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Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Guardian of the Book

By HENRY HASSE

'A strange and curious tale of cosmic horror, of the Outer Ones from beyond the galaxy, and a soul-shattering experience of stark terror

I AM always keeping an eye open for old second-hand bookstores. And, as my business takes me to all parts of the city, I have not a few times entered such places to spend an odd half-hour barging among shelves and stacks of musty volumes, often to emerge joyously with some item particular to any one of my several hobbies and interests.

On this particular February evening I was hurrying homeward, and as I crossed a narrow avenue on the outskirts of the wholesale district I stopped with a pleasurable thrill. A short distance from the corner I had espied one of those ancient bookstores, one I was sure I had never visited before—a narrow frame storeroom tucked well back between two brick buildings.

I had no particular plans for the evening; already it was growing dark, it was cold, and there was a brisk flurry of snowflakes. I entered the haven which had come to my attention so opportunely.

The place was dimly lighted, but I could see that I stood amidst a profusion of books that reposed on shelf and floor alike. There was no one in the front part of the store, but from a rear room came a rattle of pans; so I guessed an evening meal was in progress. Quietly I browsed around amidst the topsy-turvy miscellany, and must have become oblivious to time; for very suddenly there came a little shrill voice close to my ear:

"There is perhaps some special book?"

Startled, I spun around.

There beside me and peering up into

my face was absolutely the strangest little man I had ever seen. To say that he was *tiny* would be the literal truth, for he couldn't have stood a great deal over four feet. His skin was smooth and tight, and of a color that could only be described as slate-gray; furthermore, his absurd dome of a head was entirely bald, there being not even the slightest vestige of an eyebrow! And in all my life I had never seen anything half so black as those eyes that stared up into mine as he asked again: "There is perhaps some special book?"

I laughed uneasily.

"You startled me," I said. "Why, no, nothing in particular—just looking around. Thought maybe I could find something to take home with me this evening."

He did not speak; he only made a slight bow and motioned me to go ahead. As I moved amidst the *mélange* of books I was aware that the little man's eyes followed my every move; and though his expression hadn't changed, I thought he was watching me with something like amusement.

My eyes moved over the titles, missing none, for there are certain books I always look for, however remote my chances of ever finding any of them. But now, as I surveyed the books about me, I saw that there was no order of arrangement at all: fiction, biography, science, history, religion, technical—all were confusedly interspersed.

For perhaps five minutes more I

searched, before giving it up as a hopeless task; for I hadn't too much time to spend there seeking for what I wanted.

The little man hadn't moved, and now he was smiling, not unfriendly.

"I am very much afraid, sir, that you will never find what you are looking for."

I had become somewhat impatient, so I said frankly:

"I agree with you there; I never saw such a mess as this."

"Oh, I have just moved in here," he explained, still smiling, "and have not

had much time to arrange things in their proper order."

I had surmised as much. I said I would drop in later, and started for the door.

He placed a hand on my arm.

"But wait. You misconstrued my meaning when I said you would never find what you are looking for. I was not referring to the disarrangement of my books."

I merely raised my eyebrows, and he went on:

"I hope you won't be too astonished,



"My mind reeled out against the booming monody of the stars."

Doctor Wycherly, when I assure you that I am quite aware that there are certain remote books you would give much to own—or even to read. Are there not? And remote as these books are, remote as your chances are, you do nevertheless entertain a hope that perhaps some day, by some lucky chance, you might come into possession of one of them. Is it not true?"

IN MY amazement I answered both his questions at once, hardly knowing that I spoke:

"Why—yes; indeed yes."

His bald head bobbed benignly, and he waved toward the haphazard piles of books around us.

"And these?" he emphasized in that shrill voice. "These? Phfft! they are rubbish, they are nothing! You will not find there what you seek!"

I was astonished at his vehemence. "Probably not," I murmured vaguely. "But you—just now—you mentioned my name, and I was not aware that you knew me. Would you mind explaining——"

"Ah, yes, you are puzzled, of course. You are wondering how I came to know your name. That, sir, is entirely inconsequential. Even more so do you wonder how I could possibly know of that secret desire of yours, the desire to peruse those so-called 'forbidden books' which speak of the unthinkable things of evil—the books which are, now, so inaccessible as to be indeed forbidden. Suffice it to say, for the present, that I cannot help but know of your delvings into subjects of the weird and terrible, because—well, because it is most imperative to me that I should know; therefore, I know. But I think you will agree that your quest for such books is a rather hopeless one! The various versions of Alhazred's *Necronomicon*, Flammarion's *Atmosphere*, Von Junzt's *Nameless Cults*, Kane's *Magic*

and *Black Arts*, Eibon's *Book*, and the mysterious *King in Yellow*—which, if it does indeed exist, must transcend them all—none of these will you find lying around in bookstores. Even those few that are known to be in existence are under lock and key. Of course there are other, lesser sources, but even they are not easy to procure. For example, you probably had a difficult time in locating that later edition of the *Nameless Cults* which you now have in your possession; and criminally expurgated as it is, I imagine you find it very unsatisfactory."

"Yes, I do!" I admitted breathlessly. I was surprised to have come across a person possessed of such evident familiarity with this *recherché* literature. "The *Nameless Cults* which I have," I went on to explain, "is the comparatively recent 1909 edition, and it is puerile in the extreme. I should like very much to get hold of one of the originals: published in Germany, I believe, in the early eighteen-hundreds."

But he waved that peremptorily aside.

"What of the *Necronomicon*," he said, "that most fearsome and most hinted-at of all the forbidden books: you would give much for a glimpse into that?"

"That," I smiled, "is even beyond my fondest hope!"

"And if I were to tell you that I have here in this very shop the original *Necronomicon*?"

I did not bat an eyelash. "You haven't," I stated positively.

He looked not at me, but beyond me.

"True, I have not," he said at last. "I thought you would consider that statement an absurdity." He sighed, then went on a bit hurriedly: "And yet I wonder if you can imagine an even greater absurdity—a book even more terrible than the dreaded *Necronomicon*, a book so ominous in its scope as to make the *Necronomicon* seem as tame as—as——"

"As a cook-book," I supplied jocularly, for the tiny man had become almost amusingly solemn and serious now.

