial face. It was such a glorious spring morning!

Mr. Slater hummed a tune to himself, glad of the seven block walk to the railroad station. Although the distance had been a bother all winter, weather like this made up for it. It was a pleasure to be alive, a joy to be commuting.

Just then he was stopped by a man in a light blue topcoat.

"Pardon me, sir," the man said. "Could you direct



Illustrator: Ray Cassette

me to the Altar of Baz-Matain?"

Mr. Slater, still full of the beauties of spring, tried to think. "Baz-Matain? I don't think — the *Altar* of Baz-Matain, you say?"

"That's right," the stranger said, with an apologetic little smile. He was unusually tall, and he had a dark, thin face. Mr. Slater decided it was a foreign-looking face.

"Terribly sorry," Mr. Slater said, after a moment's thought. "I don't believe I ever heard of it."

"Thanks anyhow," the dark man said, nodded pleasantly and walked off toward the center of town. Mr. Slater continued to the station.

After the conductor punched his ticket, Mr. Slater thought of the incident. *Baz-Matain*, he repeated to himself as the train sped through the misty, ragged fields of New Jersey. *Baz-Matain*. Mr. Slater decided that the foreign-looking man must have been mistaken. North Ambrose, New Jersey, was a small town; small enough for a resident to know every street in it, every house or store. Especially a resident of almost twenty years standing, like Mr. Slater.

Halfway through the office day, Mr. Slater found himself tapping a pencil against the glass top of his desk, thinking of the man in the light blue topcoat. A

foreign-looking fellow was an oddity in North Ambrose, a quiet, refined, settled suburb. The North Ambrose men wore good business suits and carried lean brown suitcases; some were fat and some were thin, but anyone in North Ambrose might have been taken for anyone else's brother.

Mr. Slater didn't think of it any more. He finished his day, took the tube to Hoboken, the train to North Ambrose, and finally started the walk to his house.

On the way he passed the man again.

"I found it," the stranger said. "It wasn't easy, but I found it."

"Where was it?" Mr. Slater asked, stopping.

"Right beside the Temple of Dark Mysteries of Isis," the stranger said. "Stupid of me. I should have asked for that in the first place. I knew it was here, but it never occurred to me —"

"The temple of what?" Mr. Slater asked.

"Dark Mysteries of Isis," the dark man said. "Not competitors, really. Seers and warlocks, fertility cycles and the like. Never come near *our* province."

"I see," Mr. Slater said, looking at the stranger closely in the early spring twilight. "The reason I asked, I've lived in this town a number of years, and I don't believe I ever heard —"

"Say!" the man exclaimed, glancing at his watch. "Didn't realize how late it was! I'll be holding up the ceremony if I don't hurry!" And with a friendly wave of his hand, he hurried off.

Mr. Slater walked slowly home, thinking. *Altar of Baz-Matain. Dark Mysteries of Isis.* They sounded like cults. Could there be such places in his town? It seemed impossible. No one would rent to people like that.

After supper, Mr. Slater consulted the telephone book. But there was no listing for Baz-Matain, or for The Temple of Dark Mysteries of Isis. Information wasn't able to supply them either.

"Odd," he mused. Later, he told his wife about the two meetings with the foreign man.

"Well," she said, pulling her house robe closer around her, "no one's going to start any cults in this town. The Better Business Bureau wouldn't allow it. To say nothing of the Woman's Club, or the P.T.A."

Mr. Slater agreed. The stranger must have had the wrong town. Perhaps the cults were in South Ambrose, a neighboring town with several bars and a movie house, and a distinctly undesirable element in its population.

The next morning was Friday. Mr. Slater looked for the stranger, but all he saw were his homogeneous fellow commuters. It was the

same on the way back. Evidently the fellow had visited the Altar and left. Or he had taken up duties there at hours which didn't coincide with Mr. Slater's commuting hours.

Monday morning Mr. Slater left his house a few minutes late and was hurrying to catch his train. Ahead he saw the blue top-coat.

"Hello there," Mr. Slater called.

"Why hello!" the dark man said, his thin face breaking into a smile. "I was wondering when we would bump into each other again."

"So was I," Mr. Slater said, slowing his pace. The stranger was strolling along evidently enjoying the magnificent weather. Mr. Slater knew that he was going to miss his train.

"And how are things at the Altar?" Mr. Slater asked.

"So-so," the man said, his hands clasped behind his back. "To tell you the truth, we're having a bit of trouble."

"Oh?" Mr. Slater asked.

"Yes," the dark man said, his face stern. "Old Atherhotep, the mayor, is threatening to revoke our license in North Ambrose. Says we aren't fulfilling our charter. But I ask you, how can we? What with the Dionysus-Africanus set across the street, grabbing everyone likely, and the Papa Legba-Dambella combine

two doors down, taking even the unlikely ones — well, what can you do?"

"It doesn't sound too good," Mr. Slater agreed.

"That's not all," the stranger said. "Our high priest is threatening to leave if we don't get some action. He's a seventh degree adept, and Brahma alone knows where we'd get another."

"Mmm," Mr. Slater murmured.

"That's what *I'm* here for, though," the stranger said. "If they're going to use sharp business practices, I'll go them one better. I'm the new business manager, you know."

"Oh?" Mr. Slater said, surprised. "Are you reorganizing?"

"In a way," the stranger told him. "You see, it's like this —" Just then a short, plump man hurried up and seized the dark man by the sleeve of the blue topcoat.

