

Weird Tales

SEPTEMBER, 1952

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"I have come . . . from Hell . . . to you. Hold me! Save me!"



The S in Eater

BY G. G. PENDARVES

LOOK about you! What do you think of this land where the dark experiment we shall watch takes place? This ancient haunted land of Cornwall—unfertile, unfriendly, isolated until last century from the world, even from the rest of England. Old gods, old worships, old forgotten races have died hard and lingeringly in this narrow peninsula. Cromlechs, shrines and

ruined altars on many lonely hills and desolate moors still remain to remind, to suggest, with dark portents of evil.

Not long ago Black Magic darkened the thoughts and lives of men here, from Land's End to King Arthur's Seat; not long enough to purge the duchy of its evil, not long enough to drive out forces so long dominant.

Apparently—oh, yes—apparently only legends remain: legends useful to amuse summer visitors in company with wishing-wells, smugglers' caves, bathing-beaches, old coastguard paths, Roman forts, ancient tin mines, pilchards and clotted cream. Let it go at that. Legends!

In reality this is the story of a master scientist who dealt with human powers which few of us begin to understand. And it is always comfortable to deny the existence of what we don't understand. We demand of science improvement, discovery, bigger and better toys to play with in order that we can more easily forget the briefness of our stay in the playground itself. The science we support is obvious, spectacular, dealing only with matter, dealing with our bodies very specially that they may be bigger, better bodies so that we may stay longer to play with our toys.

But the mind of man! How convenient to forget the sciences that concern the mind of man! The majority have a touching faith in modern psychology as being a complete map to it. About as comprehensive and true a map as those of the world made in the Twelfth Century!

That's as it may be, but most readers will grant, however, the suitability of our background here in Cornwall for this, for almost any imaginable mystery. Look at the broken, towering, gloomy cliffs. They guard memories of bloodshed, violence and tragedy, of wild gales and greedy seas, of battered ships and drowning men, of wreckers more barbaric than Moorish pirates, of smugglers and press-gangs, of long centuries of struggle between man and his enemy, the sea.

On this wild coast the breaking tides boom one continuous knell—death!

And inland? Do these bare moors, this stern gray granite give you comfort?

Look closer—closer—at this old fishing-port. It is full of narrow cobbled ways, full of dark-skinned, dark-eyed fishermen, their swarming children, their hundreds of cats.

This is the port of Trink. This is where we shall watch a great experiment.

We reach the great iron gates of Lamorna House—follow a shadowed drive between tall firs that moan and whisper the sea's long dirge—death! death! death!

MARK ZENNOR was dying.

He lay in his great carven bed and watched the pair of lovers with hard, merciless eyes. His young wife, Rosaina, and Stephen Lynn, his nephew, secretary and—? What else Stephen was, or would shortly be, was hidden in the dying man's thoughts.

Dying! It seemed impossible to Rosaina. She knew the doctors had given him up, said the patient was hanging on hour by hour by a miracle of will-power. She knew her husband had repeatedly affirmed this. But he seemed to her more awfully alive than ever.

*"Death, where is thy sting?
Where grave, thy victory?"*

The words flashed across her confused and terrified thoughts. Hysteria threatened. How ironical, those words, in connection with a death-bed like this! She bit her lip, closed her smarting eyes. Mark's voice stabbed her to control again. Her eyes opened to meet his sharp, cruel stare.

"Permit me to offer my sympathy. This is a most difficult role for you, my dear. Unpardonable of me to subject you to such embarrassment. It should have been so simple, so congenial a task to speed a parting guest. And an inconvenient husband at that! But *my* exit from this world? You feel something is lacking, eh? Now why?—why, Rosaina?"

Why indeed? For the life of her she couldn't formulate her deep uneasiness. Mark really was dying, there could be no question of it; all the doctors and specialists had agreed on that. A great many doctors had come and gone during the week of Mark's illness.

"It's only fair to you and Stephen that I take my departure with a good deal of publicity," he had explained. "My illness is so sudden and so unexpected that rumors might arise as to whether you two had connived at it. With all the drugs I use in my body a post-mortem would be very unconvincing."

It was remarks like this that stuck in Rosaina's mind. And the flicker of laughter in his eyes as he'd said them. At this very moment he—

"You're a fool, Rosaina, but not quite such a fool as Stephen. You at least realize how little you understand my work—my art. And you are afraid. Most wise. My nephew, on the other hand—"

He turned his great head, massive and bold in outline as the carved figurehead of a ship. His dark-red hair, tonsured like a monk's, was untouched by gray in spite of his eighty years. Under a tremendous brow, his eyes glittered like quartz in strong sunlight. His nose was long, finely cut, extremely sensitive, and, in conjunction with deeply-sunken cheeks and the fine brow, would have stamped him as an intellectual and ascetic had it not been for the mouth. That was a horror, a great bar of ugly crimson across the colorless face.

Stephen Lynn did not meet his uncle's keen, stabbing glance. He sat in the glow of a cavernous red fire across the room, and though ill at ease and resentful of his uncle's characteristically unpleasant way of conducting his death-bed scene Stephen's clever, mobile face showed neither fear nor doubt.

"My nephew," pursued Mark, "is too much a man of the world, of *this* world, to share your misgivings as to the future, Rosaina."

*"Imperial Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away."*

"My widow and her wealth would stop a good-sized hole. Exactly!"

A stain of color showed in the young man's face, too pale and sharply drawn for his age and build. But Stephen was a young man of character and ambition. His uncle paid him handsomely. He'd found the resources of Lamorna library invaluable for his own private researches. And there was always Rosaina. The fact of her near and dear presence had made his difficult, often revolting work possible.

He made no reply in speech, but Mark Zennor saw the red blood in his cheeks and sniggered.

"Don't trouble to conceal your face, my boy. And your thoughts are perfectly correct, too. I am almost finished, so it's hardly worth while your taking me seriously now. I shall die before midnight."

STEPHEN frowned at the floor between his knees. He'd never got accustomed to his uncle's hateful trick of snatching the thoughts from his brain and putting them into words. He glanced across at Rosaina sitting on the far side of the great curtained bed. How nervous and strained she looked! He'd be thankful when the end came and he could take her away.