"Yes. A book that tells of things the mad Arab never dreamed of in his wildest nightmares; indeed, a book not even of this Earth; a book that goes back to the very beginning and beyond the beginning; that comes from the very minds of the things that caused all things!"

I looked at him with a sudden suspicion, then smiled cynically. "Are you trying to tell me that you do *not* have the *Necronomicon* but you do have such a book as you describe?"

His eyes held mine for a moment, and just for that moment there was a gleam in them.

Said he: "Do you dare to let me show you?"

Said I: "Yes, do show me, by all means!"

"Very well. Please wait here a moment."

I WAITED, doubtfully enough, and for the first time mused upon the really extraordinary aspect of the thing. I suddenly remembered a story I had read a while back, something about a man who had entered an old bookshop and was plunged into an orbit of strange adventures—something to do with vampires. I was disturbed that this story should leap to my mind at this particular time, but I smiled at the thought of anything untoward happening to me; this little slate-colored man was a quite peculiar person indeed, but he did not conform to my conception of a vampire.

He returned just then, bearing an immense book nearly half as big as he was.

"You must understand," he said, "that what I am going to tell you should not be taken as skepticism. It is important that you should know certain things about this book"—he hugged it tightly

to him—"that will seem to you incredible. First, you should be informed that it does not belong to me, nor to anyone on this Earth either: that is the first incredible thing you must believe. If I were to tell you truly to whom it belongs, I would have to say—to the cosmos, and to all ages that were, and are, and will yet be. It is the most damnable book in the universe, and but for it, I—but no, I will not tell you that now. I will only say now that I am the guardian of it, the present guardian, and you could never imagine what terrible transits of time and space I have made."

Can you blame me for edging toward the door? Can you blame me for wanting to get away from there? There had been a growing suspicion in my mind that this man was mad, and now I knew it. But I said, precisely because I didn't know what else to say:

"And you want to sell me this book?"

He peered at me more intently. "It could not be bought for all the wealth of this or any other planet. No, I merely want you to read it. I am most anxious that you read it. You may take it home with you if you wish. You see, I am aware that in spite of your skepticism you are consumed with curiosity."

He was right. And yet why did I hesitate? There was something very queer about all this, something that did not appear on the surface, something subtle and almost frightening. So far he had hinted at much, but had told me exactly nothing. He was far too ready to let me take this book away with me, and something told me that if he were so anxious to have me read it I would do best by not doing so.

"No, thanks," I muttered, and didn't try to conceal a shiver as I turned away.

I had had enough. His eyes were too black. But he had seemed to anticipate my refusal, and at the door he again gripped my arm.

"You may as well know," he said, "that if you had not come here I would sooner or later have brought the book to you. Knowing what I do know of you and your occult studies, it follows that you are the logical one to be entrusted with this volume. I realize that I have only hinted at things and have told you nothing, but I cannot do more than that now. You must read the book; then you will understand."

My hand on the door, I hesitated one fateful moment. In that moment the book came from under his arm and he pressed it upon me most eagerly, half shoving me out the door into the dusk of the approaching night; and there I stood with that ponderous volume in my hands, mystified, half angry, yet daring to hope that at last I was in possession of something momentous. With a half-laugh and a shrug, I turned homeward.

2

MY HOPES were more than confirmed, as I soon ascertained in the privacy of my rooms. The book was huge—the size of a large ledger, and very thick, the covers edged all around with metal. The binding was of a black faded fabric unfamiliar to me, and the yellowed pages proved also to be of some strange, resilient texture. The pages were covered with strange, angular symbols, long and narrow and strictly perpendicular. I looked for a key-word, or key-symbol, but there was none; so I stared at the pages, wondering how I was to decipher them.

And then a strange thing happened, which was to be only the first of many strange events that evening. As I stared and continued to stare at those bewildering pages I thought I saw one of the symbols move, ever so slightly; and as I peered intently at the page it became apparent that the symbols did indeed move

as my eyes ran across the lines—rearranging themselves ever so minutely, writhing and twisting like so many tiny snakes. And with this queer writhing movement I no longer wondered at the meaning of those symbols, for they became suddenly clear and vivid and meaningful, impressing themselves upon my consciousness as so many words and sentences. I knew that I had indeed stumbled upon something very great.

The book seemed to exude an invisible aura of evil which at first unnerved me and then pleased me, and I determined to lose no time in plunging into my task.

Seated at one end of a library table, I spread the book before me and pulled a lamp nearer. So, comforted by a blazing log fire at my right, I turned to the very first page and began the most fantastic, I might almost say insane, document I have ever read; yet in consequence of what happened, I can never be sure whether it was the document or I who was insane.

But here it is, almost word for word as I so clearly remember it:

PREFACE

*to the most Damnable Book
ever loosed
upon an unsuspecting Cosmos*

Whoso comes in possession of this book should be warned, and this Preface is to serve that purpose. The possessor of this book should be wise to flee from it—but will not. His curiosity is already aroused, and reading even these few words of warning, he will not be deterred from reading on; and reading on, he will be enmeshed, become a part of the Plot, and will learn too late that there is left but a single sorrowful alternative of escape.

Such is the awful damnability of it. But how *They* must chuckle with glee!

Know, then, whoso should read this,

that I, Tlaviir of Vhoorl, do hereby subscribe the history and origin of the Book, so that all manner of men in all time to come may consider carefully before succumbing to the curiosity that is inherent in all men throughout the universe. I had no such warning; and by reason of my folly am fated to be the first guardian. I myself know not—yet—what that may portend; for, try as I might, I cannot forget my friend, Kathulhn, who all unknowingly launched this horrible jest of the gods, and the fate that was his.

Kathulhn had always been something of a puzzle to all who knew him, except, perhaps, to me. Even as a boy he had professed an insatiable wonderment of those profound mysteries of time and space which the Wise Men of Vhoorl said were not for mere man to know or to seek out.

Kathulhn could not understand why this should be.

We grew up together and entered the university together, and there Kathulhn became such an avid student of the sciences, particularly of complex mathematics, that he was a perpetual astonishment to the professors.