"Elor," he panted. "I miscalculated the date. It's *this* Monday! Today, not next week!"

"Damn," the dark man said succinctly. "You'll have to excuse me," he said to Mr. Slater. "This is rather urgent." He hurried away with the short man.

Mr. Slater was half an hour late for work that morning, but he didn't care. It was all pretty obvious, he thought, sitting at his desk. A group of cults was springing up in North Ambrose, vying

for congregations. And the mayor, instead of getting rid of them, was doing nothing. Perhaps he was even taking bribes!

Mr. Slater tapped his pencil against his glass topped desk. How was it possible? Nothing could be hidden in North Ambrose. It was such a little town. Mr. Slater knew a good percentage of the inhabitants by their first names. How could something like this go on unnoticed?

Angrily, he reached for the telephone.

Information was unable to supply him with the numbers of Dionysus Africanus, Papa Legba or Damballa. The mayor of North Ambrose, he was informed, was not Atherhotep, but a man named Miller. Mr. Slater telephoned him.

The conversation was far from satisfying. The mayor insisted that he knew every business in the town, every church, every lodge. And if there were any cults — which there weren't — he would know of them, too.

"You have been deluded, my good man," Mayor Miller said, a little too pompously to suit Mr. Slater. "There are no people by those names in this town, no such organizations. We would never allow them in."

Mr. Slater thought this over carefully on the way home. As he stepped off the train platform he saw Elor, hurrying across Oak

Street with short, rapid steps.

Elor stopped when Mr. Slater called to him.

"Really can't stay," he said cheerfully. "The ceremony begins soon, and I must be there. It was that fool Ligian's fault."

Ligian, Mr. Slater decided, would be the plump man who had stopped Elor in the morning.

"He's so careless," Elor went on. "Can you imagine a competent astrologer making a mistake of a week in the conjugation of Saturn with Scorpio? No matter. We hold the ceremony tonight, short-handed or not."

"Could I come?" Mr. Slater asked, without hesitation. "I mean, if you're short-handed —"

"Well," Elor mused. "It's unprecedented."

"I'd really like to," Mr. Slater said, seeing a chance to get to the bottom of the mystery.

"I really don't think it's fair to you," Elor went on, his thin, dark face thoughtful. "Without preparation and all —"

"I'll be all right," Mr. Slater insisted. He would really have something to dump in the mayor's lap if this worked! "I really want to go. You've got me quite excited about it."

"All right," Elor said. "We'd better hurry."

They walked down Oak Street, toward the center of town. Then, just as they reached the first

stores, Elor turned. He led Mr. Slater two blocks over and a block down, and then retraced a block. After that he headed back toward the railroad station.

It was getting quite dark.

"Isn't there a simpler way?" Mr. Slater asked.

"Oh, no," Elor said. "This is the most direct. If you knew the roundabout way I came the first time —"

They walked on, backtracking blocks, circling, recrossing streets they had already passed, going back and forth over the town Mr. Slater knew so well.

But as it grew darker, and as they approached familiar streets from unfamiliar directions, Mr. Slater became just a trifle confused. He knew where he was, of course, but the constant circling had thrown him off.

How very strange, he thought. One can get lost in one's own town, even after living there almost twenty years.

Mr. Slater tried to place what street they were on without looking at the sign post, and then they made another unexpected turn. He had just made up his mind that they were backtracking on Walnut Lane, when he found that he couldn't remember the next cross street. As they passed the corner, he looked at the sign.

It read: Left Orifice.

Mr. Slater couldn't remember any street in North Ambrose

called Left Orifice. He was certain.

There were no streetlights on it, and Mr. Slater found that he didn't recognize any of the stores. That was strange, because he thought he knew the little business section of North Ambrose very well. It gave him quite a start when they passed one squat black building on which there was a dimly lighted sign.

The sign read: *Temple of the Dark Mysteries of Isis*.

"They're pretty quiet in there tonight, eh?" Elor said, following Mr. Slater's glance toward the building. "We'd better hurry." He walked faster, allowing Mr. Slater no time to ask questions.

The building became stranger and stranger as they walked down the dim street. They were of all shapes and sizes, some new and glistening, others ancient and decayed. Mr. Slater couldn't imagine any section in North Ambrose like this. Was there a town within the town? Could there be a North Ambrose by night that the daytime inhabitants knew nothing of? A North Ambrose approached only by devious turns through familiar streets?

"Phallic rites in there," Elor said, indicating a tall, slender building. Beside it was a twisted, sagging hulk of a place.

"That's Damballa's place," Elor said, pointing at it.

Toward the end of the street

was a white building. It was quite long, and built low to the ground. Mr. Slater hadn't time to examine it, because Elor had his arm and was hurrying him in the door.

"I really must become more prompt," Elor muttered half to himself.

Once inside, it was totally dark. Mr. Slater could feel movement around him, and then he made out a tiny white light. Elor guided him toward it, saying in friendly tones, "You've really helped me out of a jam."

"Have you got it?" a thin voice asked from beside the light. Mr. Slater began to make out shapes. As his eyes became more accustomed to the gloom, he could see a tiny, gnarled old man in front of the light.

The old man was holding an unusually long knife.

"Of course," Elor said. "And he was willing, too."

The white light was suspended over a stone altar, Mr. Slater realized. In a single reflex action he turned to run, but Elor's hand was tight on his arm, although not all painful.

"You can't leave us now," Elor said gently. "We're ready to begin."

And then there were other hands on Mr. Slater, many of them, pulling him steadily toward the Altar.