"After all, Stephen," the voice from the bed proceeded, "you owe me a good deal. You've done better for yourself here than would have been possible elsewhere. The laboratory I fitted up for your exclusive use. The lines of research I indicated. Your salary. And the beautiful widow I am so obligingly going to leave for you. All these things must be balanced against less congenial aspects of your work under my roof. In fact, I'm hoping you will not grudge a last small service—a mere trifle, I assure you."

Rosaina turned her head sharply. She recognized the note in Mark's voice with a pang of fear. He was going to ask Stephen something important—something of such importance that he thought it worth while to subdue possible opposition with a weapon that never failed him. Her own heart leaped, her pulses thrilled in response to it. Mark's voice! Against all instinct and reason, those who heard that note in Mark's voice had no choice but to obey.

"Don't be anxious, my beautiful Rosaina. Indeed, my child, you must not be too sad, too tragic. I assure you there is hope, there is indeed hope!"

She shivered. Hope! What did he mean by that taunt? He knew his death was the one hope she had. He knew how she loathed and feared him, how she had tried to escape. But he would not let her go. And what Mark Zennor wanted he accomplished by methods peculiar to himself. She shivered again at memory of how, in the early days of her marriage, she had tried to run away. Mark had got her back in three days by means of a dream which haunted her during her absence. A very vile little dream, if indeed that whispering obscenity which never left her day or night could be called a dream. Possibly Mark might have used a more accurate term in describing the messenger he'd sent to bring back the runaway.

"Yes, hope! You were thinking on the right lines just now, my Rosaina, when your mind ran on death. I do indeed propose to rob it of its sting. And Stephen shall help me. I leave nothing to chance, to faith. I don't live by faith—that last resort of the inferior mind. I prove everything. I *have* proved everything—everything in this extremely elementary world of ours."

"Proved everything!"

Stephen echoed the words. For a moment he actually believed the monstrous assertion. His own mind seemed to shrink and shrivel, confronted by a knowledge and intelligence brilliant as the noon tide sun.

Then he was himself again, but shaken, a trifle fallen in his own esteem until he remembered a reason for his peculiar and absurd emotion. Watching by a dying man was not conducive to perfect functioning of the nerves, more especially when the dying man was his Uncle Mark. He rallied himself and smiled at Rosaina. She mustn't guess how close he'd been to sharing her own superstitious fear of this megalomaniac.

"It reassures me, Stephen, to see you smile."

Rosaina shuddered at the mad laughter in her husband's eyes.

"You appreciate this death-bed business for what it's worth, a convincing bluff for the ignorant. Objective facts of the most elementary kind are all this so-called scientific age understands. The real experiments are concerned with the spirit—with the *will*."

Will! At that ominous word Rosaina felt her blood run cold under the costly gold brocade of her gown. Mark insisted always on golden rich materials to set off her honey-gold hair and the matt pallor of her skin. The great emerald, emblem of their marriage, flashed wickedly with each nervous contraction of her hands.

"I am the only man in Europe who needs no faith. I have knowledge. I have mastered the secrets of existence."

Stephen felt completely himself now. Had it not been for Rosaina's obvious apprehensions he'd have started an argument.

"I must say I envy you," he replied. "It must be a wonderful sensation for you!"

"Sensation!"

Zennor's resonant voice gave the word an extraordinary inflection. It expressed all the mad unfathomable derision that danced in the speaker's eyes. He opened a small platinum box, took out a pellet and swallowed it.

"A drug to give that keen edge to my intellect which I find necessary in dealing with you, nephew. I am too much diverted. And I have not much longer now. My arrangements need scrupulously exact timing. The forces I control are as implacable as they are powerful."

The younger man frowned. He'd not realized quite how mad Rosaina's husband was. He looked at her again with startled apprehension. Good heavens! Was this the sort of thing she'd had to endure? No wonder she'd talked to him so wildly. There really was something in the old devil's voice—in his eyes—something inimical he'd never felt before. What a strong horrible face his uncle had! Curious this was the first time it had seemed malevolent and spiteful. In dying, though, no doubt the face-muscles contracted. Or perhaps the shadow that lay across the bed—

He got up in some haste, stirred the fire to a blaze, threw on a log, turned up a lamp. The shadow over the bed inexplicably remained.

"It's the shadow of death, my boy! Must do the thing properly." Zennor's eyes shone incandescent as a cat's as the fire roared up the chimney. "I promised both of you I'd die within the hour, and I'll keep my word. Death. Funeral. Burial. My mortal body committed to the earth. You two can carry out the whole heathenish sequence in most irreproachable style."

ROSAINA sprang to her feet. Her panic found speech.

"Tell us, tell us quickly what you mean? What is this new trick?—this game you're playing with us?"

Zennor regarded her convulsed features with deep interest.

"You ought to have gone on the stage. Absolutely born for tragic roles! That was perfect! Perfect! I'm grateful for a moment of pure pleasure, Rosaina. It hadn't occurred to me you'd ever give me one again. I never saw you so thrillingly, vitally alive.

Beauty! Passion! Exaltation! If a woman hasn't these she's a poor drab nuisance in the world."

Her tortured eyes looked across the bed to Stephen. He was standing by the fireplace. Irritation and some bewilderment showed on his thin tired face now. He didn't understand the awful fear that made Rosaina's face a Greek mask of horror. He didn't understand the crepitation of his own nerves. He didn't understand why his uncle, whom he'd always regarded as a man of brilliant intellect most grossly misapplied and therefore faintly contemptible, should now be inexplicably dominating even portentous.

The vast shadowy room was very still for a spellbound minute. Huge black candles burned in wooden standards four feet high and stood in a wide semicircle at the foot of the bed. Their wax gave off a faint scent of ambergris. Three uncurtained windows showed a staring moon and hard bright stars in a sky like polished gleaming steel. Rising wind made the dark firs toss and moan about the house. A dog's long dreary howl rose.

"Stephen!"

Rosaina's voice was like the clash of cymbals.

"Stephen! Take care—ah, take care! There is danger! Mark is not dying—not dying, I tell you! It's a trap for you, my darling. Stephen! Stephen!"