We left the university together, I to enter into my father's business, and Kathulhn, having been awarded an assistant-professorship, to continue with certain of his studies.

I can never understand why he confided in me as he would in no one else, unless it was because I listened to his theories with true seriousness. I was fascinated by certain of his lines of thought. Nevertheless, I cannot but admit that he sounded rather wild at times.

"Here we are," he would say, vibrantly, "tiny motes upon the surface of the planet Vhoorl, deep in the twenty-third nebula. The great scientists have told us that much as to our present locality. But what of our destination—the *ultimate?*

Here we have our spinning planet, our revolving system, our drifting nebula—but one among millions that go to make what we call *the* universe—a universe we should say, for it is only a particle, rushing onward with other particles—whither? and to what destiny? and for what purpose? . . . For *whose* purpose, perhaps we should say.

"And are we never to know; must we remain ever chained to this miserable little planet? I think not, Tlaviir. Man in a million years may master the stars. But that will not come, in my time; and I cannot wait; and besides, my greed is greater than mere mastery of stars. Look, Tlaviir: suppose that one could discover a way to project himself out, not among the stars, but *beyond—outside of the cosmic globe of stars!* To attain a point entirely outside . . . from there to watch the working of the cosmic dust in the fluid of time. Why, *there is no time*, after all, is there?—must not *space* and *time* be one and the same thing, co-existent and correlative, one to the other? Do you not see? And to project one's self quite outside of it—would not *that* be the realization of our vaunted immortality? And rest assured, *there is a way.*"

I COULD not quite digest this fantastic bit of reasoning, but did not deny the possible truth of his theories. There were several old books to which he often made reference, and I think it was these books which caused his theorizing at times to take a somewhat tangential trend:

"What of those superstitions, Tlaviir, that have come down to us from the ancients who inhabited Vhoorl eons ago? And why must we say *superstitions* and *myths*? Why must man scoff at that which he cannot understand? It is only logical that these *superstitions* and *myths* had a definite reason for being: my perusal of certain ancient manuscripts has

convinced me of that. Who knows?—perhaps probing fingers from *outside* reached in and touched Vhoorl ages ago, thus giving rise to those tales that we know very well could not have had birth in mere imagination. That, Tlaviir, is why I sometimes think I may be wrong in seeking the way outside; perhaps it were best for man not to try: he might learn things that it is best not to know.”

But these latter reflections of his came only seldom. More often he would show me sheafs of paper covered with calculations, and others filled with geometrical drawings, infinite angles and curves such as I had never before seen, some of which seemed so diabolically distorted as to leap from the paper out at me! When he would try to explain his calculus I was never quite able to follow his reasoning beyond a certain point, although his explanation plus his enthusiasm made it all seem quite logical.

So far as I was able to grasp it, there exists an almost infinite number of space-dimensions, some of which impinge on our own and might be used as catapults if one could but penetrate the invisible and tenuous boundary between our space and these hyper-spaces. I had never given much credence to any dimensions beyond our familiar three, but Kathulhn seemed very certain.

“There must be a way, Tlaviir. I have ascertained that beyond doubt. And I am sure now that I am working toward the correct solution. I shall find it before long.”

Aye, he found it. He found it indeed, and went further than any mortal has ever gone or will ever go again. He could not have known. . . .

IT WAS but shortly after my last conversation with him that he disappeared, without trace or reason; was given up as dead, and even I, to whom he had con-

fided all his hopes, did not suspect that I was ever to see him again. But I did.

It was twenty long years later when Kathulhn returned as suddenly as he had gone; came direct to me. The marvel of it is that he looked not a day older than when I had last seen him, those twenty long years ago! But the years had lain heavily on me, and Kathulhn seemed shocked at the change.

He told me his story.

“I succeeded, Tlaviir. I knew I was on the right track with my calculus, but it might have gone for nought had I not interpreted a certain passage from one of those ancient books; it was a sort of incantation, the very essence of evil, which opened the door when spoken in correlation with my dimension calculus. The purport of this incantation I cannot tell you now, but it should have warned me that the thing I was doing was for no good. Nevertheless, I dared; I had already gone too far to turn back.

“I carried the thing through, feeling a little foolish perhaps, only hoping, but not knowing, that this was the combination I had so long sought for. For a moment it seemed that nothing had happened, and yet I was aware of a change. Something had happened to my vision; things were blurred, but were rapidly emerging into a clear grotesquerie of impossible angles and planes.

“But before this vision could become quite definite, I was jerked outward, Tlaviir; out beyond the curvature of space, out into the space beyond space where even light turns back upon itself because of the non-existence of time! All things ceased: sight and sound, time and dimension and comparison. There was left to me only an awareness, but an awareness infinitely more acute than our mere physical one. I—I was Mind!

“As to *Them*—now I know, Tlaviir, and it is even as I feared. They are not

to be imagined as Beings, or Things, or anything familiar to us—no word is adequate. They are forces of pure Evil, the source of all the evil that ever was, and is, and will be! Sometimes They reach in. There is a purpose."

Kathulhn's hand brushed his forehead.

"There is much—so very much, Tlaviir. All is not as clear as it was. But I am beginning to remember! I am beginning. . . . I think those entities of Evil were *amused*, Tlaviir—with a kind of amusement I cannot now understand. Amused, perhaps, that I should have managed to come out there among Them. Assuredly no mere *being* had ever done that before. I realize now that had They wished, They could have uttered a *word* that would have blasted and annihilated me. Had They wished! Instead, They kept me among Them. There was something—something about Their amusement.

"Do you remember a certain conversation of long ago, Tlaviir, wherein I said that our universe was but a particle among other particles, rushing away somewhere, on to some destiny, for some—*purpose*? Do you remember also that I said perhaps it was best that man should not know—certain things?

"I have learned many things, Tlaviir, things that I now wish I did not know. Monstrous things. Whence the Cosmos came . . . and why . . . and its ultimate destiny—not a pleasant one. Most horrible of all is that I am beginning to *remember* . . . rites . . . performed by those Evil Ones . . . rites involving the Cosmos in a most diabolic way. . . .