Zennor's big smooth supple hands flickered in a movement so swift that Stephen couldn't then, or afterward, recall exactly what he thought he saw, whether from the deepening pall of darkness over the bed a wing fluttered, a claw-like hand leaped forth, or if . . . if it was merely an effect of smoke and flame drawn with sudden swift roar up the great chimney.

Rosaina's hands flew to her throat. She gave a choking cry and fell back in her chair. Zennor's steely gaze turned from her to Stephen.

"Hysteria. I shall be dead in another fifteen minutes in spite of her unwarrantable lack of faith in my promise. You will spare fifteen minutes to hear a dying man's request?"

The cool convincing musical voice checked Stephen. Rosaina was overwrought. She'd had the devil of a time. But now—

well, it was only decent to humor his uncle in his last moments.

"If there's anything special, Uncle Mark, anything I can do for you, of course I'll be glad to carry out instructions."

His eyes sought Rosaina. She looked a great deal more like dying than did the man on the bed. Rigid as if bound to her chair, her face, her eyes, her straining throat, every line of her body showed terror bordering on madness.

"She will recover. I shall not."

The words came from the shadow slowly, solemnly. They riveted Stephen's whole attention.

"I am listening, Uncle Mark."

"Then it is soon told. *I wish you to be my sin-eater.*"

The fantastic words meant nothing to the listener. He waited. Mark Zennor's brilliant eyes were turned toward an hourglass set in an alcove near by. Filled with blood-red sand, it was swung between supports formed by two nude figures of transparent amber glass. The thing was of exquisite workmanship wrought by a craftsman whose skill was only equaled by his obscenity.

"The last sands are running out, the last minutes of my life. Soon the glass will turn over. In the moment of its turning I intend to make the change you call death. I have planned this ever since you came here, nephew. It is no question of my eighty years, of failing powers. My brain and body are not affected by time. I learned the small secret of prolonging the life of the body here centuries ago. Oh, it was easy to produce symptoms for the doctors if you're remembering their babble! Sant's the only man who'd have guessed."

His fingers crisped in angry recollection.

"Sant! The only man who might—"

He glanced again at the hourglass and checked himself.

"I have work that can't be completed on this plane of existence. I am hampered by my body, restricted by its laws. So I shall die."

He caught and held his nephew's eye.

"I ask you only to keep vigil for one hour by my body when I am dead. And then to eat bread, to drink water, and repeat the few words written on this parchment."

He showed a small scroll tied with black tape and sealed. Stephen glanced at the still figure of Rosaina. How ill and queer she looked! It was difficult to think of anything else. His uncle's thick lips twitched in savage amusement.

"She hears and sees you very well. But she is—er—prevented from joining this last intimate talk between us."

"You've—you've hypnotized her!"

Stephen dashed across the room, took the girl's cold stiff hands, called her name. His frantic efforts might as well have been addressed to the chair on which she sat. He swung back to the mocking, mountainous figure on the bed.

"What have you done to her? You old devil! I'll go and call—"

"No!"

Stephen was held in a vise. He could neither speak nor move.

"Unless you swear to obey me, swear to be my sin-eater, Rosaina shall never wake. She shall die in trance as she is now. I can rely on Those who serve me to see to it after I am gone. You can't help her any more than you can help yourself now."

Furiously aware of sudden utter helplessness, Stephen heard Mark Zennor's voice. Its deep organ-note filled the room; its terrible music bound his soul in chains.

"Swear, Stephen Lynn! Come close. Put your hand in mine and swear!"

In spite of fiercest effort, Stephen felt himself obeying the voice, the lambent burning eyes that drew him . . . drew him . . .

He was compelled. His slow, reluctant feet moved forward, he began to cross the width of polished floor between fire and bed. It seemed like some tremendous journey. Cold, deadly conviction of loss and loneliness made those few yards of flooring beneath his feet wider than all the deserts of the world.

Rosaina and his love for her, Rosaina's stricken body close beside him, Rosaina and all their winged and shining future faded in that moment of his strange journey to Mark Zennor's bedside, faded to a small cloudy dream . . . insubstantial . . . drifting . . . drifting out of sight . . . out of mind.

Midnight approached.

The blood-red sands sank low in the hourglass, trickling through a bunch of

glass grapes held by an excessively female figure into the opened mouth of an aggressively male one. When the glass swung over, the sands would flow back in a fashion as original as it was unprintable.

Stephen glanced up at the thing and back to the still figure on the bed.

Thank heaven! His hour of vigil was almost over. An hour. It seemed a lifetime since he had pledged himself, left hand in the dying man's cold strong grip, to carry out his uncle's last wish—to be his sin-eater. What a perfectly silly heathenish little ceremonial! And what peculiarly different things brought comfort to the dying! Certainly this last whim of his Uncle Mark's was outstandingly strange.

Little the dead man had ever cared about his sins! A man who refused to recognize any moral code at all, who never applied the words *good* or *evil* to conduct, who lived for experience alone—any—all experience.

His sin-eater! Fantastic notion! When last wishes had been mentioned, Stephen had imagined something far more formidable, something aimed at separating him from Rosaina. But this sin-eating business was merely a gesture—and a pitiful one considering the dead man's extraordinary intellect.

A baffling incalculable character. Sometimes he'd practiced harsh rigid asceticism, reduced his great frame to a skeleton. Sometimes he'd indulged his senses in debaucheries that ought to have killed him—and didn't! He'd used brain and body to their utmost capacity in every conceivable way.

Stephen had known all this before taking on the duties of a secretary two years ago. What he hadn't known, and still didn't believe in, was the reality of the dead man's art. That was his uncle's name for the overruling interest of his violent and checkered life. Stephen was a brilliant young man in his own particular line but he never conceived of anything that came under the heading of occult as being more than the rankest imagination. And imagination, he reasoned, belonged to poets and children in its better manifestations, and to drug-friends and the morally and mentally deficient in its worse ones.

When a man died, argued Stephen, he utterly ceased to be, save as a memory. Death—death of the body was the end of a man as a separate individual. His work alone survived.

His uncle's work! Stephen reflected on it as represented by the many books that bore Mark Zennor's name. He'd read some of them, a few that were written in English and dealt with scientific subjects. He'd been taken out of his depth and had never tackled the more recondite in German and French. There were books on philosophy in Chinese, Sanskrit, and Hebrew. There were books on music equally beyond his comprehension. He'd tried a volume of poetry once but decided that all the Turkish baths in the world wouldn't make him feel clean after such literary explorations as these.

However, there was one book in the Lamorna library which he had been forced to know from cover to cover. He had made its black linen covers himself and printed every word of the text between them. It was not published, not publishable. It had been his first and most unpleasant task as his uncle's secretary to print this book on the private press that Zennor owned. A short book and a damnable one. The author's references to past vile experiences and experiments, and to others even more monstrous which he intended to carry out, haunted Stephen for months. To his clear young mind such revelations of immense research and familiarity with unspeakable beliefs and practices were lewd expressions of insanity, the excesses of a megalomaniac whose ambitions rivaled Lucifer's.

Finally, however, he grew callous. Profound disbelief enabled him to do his daily work with the detachment of a machine. He ceased even to wonder why his uncle had wasted time and his amazing intellectual powers over such insane and filthy nonsense.

"Yes, filthy nonsense!"

He repeated the words aloud. He was beginning to feel the necessity of reassurance. This vigil was getting on his nerves. Something was wrong with the lamp—it needed refilling, perhaps. His uncle had insisted on lamps and costly special oil for them that made the whole house reek. Tonight the lamp and the fire too—what was

wrong?—everything seemed on the jump. Shadows. Beastly what queer imitations of life a shadow could give! Shadows—in that foul little book—they were said to be—

He thrust back persistent words and images, and glanced toward the bed. The old man looked extraordinary. His arms and hands lay naturally by his side, the fingers crisped a little in the characteristic way they had in life. His eyes were open.

"Don't close my eyes, remember, Stephen!" he had commanded. "I want to watch you perform the ceremony."

And, although Stephen would have preferred to close those merciless bright eyes, he had given his word and could not bring himself to break it. He tried however, to be mocking at his obedience, to be watching, waiting . . . waiting . . .

He attempted once more to reason about the thing.

"It's merely reflex action. The old man died believing in all his sticky little devil-worshipping ideas. He died happy in the thought that he was pushing all the results of his highly colored life on to my shoulders and went off believing this sin-eating business would square his accounts. That explains the peculiar expression in his eyes. And that half-smile!"

He frowned, stared.

"It certainly seems more pronounced. Probably it's those drugs he poured into himself to keep going as long as he wanted. When the rigor passes his muscles will relax. Nasty look on a dead face though—very nasty. Still it's perfectly explainable—perfectly!"

He wrenched his gaze from those fixed, sightless eyes. Sightless! It was hard to believe they really were that.

"He knew what he was about when he made me promise not to close them. Damned if the old devil's not at his old games even now he's dead. Trying to hypnotize me."

He moved restlessly, tried to laugh. The face of the dead expressed considerably more amusement than did his own; yet remembrance of this trick of his uncle's brought relief to the watcher. Hypnotism! That was it. That covered everything, especially the strange sensations he'd had just before his Uncle Mark had died. Idiotic to

have laid hi himself open to it—to have let imagination ride him so completely.

Thanks be! It had passed off almost at once.

Probably Rosaina's collapse had unnerved him, made him susceptible to suggestion. It was the very first time his uncle had ever caught *him* napping. His self-congratulation was unclouded by suspicion of design in this fact.

Rosaina! He looked at her. Still as a statue, white, frozen. Nothing he said or did could wake her.

"When you've fulfilled your promise, Stephen! She won't wake until then," Zennor had repeated. "Not until the hour is up and you've become my sin-eater."

Somehow he felt less concerned about her now—the strained white face, the terror-filled eyes, the slender limbs held as if in bonds! Hypnotized. He felt a faint contempt for the weakness that made her so easy a victim, even a sort of respect for the dominance of a will that could, even after death, exert its influence. Anyhow, if she were in a trance she felt nothing. No use his agonizing over her. Not long now to wait.

A FAINT whirring of machinery drew his glance to the hourglass. Its last grains had run out. Chimes of midnight sounded from some deep-toned village clock. Noiselessly, smoothly, the big hourglass turned in its half-circle.

He got to his feet, stood beside the dead body. At last he'd get the thing over and done with.

The first red grains ran back as he stretched out a hand toward the bared breast of the corpse. Those eyes! The light in them still. Surely—surely the dull fire couldn't strike that gleam in them? No, of course not. It was those infernal candles at the foot of the bed. Probably the wax contained some filthy ingredient that was affecting his eyes. Nothing his Uncle Mark had used was normal or natural. He was forever experimenting on his own senses and on other people's. The whole house ought to be burned down. Fire was the only purge for so much dangerous rubbish. That book in the library—everything suggestive, indecent. Yes, fire was the proper

cure. He was so furious, so humiliated by the repugnant fear he felt of touching the corpse that he suddenly shouted at it:

"I'd like to burn the house down and you in it!"

Naturally there was no reply. Or was there? Didn't the dead man's grinning lips draw back a trifle further? Didn't the fixed eyeballs roll slightly in their sockets to meet his frantic angry gaze?

He cursed himself for a fool. A fool to have promised to carry out this fantastic post-mortem charade. A fool not to break his promise now. And fool most of all to get the wind up like this if he *was* going to do it.

He forced himself to take the parchment roll from under the dead man's hand.

He broke its black seal, unwound the tape, opened out the crackling sheet. His face darkened as he read the strong black lettering. This thing that seemed so childish and superstitious an hour ago began to assume a new aspect in its fulfilment. And for this, Stephen cursed his imagination now, rather than his lack of it in the first place.

Consulting the parchment from minute to minute he began to obey the directions written there.

"Take up the wafer that is in the mazar-bowl," he read. "Mazar? I suppose he means black-cherry wood."

Yes, there was the small wooden bowl on a table beside the bed. He took out of it a wafer whose smooth black surface was pricked in a deadly device he failed to understand. His fingers, colder than the dead flesh he touched, placed the wafer on the bared breast of the corpse.

Another, smaller bowl stood filled with water. And this also he put on the dead man's breast.