"I could not even wonder at my presence out There. All was Mind and Mind was all. It would seem that I was large among Them—wilfully one of Them—assisting in certain of those colossal rites—partaking of Their evil joy. But at one

and the same time, by some unexplainable and inconceivable ultracircumstance, it seemed that I was aloof and insignificant, a spectator of only some small part of the whole. It seemed that I mingled there among Them for countless millenniums, but again it seemed but the smallest fraction of what we call 'time'.

"But now—now I know that They merely toyed with me awhile, as a child toys with and then tires of a new plaything. They thrust me back, Tlaviir, and here I am upon Vhoorl again. At first I thought I had awakened from a very bad dream, but it didn't take me long to discover that Vhoorl had traveled twenty years upon its destined path during those many millenniums, or those few seconds, that I was in that timeless place!"

"And you will go back again?" I asked eagerly, for by his very sincerity I believed his story.

"I cannot, even if I would, nor can any mortal again. They have closed the route now for all time, and it is well so.

"To Them, as I have said, I was but a moment's amusement, but not too insignificant, for all that—because They gave me warning! They thrust me back, and this was the warning: if ever I made known to another mortal the slightest of the secrets I had learned, or mentioned any part or purpose of the awful rites I had seen enacted, my soul would be shattered into a million fragments and these tortured fragments scattered shrieking throughout the entire Cosmos! That is why, Tlaviir, I dare not tell you more than I have. More and more memory floods in upon me, but I dare not speak of things.

"Because—I know that *They can reach in!*"

FROM that day neither Kathulhn nor I again mentioned his sojourn "outside". For a long time I could not forget

the things he had hinted at, but how terrible must have been that which he did not—dared not—tell!

Several years passed, and the whole thing became more or less a myth in my mind. But not so with Kathulhn, it was easy to see. The twenty years that had ignored him now reached out malign fingers and took their toll. Vexation, discontent, restless broodings of the mind, all served to change him pitifully.

He came to me then, one day, and broached the thought that had been preying upon him. He could not, he said, remain silent longer. He was sick of the blind groping of men after knowledge. It lay in his power to give them the answers to cosmic secrets which they had sought out slowly for years—and things besides, of which they had never guessed. And, terrible though those secrets were, man should know all. Thoughts and memories crowding upon Kathulhn's tortured brain screamed for outlet, and there was but one resource: he had determined to write down the history of his adventure "outside", to tell of all the things he had experienced and learned.

As to the warning which the Entities of evil had given him, it was nothing. Years had gone by, Kathulhn reasoned, and surely They must have forgotten; we were puny, and They reckoned with universes.

I did not demur. Like Kathulhn, now that the years had passed I felt that the warning of those Outer Ones was a little thing.

Thus was the beginning of the jest.

. . . Never can I forget that night when doom descended upon the city of Bhuulm. I had left the city but a few hours before, accompanying one of my caravans into the near neighboring town, access to which led through a tortuous passage in the encircling mountain range. The passage was made without mishap,

and, my business transacted, I was hurrying homeward, alone, and was well into the mountains when that strange darkness descended so mysteriously and prematurely. Shortly thereafter I saw the long livid streamer that came flickering out of space, to hesitate a moment and then dart out of sight directly behind the range ahead of me.

I spurred hurriedly forward, already, with a feeling of disaster.

When I finally pushed through the passage and came in sight of the city, the streamer was gone and everything was quiet with a stillness that seemed to shriek in agony to the pale stars peering fearfully down.

I entered the city and came upon a person groveling in the street, and when I bent to help him he seemed not to see me, but shrieked, over and over again, something about the "shape" that had come slithering down the streamer. He lapsed then into a drooling insanity, and I left him lying there and passed on into the heart of the city.

It was not long before full unhallowed horror burst upon me. The entire populace had been rendered not only gibberingly insane, but stark blind. Some lay quite still in the streets, in merciful oblivion; some still writhed and mouthed unintelligibly of the thing that had descended to blast their minds and their sight, and others groped pitifully about, dazed and whimpering.

I rushed to the house of my friend Kathulhn, but already I knew I was too late. I found what I had expected: he was dead. But his body, as I gazed on it, was scarcely recognizable as the one I had known. It was entirely covered with tiny blue perforations, gruesomely suggestive. His limbs were horribly distorted and broken. His eyes had been torn from their sockets, and two great holes gaped in his face from which

something oozed. And his lips were drawn back in such a frozen, exaggerated grin that I turned quickly away.

Scattered about in profusion were loose pages upon which I recognized my friend's fine writing. Well did I know what that writing was and what it portended; and in a sudden insane frenzy I gathered them all up, stuffed them into my clothes and fled from there in precipitate horror.

I **C**ROSSED the three great oceans of Vhoorl, and after many mishaps reached the Abhorred Continent of Dluuhg. I ascended the tortuous Inner Mountains and descended into the lowlands fraught with those creatures supposed to have passed from the face of Vhoorl eons ago. Slowly, relentlessly, I thrust my perilous way forward; and finally, half dead from hurt and fatigue, reached my objective: the half-mythical city of a mysterious and fanatical priest-like sect so secluded that only the veriest rumors of its existence ever reached the outer realms of Vhoorl.

I was taken in and my wounds were ministered to; for all are welcomed and none are questioned who manage to reach there.

So it was, that in the quietude of my temporary quarters in that deep-hidden city, I dared finally to delve into the secret linings of my clothes and bring out those pages which Kathulhn had written before doom descended upon him. Arranging them in their sequence, I saw that Kathulhn had been allowed to finish his treatise. And somehow this fact was more profoundly disturbing than if he had been suddenly cut off before he could finish.

Tremulously I began to read, and was immediately absorbed. But before long I encountered Kathulhn's first few hints of the cosmic horrors to be revealed, and

I began to waver. I read on . . . a few more pages . . . I became appalled and frightened. . . . I lost heart then, would have ceased reading, would have destroyed those pages for all time—but found to my unutterable horror that I could not! A will that was not my own compelled me to read on . . . all things around me ceased to exist . . . I was no longer bound to Vhoorl but was drawn, sensually if not bodily, into the very midst of those mad pages. . . .