Then, turning to the table again, he dipped his trembling fingers into a handful of salt around which five minute black candles burned in a circle. Their tiny flames licked up fiercely as his hand was outstretched above them. Pain set his whole body on fire. He stood rigid, agonized. Suddenly the burning ceased. Only in his brain a strange sense of heat remained as if the fiery ordeal had left a spark upon the altar of his mind.

The salt he had taken up he now sprinkled upon the wafer and into the water. Once again he consulted the written words, put out an obedient hand, let it fall with a groan.

"No! No!" he muttered. "I don't like this business. It's—there's something I don't like about it! I believe he's—"

Against his will he looked up, caught the fixed dead eyes that seemed so piercingly to watch him, and again he felt a sense of utter powerlessness. Again, as when he first agreed to be his uncle's sin-eater, his resolution fatally relaxed. The fire in his brain dissolved the half-formed premonition of his danger.

Before the hard cold glitter in the dead man's eyes his own fell. He raised the bowl of water and held it out with stiffly extended arms toward the corpse. His hoarse strained voice came haltingly:

"I drink this water, with salt that can compel, that your sins may be washed from your soul. Let them flow—as this water—from you to me. I receive the great darkness of your sins. I give the light of my soul that your own may walk in it forever."

He shuddered violently as he turned, bowl in hand, to each of the four corners of the room, repeating the form of words each time. Then, putting the water to his lips he drained it and tossed the bowl away.

And now he knew no trick of candle or firelight had set that flame of wicked malice dancing in the eyes that held his own, or brought those capering shadows all about him. The fire within his brain worked like madness. He was part of all this now. He loved as much as loathed it. He desired as greatly as he feared to share the dead man's secret power.

He took up the wafer, turned again to each corner of the darkening room to repeat the written formula. Now his voice rose loud and defiant as he faced the corpse:

"Mark Zennor, with this bread and the salt that has power to seal my vow, I eat your sins. Give me the burden of them. I take their weight on my soul. I, your sin-eater, give my soul's rest for yours eternally."

He put the wafer in his mouth. It crumbled to salt dust on his tongue. As he swallowed it he was aware that the

flame of life within him was rising higher—higher—higher. And, with its soaring, towering, leaping life, he seemed to touch the stars. Then, with awful downward plunge, he sank—swift—swooning—down to thunderous abysmal dark. . . .

"STEPHEN! Stephen!"

He roused himself. Rosaina was kneeling by his side where he lay on the floor. Her arms were about him. Her tears fell on his face. He got up, drawing her also to her feet, and looked down at her tragic face. He felt as though he'd been under the sea, submerged, almost drowned. His fears, his pain, the madness in his brain were washed away.

Rosaina held him with desperate convulsive pressure. He felt the wild beating of her heart against his breast. She couldn't speak. His low murmured words of love seemed to increase her dreadful shuddering agitation.

At last her sobbing breath was stilled, and she leaned against him in utter exhaustion as he stroked her golden shining hair.

"Darling! Dearest!" he whispered. "He's gone at last, left us free, you and me! You and me, my own! Rose! My golden lovely Rose! Love me, love me and forget the rest."

She didn't move or speak. Once she turned to kiss the fingers that rested on her hair, and the cold pressure of her lips startled him—her clasp, her kiss were so despairing. Then she cried out again:

"Stephen! Stephen! Stephen!"

"Darling! I am here—holding you—close—close. Why do you call as if I were leaving you?"

"Stephen! You are—you are leaving me!"

She pushed him away, stood with white tragic face and haunted eyes.

"Oh, Stephen, my dear!—my dear! Don't you understand at all what you have done?"

"You mean that barbaric little ceremony? Dearest, you simply can't believe there's anything in that! You might as well believe in ghosts and witches and devils—or—or anything," he finished lamely.

"I do believe in devils. He was a devil—served by devils. Didn't you see what held me bound this past hour, Stephen? Didn't you see?"

"The old man hypnotized you. I tried to wake you up—I tried repeatedly."

"You saw nothing—felt nothing when you touched me? Oh, it's come, it's come at last—our punishment for loving. How fast he's got you now! He'll drag you down to hell—down to hell."

She went close to him again, looked up into his frowning bewildered face.

"His sin-eater. *His sins*. Have you any idea what Mark's sins were? No! How could you—when even I—although I can't sleep for remembering, for remembering—even I can only guess at—"

Her face grew ashen but she moved back from his imploring arms.

"Wait, wait, Stephen darling! Oh, try to understand—try to believe me. It was real, that ceremony of the sin-eater. You *have* taken Mark's sins from him."

"You really believe that?" His tone was the more emphatic for a cold creeping doubt that chilled him now. "Darling, you can't be so medieval and superstitious as that!"

"I know, I know I'm right," she urged. "You're in hideous danger. Oh, if you believed me even now it might be possible to—"

She broke off, seized his hands and pressed them to her breast.

"Stephen! Stephen! Of course, I remember now what he said to me about Mark's illness, and that I must tell him if—Come quickly, quickly! We'll ask him to help you."

She clasped him in an agony of relief.

"Mr. Sant—don't you remember?—don't you remember he said Mark was not ill? He promised to return before any crisis arose if he could."

"No, I forgot all about it. But he'd think me a fool to go to him with this tale.

"Uncle Mark was mad and you can be sure Sant knew it. He's the most celebrated alienist in Europe. Sant would count me as a patient if he thought I believed this. What can it signify—a few silly words gabbled over a dead body? Look here, Rosaina, let's get out of this room and talk somewhere else; even the sight of his corpse—"

She glanced over her shoulder as they went, hand in hand, to the door. Her loud

cry seemed to the man to come from his own lips as he turned and stared also at the bed.

"Look! Look! Ah-h-h! Look at him now!"

He dropped her hand, strode to the cavernous bed. The face of the corpse was the face of one utterly at peace. Its bright staring eyes were closed, its lips gravely folded, every line that lust and pride had deeply stamped was smoothed away.

It was the face of one whose soul had found its rest.

Rosaina pressed close to Stephen. She stood staring . . . staring. . . . Her white trembling lips whispered over and over and over:

"You are his sin-eater—his sin-eater—his sin-eater You have taken the evil from him."

They turned to look at each other. Her eyes searched his in frantic love and agony, dreading to see in them what he had taken from the dead. He returned her look. Faint impatience pricked him. He'd had enough melodrama for one night, he felt. Rosaina was—what had his Uncle Mark once said of an Arab woman he'd bought in Touggourt? Oh, yes! "Zobeide, my dear nephew, was a—"

He pulled himself up. Good heavens!

What had brought that lewd story to his mind—and in connection with Rosaina? He turned in horrified contrition.

"Dearest, you must come away. This place reeks of him and his beastliness."

"O H, YES, please! Yes, we'll come at once. No, not here! I can't talk to you in *his* house."

Sant put down the telephone receiver, stood gazing at it. His mind was roused to extraordinary activity. His memory was gathering up facts, proofs, experience from the immense field of his knowledge. The whole situation was changed now.

The great tawny Persian cat, lying with head sunk between straightly extended fore-paws, felt a break in the continuity of his peace. He looked up, gave a small inquiring trill of protest. His master picked him up and tucked the satin head beneath his own chin.

"Hároon Er-Rasheed, my old friend, it's

bad news—the worst possible news! Mark Zennor is dead."

He held the cat so that he might look into his benevolent peaceful face. The animal rubbed a cold friendly nose against his own.

"Oh, yes, I know I'm clever, my dear. But so is he, most infernally so, and if he's dead it's because he didn't wish to remain alive. For the moment I can't fathom his reasons—that is what we've got to discover."

Hároon Er-Rasheed burrowed his muzzle into the palm of Sant's hand and gurgled consolation.

"Well, I'm glad you believe in me so utterly. It all helps. But we must think—we must think."

With the gentle deliberation approved by that nervously constituted aristocrat he put the big cat down. Turning to his bookshelves he took out a battered volume entitled *The Human Will*. His visitors could not be here immediately, for his house was fairly inaccessible from Trink Village and the motor-road made a very long detour.

As this is the story of Zennor's death and of certain events immediately consequent on that crisis, it would be tedious to go back in any detail into circumstances of how and when these two men had previously come into conflict. The affairs were too elaborate, a great many other people were involved in them, and they had never been in the nature of man-to-man duels. Rather, Sant had interfered, very quietly, very circumspectly on a number of occasions in order to frustrate some of Zennor's ripest and most deadly plans.

By the time a rapid muffled knocking sounded at his front door, Sant had traveled a long journey in his thoughts. His immense power of concentration had marshaled his every encounter with Zennor and criticized each anew. In the light of his last dramatic move, everything Zennor had done or not done assumed less or more importance.

"Yes," reflected Sant aloud, as he rose to let in his visitors. "His death is a retreat in one sense, but it means that he has fallen back on some superior vantage-ground. My task is to discover what it is."

The welcoming light which, from the

vestibule of his house, shone like a little star on the lonely hillside, showed Rosaina and Stephen to Sant as he opened his door to them.

Both were changed. He knew that instantly. It was a new and different quality of fear that now whitened the girl's face, aging and withering her inexpressibly. In Stephen's keen alertness there was now an edge of antagonism. At first faint pattern of the dead man's plan began to take shape in Sant's mind.

He led them in to his warm fire, and it did not surprise him to see his cat pressing up against the door as he opened it, but as the creature shot past his legs and away, ears flattened back, tail stiffened in angry fright, the pattern of Sant's thoughts was stamped a trifle more clearly. His eyes took on the gray remoteness of a winter sea, always a sign of intense mental preoccupation with him. He didn't, however, communicate his thoughts, but merely listened to their story and put extremely pertinent questions.

"About that one special book you recollect when Zennor had died and you were keeping vigil by him. It seems to me very important. I must get hold of that book you printed."

"I suppose it would be a good idea." Stephen felt a peculiar reluctance all of a sudden to part with that black-bound book. "I'll see if I can find it for you."

"Thanks. Tomorrow morning, then."

Stephen was astonished at his own stab of furious anger. He was an even-tempered man and, although he was roused at rare intervals, it took a great deal to make him angry. Also, when that happened, he always felt cold as a block of ice. Never in his life before had he experienced such fiery murderous hate as flared up in him now.

SANT pretended not to see the vivid, if very fleeting, change in the other's face.

A strong revulsion of feeling seized the younger man. "Yes," he begged, "do come and take the thing away. I can't bear to remember I printed it, helped to perpetuate such foulness. It's coming back to me as we talk what it was all about, at least so far as I understood it. When I was working on

it I was convinced Rosaina was somehow concerned—the human sacrifice—but there were a good many sacrifices mentioned, and she couldn't have been the same 'golden woman' who died in Persia thousands of years B. C., or a Libyan princess in the time of Alexander the Great, or a slave in A. D. 50! And yet the book—"

Sant's blank calm face effectually concealed his thoughts.

"Yes. Do go on," he encouraged; "this is all most relevant."

"Of course," confessed Stephen, "most of it was gibberish to me. Uncle Mark claimed to have been reincarnated over and over again. He had to find something—or someone to complete a Triad—a mystic perfect Triad. It had to be three who were bound each to the other in some mysterious way. Then he could offer his last sacrifice through the medium of the Triple Link. His great object seemed to be the possession of a Key—"

"The Key of Thoth?"

"Yes. That's what he was after—the Key of Thoth." He met Sant's grave eyes. "It's all pretty much of a jumble in my mind. I didn't understand one word in a hundred. But I do remember that he'd got to have some special sort of co-operation for his sacrifice."

"Stephen! What else—what else?"

Rosaina's voice was sharp with anxiety.

He looked at her rather vacantly, his brows drew together, he ruffled his thick brown hair. "It was fairly evident that he felt he'd got to the end of his search. There was a lot about his High Priest and the bond of blood to seal his bargain."

Sant's eyes were very cold, very remote. "I see." He looked intently at the other man.

"Damned if you do!" blazed Stephen suddenly. "It was my uncle's great secret, the goal of all he'd ever done or thought or lived for! No one—*no one* ever so much as guessed at his tremendous success—at the things he'd discovered."

"Stephen!"

Rosaina's cry brought him to himself. She shrank from his touch, turned to Sant with unmistakable appeal.