Far into the night and into the morning hours, mind reeling, soul recoiling, I perused those all-revealing pages which moved relentlessly but surely toward a final, culminating immensity which froze my brain.

A sullen dawn was looming when I finished that terrible treatise and screamed curses upon all the gods that were—for then I *knew!* Fool, fool that I was! Fool to have thought that the tiny globe of Vhoorl or the entire cosmic sphere itself could contain any place of hiding from *Them!* Fool not to have destroyed those pages utterly, unread! But it was too late; the eternal dirge of all mankind: "Too late!" I had succumbed to that deadly and avaricious arch-enemy, curiosity. I had read, and was utterly and damnably doomed!

AND NOW, as if in answer to my imprecations there came a mocking chuckle of amusement as if from far away, and then nearer, riding down the star wind, faint and clear . . . a peculiar sibilance and a shifting as if every individual atom in the planet of Vhoorl had been deviated infinitesimally from its path . . . intense cold . . . a kind of livid glare that burst suddenly, filling all the room about me . . . and then—

I think I tried to shriek, but each succeeding attempt rose to a certain point in my throat and stopped. How can I con-

vey the soul-shattering horror of that moment when, from the nothingness before me, there emerged a thing, a sort of shapeless, writhing mass, greenish and fluorescent, tangible and *sentient*—in-describable because it was constantly changing, fading away at the edges as if it were but a projection reaching through from some other space or dimension. In that moment I remembered those words Kathulhn had said to me: "Because I know, Tlaviir, that *They can reach in!*" In that moment I knew what manner of thing confronted me . . . knew that this was the "shape" that had descended upon the city of Bhuulm those many months ago, to blast all intelligence. . . .

I knew that I must shriek to save my mind; tried again and again but could not; and then as I closed my eyes against the blinding brilliance of it and felt my mind slipping slowly away, there seemed to emanate from the thing a radiance to touch my brain with a soothing coolness. The first icy wave of horror passed over me and left me calm with that utter impassivity born of hopelessness.

So it was that there in the cold dawn of that nameless city I listened to the pronouncement of the doom that was to be mine.

I say "listened", but there was no sound. The thing was polychromatic, with an interplay of colors many of which I was certain were alien to this universe. And with every scintillating change of color, thought was sent pulsing into my brain.

The fate reserved for me [the thing scintillated] was not to be as Kathulhn's, nor as those other unfortunates' back in the city of Bhuulm; for I was the very keynote upon which They based their jest. Not until the person whom I knew as Kathulhn had found the way Out There, had They ever so much as suspected the existence of such animalia on

the tiny spheres. Observing closely, then, They discovered that many of the spheres abounded with such creatures, and They were amused at the colossal impudence of this one. Probing Kathulhn's mind, They discovered that it was his inherent curiosity which had made him seek for the answers to galactic secrets and finally to find the way Out There. This phenomenon of *curiosity, or aspiration*, They discovered, was a universally inherent quality of these animalia. Furthermore, it was a quality of *good* to which They, being forces of pure *evil*, were opposed.

Then it was that They conceived their jest.

They thrust Kathulhn back upon Vhoorl with that dire warning which he had almost whispered to me. To Them, who were timeless and therefore omnipresent, the phenomena which Kathulhn knew as "past" and "future" were as one.

They had foreseen that Kathulhn would not heed that warning!

And [the thing went on] knowing well the fate that had been his, I had had every opportunity to destroy those pages he had written. *But it was foreseen, indeed fore-ordained, that I should read!* And now those pages would never be destroyed. I would bind them well, into a book that would be imperishable all through the ages, and upon that book They would cast a curse to await any who dared to peruse it. And as a stimulant to this gigantic scheme of the Outer Ones, conceived by Them for Their own amusement, I must preface the Book with a warning to all mankind. Then let him disregard the warning who dared. Reading on, there could be no turning back; he would be compelled to read on to the end, and upon him would devolve the curse. Only when such a one had dared, would I be free.

As to the curse [the thing continued] and my immediate fate, he was undeter-

mined. Perhaps he would take me out There. Such things as *aspiration* and *emotion* and *mind* in connection with the tiny motes They had newly discovered on the spheres, had aroused a transient interest, and experiments would be entertaining.

* * * * *

Such diabolism only those Entities could conceive. The thing has gone now, as I, Tlaviir, conclude this preface of warning; but I feel that I have written these words under a pervading surveillance. From infinitely far away, now, I seem to hear unleashed shouts of glee . . . or is that only my imagination? But no: very close to my ear now, as I write these final words, comes that penetrant and portentous chuckle which I know is not imagination, to remind me that this which I write, everything, all, is but a part of Their preconceived plan.

3

THE BOOK lay there, opened wide, flat on the table before me. Thus had the Preface ended, on the left-hand page; the page opposite it was blank—and there were many pages following.

For a long time I sat there in the absolute stillness of the room, pondering, full of amazement at what I had just read, wondering what evil secrets might be revealed in those following pages. Even the things hinted at in the Preface were suggestive enough. I recalled with a start how anxious that tiny slate-colored man had been for me to read the Book—and I wondered if, indeed, the curse would be transferred to me if I dared to turn the page and read on.

Abruptly I came to my senses, with a little laugh. "Nonsense!" I said aloud to the room; "what am I thinking of? Such things as that can't be!"

My hand reached out to turn the page. . . .

The log in the fireplace snapped sharply. I arose to replenish the fire, noticing as I did so that the clock on the mantel said twenty minutes until midnight. For the first time I was aware of the chill that had crept into the room.

As I turned from my task I saw that tiny man of the bookstore standing very quietly there beside the table.

Now by all rules of propriety I should have been shocked or astounded or scared—later I wondered why I hadn't been; but right then I wasn't any of those things. I should at least have done him the courtesy of inquiring how he had learned my address, or how he had managed to enter my room, the very solid door of which I had most decidedly locked! . . . but right then as I turned and faced him I only seemed to think how very appropriate this all was . . . that he should be there, so very opportunely . . . there were several of the most deucedly puzzling points about the Book that I should like to clear up. Oh, I knew of course that all this was nothing but a dream, knew that that was why it was so illogical!

The little man spoke first, in answer, as it were, to the very first question I had been about to propound.