"He's worn out—as you are." Sant's voice was stern now. "You mustn't show

fear, Rosaina, you mustn't feel fear! It will injure him. If your love has any depth and reality you've got to help him. You can't leave him now."

"Leave him?" stammered the girl.

"Certainly. You left him when you turned to me then. Now listen to me, both of you!"

He looked into Stephen's dark eyes. Anger made them glitter. His thin face seemed a trifle squarer, his lips a trifle fuller.

The rough dark hair took a red gleam from the firelight.

"Stephen," Sant put a hand on the other's twitching one, "you're afraid too and you're giving ground to the enemy. It's no use keeping up any sort of pretense about this; we must work together, it's our wills against—the dead!"

"His sin-eater. I am his sin-eater."

Stephen spoke, not in horror so much as in warning and reminder.

"You were ignorant and foolish. You let Zennor trick you once—are you going to let him go on doing it, Stephen Lynn?"

The other got hastily to his feet, held out his hand.

"No!—no! I'm not! No, I'm all right again now and I'll fight him until I die."

"And that won't do, either." Sant gripped him strongly. "You've got to live. You've got to find out how to free yourself."

He turned to Rosaina.

"I won't disturb my housekeeper so late—or so early! It's almost three o'clock in the morning. You shall have my room. There aren't any others ready. Stephen will do very well down here by the fire. I must go to Lamorna House at once."

He spoke with eyes on Stephen's face, saw gratitude and relief suddenly sharpen to suspicion.

Some sort of struggle was going on in the young man's mind. Sant went off with Rosaina, and returned to find Stephen in hat and coat.

"It might be better if I went back with you, after all. You can—" he hesitated. "Oh—if—of course, if you prefer—no, I'll come! You can keep an eye on me then."

His companion regarded him with absorbed attention.

"Don't you mean you want to keep an eye

on me?" he corrected. "Come if you will, by all means."

Again the younger man hesitated, then spoke in slow sulky tones.

"It would be better. The servants would think it queer if Rosaina and I were both here and you in possession at Lamorna House. Uncle Mark left like that!"

"Of course," Sant heartily concurred. "We'll go together."

THEY found Lamorna House abominably quiet—a challenging sinister quiet that met them on the threshold with all the force of swarming invisible assailants in possession of a stronghold. As they went through the hall and up the broad stairs, shadows seemed to peer and watch, to keep guard over the dead.

In the chamber of death they found the tall black candles still burning steadily at the foot of the bed. The head of the corpse lay deeply sunk into the pillows. On its face a yet profounder calm had settled. Sant looked down in silence. He hid his deep disquiet from Stephen, standing beside him; but, turning sharply, he surprised a strange smile dawning in the young man's dark eyes, a smile that spread as Sant watched it—loosening the fine curve of the mouth, aging and coarsening the eager face.

He faced the corpse and spoke a few rapid words under his breath. For a moment the look of infinite calm on Mark Zennor's face seemed to break and alter—as the surface of smooth water is ruffled by a sudden angry gust of wind.

But it was Stephen who answered Sant's words. What he said was unintelligible to himself—the words rushed from between his lips—his hands clenched—his whole body stiffened. Then, under the penetrating steady look with which Sant met his outburst he drew back. His taut muscles slackened. He looked almost stupidly bewildered.

"Sorry! Did you say anything? I felt dizzy all of a sudden."

"I didn't know you spoke Arabic!"

"Arabic!" echoed Stephen. "Why, I don't speak it—don't understand a word of it. What makes you say so?"

"Only that you cursed me very competently in that tongue just now."

Stephen's bewildered frown deepened to

a scowl. "You seem as much off your balance as Rosaina. I've never spoken a word of Arabic in my life."

"Forgive me!" Sant put a hand on his arm. "I'm not playing tricks on you—it is *he* who is doing that. I wanted to prove something and I've done so. Come away. This empty shell he's left—everything here reeks of him—tainted—poisonous! Come, Stephen!"

Outside the room, Sant locked the door and pocketed the key. Instantly his companion's eyes blazed with fury, but it died down and faded at the older man's friendly smile and touch.

"Look here, Sant, I can't stand this, I'm all in a fog—can't seem to get a grip on myself. Can you give me something to make me sleep? If I could sleep, forget the last few hours, I might—"

"The very best thing," agreed the other.

THEY went downstairs again. In his own private study, Stephen switched on an electric radiator and produced drinks. An hour later he was sleeping heavily, stretched out in an easy-chair. Sant made for the library; he knew he must get hold of Mark Zennor's book before he was prevented.

He found it at last, sat down at a desk, and began to examine it. He read on and on. Dawn crept up to the tall, uncurtained windows. Warmth of the rising sun touched his cheek as he sat, fell on the printed page before him.

He got to his feet abruptly and flung up the nearest window, thrust out his head to breathe deeply of the keen salt air from the Atlantic. In the east a streak of yellow kindled behind glimmering ghostly bare trees. Ah! How good the sharp sweet air—the untainted dawn! How cleansing after the abominable pages of Zennor's book! He leaned against the window-frame, half closed his eyes, surrendered his tired mind and body to the spell.

A robin warned him. Young and bold and hungry, it fluttered to the broad sill on which his hand rested.

Cheep! Cheep! Cheep! Cheep!

Sant's eyelids lifted. He caught sight of a shadow on a side-pane of the bay window and turned in time to snatch up the open book. Stephen stood beside the

desk, a queer stiff automatic figure, his eyes wide open but glazed with sleep. As the book was withdrawn his lips drew back in a savage grimace and a blaze of vivid hate shone through the dreaming dark eyes. The hand outstretched to pick up the book drew back with crisping crooked fingers like the talons of a bird of prey.

Sant leaned forward, looking deep into the black fixed eyes of the sleepwalker.

"No, Mark Zennor—not yet! I stand between you and this man you have betrayed. I fight for Stephen Lynn—for his body and for his soul."

Again hate leaped like white fire in the fixed eyes, and for a moment the mask of Stephen's face quivered, altered, expanded to hideous semblance of the dead.

Sant drew closer, put all his will into repulsing the assault. "Not yet," he repeated. "You dare not take possession of this human body now. The four hands of Adda Nari still hold the four elements from your grasp. You are not yet wholly freed from the Wheel. The laws of human life still bind and limit you."