"No, I am not that Tlaviir whose warning you have just read," he said with a monotony that suggested an infinite weariness of repetition. "The fact is, we may never know how many eons ago this diabolic thing began; that very part of the cosmos where the Book had its origin may long since have passed into oblivion. But, for all of that, neither am I of your world. It was ages ago on my own planet, the very location of which I have long forgotten, that the

Book came to me in much the same way it has come to you—brought to me by a queer person not of my own planet, who had traversed the ages and the outer spaces with the Book. I was an avid student of the vaguely hinted-at, premundane creatures supposed to have inhabited my world before it swam into light out of the darkness. Just as you have read, so did I read—eagerly. And just as you now doubt—appalled at the thought of the immensity that *might* be—so did I doubt. As you now hesitate before the Book—so did I hesitate. But in the end—”

I gestured impatiently at the thought he was trying to suggest to me. Whatever kind of hoax this was, it was silly. True, I had always been an imaginative person, my library consisting of the weirdest literature ever written, but always deep in my mind was the safe and comfortable knowledge that it *was* literature and nothing more. But now—to ask me to believe that upon this Book had been placed a curse, to be transferred to him who read . . . that it had come here through space and through the ages from some alien planet . . . *brought* here by this man who claimed he was not of this world—that was too much. It was much too much. That is the stuff of which fiction is made.

So thinking, I once more reached out toward the Book. But—thank God!—my hand recoiled in horror as those queer, writhing symbols upon the open page met my eye with a significance that jerked my mind back to a semblance of reason: for I saw that those symbols *were not, could not be, of this earth!*

I felt myself suddenly trembling as all my assurance vanished in an instant—trembling as my taut mind suddenly sensed *things* lurking, out of sight and sound, but very near. . . .

THE tiny man had watched my movements with an intense expectancy and eagerness, and as my hand recoiled his whole being bespoke disappointment and temporary defeat. But this was only for an instant, and then he, too, seemed to sense some invisible presence close at hand—stood poised, very still, head erect as if listening to something that I could not hear, something I was not meant to hear. For just a moment he stood thus before he spoke again; and now his voice, as he went on, was weary once more and sad:

“Yes, you had persisted in believing that all of this was some kind of hoax—but now, even as all the others, you know differently. You delight in delving into the weird and terrible, and I had hoped that you would be the one. . . . But it has always been thus.

“On the outermost planet of your system, that which you call Pluto, I encountered a denizen who, like yourself, was intensely interested in the ancient and dreadful superstitions of his planet. He also read the Preface that you have just read; he too wavered with that dread uncertainty, but his courage failed him and he fled from me and the Book as he would have fled from a plague, and so I knew that once again I had failed in this grotesquerie, that not yet was I to be free from the curse. But it has been so long, and nowhere can I escape those tortures of mind and soul which *They* inflict upon me at their will! For it is from *Them* that I derive the immunity to the terrors of outer space, and that hitherto unsuspected Power of darkness which transcends by far the power of light, by which I am enabled to traverse the space between planets and between galaxies. But no single moment, no single thought of my own!

“You cannot know the horror of that! Sometimes in the middle of night *They*

project a blasphemous Shape upon me, whose toothless mouth opens and closes in an obscene, soundless sound, who sits on my chest to perform a grotesque rite during which my very identity is lost in the churning of chaotic confusion and my mind reels out amidst the booming monody of the stars, on out into that boundless abyss beyond the outermost curved rim of cosmic space, where They dwell in contemplation of a monstrous catastrophe to the cosmos; nay, it is more than a contemplation, the thing has begun, is being done now, and out There I have assisted in this thing, the very immensity of which would drive one mad who knew. I would welcome madness, but They will not even let me go mad!"

His voice, ordinarily thin and shrill, had reached a penetrating shriek.

"But," I said at last in a sort of triumph, "if you are so anxious for me to read this Book, these very things you tell me defeat your purpose—if this whole crazy thing is not a dream, which I believe it is!"

He almost reeled as he put his hand to his head. "That is because you do not know the malign cunning of Them who conceived this plot. My very thoughts, the words I speak, come from Them! I am Theirs!"

An almost imperceptible pause during which he again seemed to listen to that which I could not hear, and he continued:

". . . but consider well . . . the Book reveals secrets which can be yours . . . knowledge of which you have scarcely dared to dream . . . why, you have not even thought to connect that 'Kathulhn' mentioned in the Preface with that tentacled and ever-damned *Kthulhu* reputed to have come to Earth eons ago by way of the planet Saturn to which it had previously fled from depths beyond your solar system . . . you can know whence obscure and loathsome Tsathoquah came, and

why . . . and other obscenities of sub-human legend hinted at in your *Necronomicon* and other forbidden books: N'hyarlothatap, and Hastur, and the abominable Mi-Go; frightful and omniscient Yok-Zothoth, ponderous and proboscidian Chaugnar Faugn, and Beh'-Moth the Devourer . . . you will converse with the Whisperer in Darkness . . . you will know the meaning of the Affair that shambleth in the stars, and will behold the hunters from Beyond . . . you will learn the very source of those Hounds of Tindalos who dwell in a chaotic, nebular universe at the very rim of space, and who are in league with those Outer Ones . . . all of these things, with which you are vaguely familiar through your readings, will you know—and much more. In the pages of the Book, which go beyond the very beginning, are revealed secrets which the wildest flights of your imagination cannot begin to comprehend . . . your mind, now such a puny thing, will expand to encompass that entire infinite arcanum of all matter, and you *may* learn in what manner the entire cosmos was spewed forth by an evil thought in the mind of a monstrous Thing in the Darkness . . . you will see that this cosmos which we consider infinite is but an atom in Their infinity, and you will behold the appalling *position* of our cosmos in that larger infinity, and the obscene rites in which it plays an integral part . . . you will know the histories of suns and nebulæ, and yours will be the power of bodily transposition between planets, or even to galaxies so remote that their light has not yet reached Earth. . . ."

HOW can I describe those few minutes—his shrill voice going relentlessly on, the book lying open there on the table between us, the flames in the fireplace throwing flickering shadows about the room; I standing there stiffly erect,

one hand on the table, mind reeling, trying to grasp the great magnitude of these things he was telling me and trying to weigh, one against the other, what I dared to believe and what I feared to believe!

And all the time he was speaking his head was held in that position which made me think he was listening . . . listening . . . for what? And his gaze as he talked was not fixed on me, but over my shoulder at the mantel where rested the clock. . . . Once while he was speaking I had slid my hand forward on the table, slowly, to almost touch the book, but an almost imperceptible change in the timbre of his voice made me draw my hand back. And all during his rambling sentences—whether it was the bewildering effect of his words on my brain, or not, I shall never know—I seemed to sense more and more clearly the presence of those invisible forces lurking near by, and they, too, seemed to be waiting. . . .

He was no longer speaking. I was not aware of when exactly he had stopped speaking; I only knew that I was no longer listening to his voice, but was listening for something else—something—I knew not what. I only knew that we were not alone in that room, and that the time had not yet come, but was near. So I listened for that which I could not quite hear, and stared again, fascinated, at the Book that lay there on the table between us. . . .

He saw that fascination.

"Read," he whispered fervently, bending toward me. "You know you want to read. You *want* to read."

Yes, I *wanted* to read. More and more was that fact forcing itself upon me. What sane man could believe that this Book had such menacing connections as he had hinted? But I was past being sure that I was a sane man. If I believed this story, I was assuredly not

sane; if I did not believe, why did I hesitate?

Again his whisper: "You *want* to read."

His almost imploring tone caused me to recoil from the Book in horror. But the fascination had not left me, and I could not utter the emphatic "no!" that had risen to my tongue. Instead, I looked quickly, a little wildly, about the room, into the corners, anywhere except into that little man's eyes; for I suddenly knew that to do so would be fatal.

Those unseen forces seemed to fill the room now. I could feel a definite tumult, a sort of surging to and fro, faint sounds of fury as of a mounting hostility between two opposing groups; a growing but unseen confusion of which I was the center. Into my mind flashed the thought that there was no little gray man, and no Book, and that all the seeming events of the evening were but a nightmare from which I would presently awaken. But no—here I was standing in my library beside the table with that absurd little man opposite me and that growing, unseen tumult about me. Could one think thus in nightmares, I wondered? Probably not, and therefore this was no nightmare.

Close upon this illogical chain of thought came another, with a suddenness so terrifying that I knew it had not originated in my own mind; it was one of those thoughts out of nowhere. It was simply the plain and uncompromising *knowledge* that this was all real, no hoax, no farce, but that I was faced with the most stupendous thing that had ever come to this Earth, and must conquer it or be conquered; I knew, too, with a sudden wild hope, that I would not be alone in fighting it. Those forces surging ever closer about me were there for a purpose, presaged something in my favor.

I turned then with a slow deliberate-

ness and faced the tiny man who was waiting. No word was spoken as my eyes met his very black and bottomless ones. . . .

I WAS lost! Too late I knew it. Everything around me vanished as those eyes grew, expanded, became two huge pools of space black and boundless beyond all imagining. I had been caught by the suddenness of it, but with a feeble instinct I fought against those eyes which seemed to draw me. . . . But there were no longer any eyes . . . my feet were no longer on the floor . . . I was floating serenely along somewhere a million miles out in that black space . . . serenely . . . but no—I was no longer floating now; a touch had brought me back. My feet were on the floor again and I stood close against the table. But something—some part of me—seemed still to move along against my own volition. That was funny! I wanted to laugh. It was my hand that was no longer a part of me, that was creeping, crawling, sliding like some sinuous serpent across the smooth table-top . . . toward the Book!

Yes, I remembered then, in a vague sort of way. There was a book on the table, a book that lay open and waiting, a book that for some terrible reason I must not touch. What was that reason? Slowly, slowly I remembered. There was a queer little man with very black eyes, who had told me an awful fact about the book, who had wanted me to read . . . to touch it would mean that I should read . . . and read . . . no turning back. . . .

Ah, how fully did comprehension then flee back to me, through my rising panic, as I sought in vain to stay the hand that crept along the table there like some Judas that would betray its master! How that churning confusion about me did increase, warningly, sweeping around me in an undulating wave as if they, too,

knew something of the panic that was upon me! How they closed in around me, those unseen forces, from behind, from all sides, purposeful, as if they would press me back away from the table, away from the menace of the Book! I almost heard tiny warning voices flitting past my ear, almost felt fingers tugging valiantly at my own, and for a moment I thought I comprehended. These forces—rallying valiantly about me—had *they* once succumbed to the Book, in ages past—countless beings from all parts of the universe—come now to aline themselves with me against the forces of the Book?

I may have guessed close to the truth—I shall never know. Nor shall I ever know by what terrific effort I finally hurled myself away from that table. I do not remember it. I only know that I stood at last supporting myself on the back of my chair, trembling in body and weak in mind; knew that the tension of that terrible moment was gone, and that the forces which had rallied around me were once again quiet, waiting. That this was but a temporary respite in the battle I well knew, and knew too that my exhausted brain could not endure another such assault.

A half-dozen feet away the Book lay face up on the table, a menacing, mocking thing. . . . Opposite it, that tiny man still stood on the selfsame spot where I had first glimpsed him in the room; in those black eyes was now a luster, a bright luster of hate for those forces which had fought with me against him—those which he must have known would come. How many times had they defeated him, I wondered! Had each of *them* once been a guardian of the Book as he was now? If ever *he* won release from the Book, would he in turn join forces with those who fought against it? Would they ever become strong enough

to defeat those Outer Ones who had conceived this entire plot?

I must not waste my strength in wondering, but prepare for the assault that must surely come again. In a sudden flash of illumination I knew that I must hold on—just a little longer—hold on until twelve o'clock. *That's* why he had watched the clock there on the mantel, over my shoulder! It must be very near the hour now, and if I could but hold on—stay away from that table—avoid those eyes—not be caught off guard again!

But how futile a thought! In that very instant the huge swimming blackness of those eyes again caught me with that fierce tenacity, again swept me up and away beyond all suns and stars, out into that vast darkness which cradles the universe. I was like a man drowning, who in a few brief seconds sees his entire past unfolded; but I saw instead my future, a future of dark terror and torture amid the vague forms and fears of that outer place. Even as I floated serenely in that terrible darkness I could seem to see those forms, those Outer Ones, indescribably repulsive for all their vagueness, peering past me with malicious glee at some drama being enacted for them as it had been how many times before! And this time *I* was a part of that drama.

And yet there seemed to be another part of me, far away and unimportant—a part of me that tried to make me see that this darkness was the illusion, not the reality—that struggled with a feeble sort of intensity to thrust this darkness away . . . how foolish! . . . how useless! . . . Now that other part of me was trying to remember—something—that had seemed important a long time ago—something to do with . . . but no—it was useless. . . .

Wait! Had not that darkness all about me suddenly shivered, like water whose

smooth surface is disturbed? Again! Now fading, receding! . . .

Had not something brushed my cheek just then? Was that a whisper in my ear? A number of whispers now, eager, urgent. . . .

The blackness around me receded rapidly, dissolved into two ebony pools that fled far away into space, becoming tinier, tinier, until they stopped to peer back at me.

WITH a shock, I was once again back in the familiar room, felt the floor under me, stood close against the table and was gazing at the twin ebony pools that were the tiny man's eyes. But in those eyes was now something of consternation and distress! Dismay in those eyes!

As before, with no volition of mine, my hand was gliding smoothly across the table-top toward the Book. As before, that surging of unseen forces was all about me—but now there was no confusion, no haste, no panic; there was instead a kind of unseen jubilation and pulsing of triumph!

But still those flitting little voices past my ear, faint and not quite heard, but seeming to urge me in something that I could not quite grasp.

I must try to be ready for whatever would come. . . .

My hand touched the Book! It moved over the opened page. . . .

"Now! Act now, act, act!"

The hand, which before had tried to betray me, now acted in a flash. I seized the Book, whirled, and cast it straight into the blazing fire behind me.

Immediately everything about me was a wild joy of triumph, but this lasted only a moment, and then all was quiet and still. Those forces, or beings, or

whatever they were, had once more triumphed, and now were gone back to whatever realm they had come from.

But as I look back at it all now, it seems a nightmare and I cannot be sure. I am not even sure whether those words "Act now, act!" were whispered in my ear, or whether they came screaming from my own throat in the tenseness of that moment. I am not sure whether some force entirely outside of myself caused me to seize and fling that book, or whether it was a purely reflex action on my part. I had no intention of doing it.

As for that tiny man beyond the table—he did not even leap to intercept. He did not move. He seemed to become even smaller. His eyes were once more very black, but somehow pitiable, not even reflecting the fire into which he gazed. For a few seconds he stood there, the very aspect of infinite sorrow and utter hopelessness. Then, very slowly, he walked over to the fireplace and reached a thin hand, as it seemed to me, into the very flames—and from those flames picked out the Book, the age-old, parchment-like pages of which had not even burned!

OF WHAT happened next, I hesitate to write; for I can never be sure how much of it was real and how much hallucination. In my fall to the floor I must have struck my head a pretty hard wallop, for I was several days in the care of a doctor who for a while feared for my mind.

As I said, the tiny man had picked out the Book from the flames. I am sure no word was spoken. But the next thing that happened was a sound, and it was a *chuckling* sound of such portentous diabolism as I hope never to hear again, seeming to come from far away but approaching nearer and nearer until it seemed to emanate from the four walls of

the room. Then came a blinding glare of light. That sounds trite, somehow, but it was exactly that; "blinding" hardly describes it, but I know of no stronger word. And it's at this point that I am not certain: I may have fallen and struck my head and become unconscious right after that glare of light, or I may really have seen what I seemed to see. I'm rather inclined to the latter belief, so vivid did it seem at the time.

How often I have read stories in which the author, attempting to describe some particularly awful thing or scene, has said: "It is beyond the power of my pen to describe"—or words to that effect. And how often I have scoffed! But I will never scoff again. There before me in that moment was the indescribable in reality!

I will, however, make a feeble attempt. What I saw or seemed to see must have been that same thing from Outside which Tlaviir described in the Preface of the Book. One moment it wasn't there and the next moment it was there. I suppose the glare of light occurred in that interval between the wasn't and the was. But there it was.

I can look back upon it now with a sort of grim humor.

It was pretty big, and seemed to be sticking through from some other space or dimension, just as the fellow had said in the Preface. It wasn't an arm, or a face, or a tentacle, or a limb of any sort, nothing but a *part*, and I wouldn't want to say what part. It was all colors and colorless, all shapes and shapeless, for the simple reason that it changed color and shape very rapidly and continually, always disappearing at the edges, not touching the floor or any part of the room.

More than that I cannot say; I had looked upon it for barely the count of one-two-three, when everything was sud-

denly black and I could not feel the floor under me at all.

But just before my mind slipped entirely away into the abyss, I heard a monstrous Word, a Name, shrieked in that shrill voice that belonged to the tiny man with the Book . . . and once again that Name shrieked in agony, shrill, faint, floating down along the star path, fainter . . . fainter. . . .

• • • • •

THE first thing I did when able to leave my bed was to pay another visit to that bookstore.

As I approached the narrow frame building, its air of utter desolation dawned upon me. I tried the door, but it was locked, and peering through a grimy window I perceived the books piled around haphazardly on the floor and on the shelves, everything covered with a gray depth of dust. That was peculiar.

A curious apprehension seized me. I was sure this was the right bookstore; there could be no mistaking it.

I had considerable difficulty finding out who the owner was, but I finally located him, a tall, raw-boned, rather unkempt man.

"Oh," he said, in answer to my question, "you mean the place down on Sixth Avenue. Yes, I own the place, used to run a bookstore there; business bad, so I locked it up—all of six months ago, I reckon it was. I might make another stab at it sometime. . . . No, I've never unlocked the place since. . . . Yes, sure, of course I'm sure. . . . What? A man about four feet tall with gray skin and no eyebrows? Hell, no!"

He looked at me as though he thought I was crazy, so I didn't pursue the matter further.

But I don't think I want to read the *Necronomicon*, after all.