Fiery hate died on blankness in the eyes opposite his own. He blew lightly in the set young face.

"Wake, my dear boy—wake!"

Stephen was bewildered, annoyed, and very tired.

"What's it all about? Sleep-walking! Never done that before. Heavens! What a beastly draft!"

He slammed down the open window against the still twittering robin and rang a bell.

"Those lazy good-for-nothing servants! Snoring away upstairs. They can jolly well come down and do their bit. I'll have enough on my hands now with funeral arrangements and all the rest of it."

He looked far more exhausted than before he'd slept.

"What were you working at? That book of my uncle's—eugh! Better burn it—burn the whole library—everything!"

"Yes, I agree, but not until I've come to the end of the trail I'm following; not until I know how strong a link he made to bind you to him."

"That sin-eating charade?" Stephen's look was derisive. "Y'know we all got the wind

up pretty badly last night. No man could believe in such mumb-jumbo—not now, in broad daylight. Last night was different. After watching Uncle Mark all those hours—and he was a—well, he's gone now, no need to dissect his unpleasant character more than necessary. Anyhow last night's over and done with! As to the rest—"

"You mean you no longer feel in any danger?"

"Danger? No, except of making a fool of myself. Last night he hypnotized Rosaina and I believe he put some sort of a 'come hither' on me too. Making the most of his last hours I suppose. I don't want to think of, or talk about, or remember last night any more."

"Perfectly natural and normal, but unfortunately your attitude gives Mark Zennor a clear field."

"What—with me!"

Stephen stared, then burst into a laugh. Sounds of steps in the hall interrupted him.

"One of the Seven Sleepers at last—butler probably," he went on. "Better go and tell him about Uncle Mark. He'll want to warn the maids and trot round pulling down blinds, etc. Servants adore deaths and funerals and all the gloom and wreaths and hushed voices and all the rest of it. There won't be tears, at least. No one in the wide world could regret Uncle Mark's death. There's the telephone, that'll be Rosaina—hope she slept better than I did, poor darling!"

IT WAS after the funeral that Sant missed Stephen.

"I can drive the car, of course," he told Rosaina as he tucked a rug about her knees. "But—"

She gave a shiver, nor was it the keen north-east wind that chilled her.

"We can't wait here in the churchyard for him. Let's go back.

A crackling log-fire and Sant's big yellow cat gave them welcome. Rosaina sank to a chair by the leaping flames and tossed her hat on the rug. She'd cast aside all the rich flaunting golds that Mark had insisted on, and in a dark tweed suit she looked less sophisticated and considerably more tired and fragile.

Hároon Er-Rasheed inspected her hat

with deep interest and a running commentary of sounds peculiar to himself, then leaped to her knee.

Sant smiled down on them both. "Not much of you visible now. I must see that Zennor's book is safe before looking for Stephen."

He crossed over to a bookcase and pulled out from behind a row of dusty folios a box clamped with silver, unlocked it with a key on a bunch in his pocket.

The box was empty!

"Gone! Stephen evidently made straight for it. It had a preface with elaborate detailed instructions for reaching the hidden entrance to a vault or crypt beneath Lamorna House—Zennor had converted it into a sort of chapel."

She stared up at him.

"The book! Instructions! D'you think Stephen's gone down to the horrible place?"

"Sure of it. He's been trying to do it ever since Zennor's death. I dogged him like his own shadow—he'd no chance until this afternoon. I saw him slip away from the graveside, but I couldn't run after him then.

"I've made a copy of those instructions." He put a hand into his breast-pocket and drew out a few thin crackling sheets from a case. "Impossible to find the place without this key. I'll have to follow at once."

"I must come too. Yes!—yes!" she got to her feet impetuously. "I can't wait here alone. You don't know what horrible thoughts I have."

"Believe me, I do know, but I ask you to stay. The danger is acute for all three of us, most of all for Stephen. For his sake I must go alone. I'm not powerful enough to give you protection if sudden attack came. If you hinder me or distract me and I fail—you and he are also lost, remember."

She met his eyes bravely.

"You're very clever, and very strong. I believe in you with all my heart. And I'll do my best to—to believe in myself too. But bring Stephen back to me! Oh, bring him back!"

BRING Stephen back to me!" An hour later her passionate appeal echoed in Sant's ears as if Rosaina's strained white face still looked into his, while eyes and

lips implored, "Oh, bring him back to me!"

On the threshold of a vast and vaulted chapel he stood cold and stiff as the carven monstrosities within it, his eyes fixed on a great altar that faced the entrance. Before the altar a man was standing—a man who elaborately genuflected and abased himself. The man was Stephen Lynn.

Sant, who knew the value and the meaning of each gesture, knew also that he was too late to interfere.

"It would kill him outright now," he murmured; "he's in trance. Zennor's taken complete control. He means to strike at once without giving me time to prepare. Yet the Universal Agent turns to its ebb! He's broken his Rule. He means to sacrifice before his Hour."

He took a few steps into the heavy perfumed gloom. What light there was beat down upon the altar-steps, above which a great metal globe hung, suspended in mid-air by magnetic force, a globe that received long shafts of light from concealed sources and gave them off again in dazzling hypnotic points of fire.

Sant carefully avoided raising his eyes. As carefully he moved forward, choosing his steps over the bizarre mosaic of the marble floor. He knew the deadly trap of the symbolic tree whose reversed branches spread under his feet. He knew what dark magic lent iridescent gleam to the peacocks set within their topaz circles. His lips murmured the Words and a Word as he trod between the stippled ochreous coils of two serpents intertwined. His hands moved in strange rapid gestures as he followed a narrow track of alternating black and yellow tiles, setting each foot on the black, advancing with a swaying balance of a tight-rope walker.

And now he halted. On the chapel pavement before him glowed a full moon, red, ominous as spilt blood. He anxiously examined it. If the moon revealed—Yes! So faint that only an initiate might discern its awful significance, an ovoid luminous shadow moved within the confines of its own circumference, vaporous, restless, potent, dread symbol—the Orphean Egg.

Sant waited, watched a curl of bluish mist rise from the full moon's strange

matrix, stood like a stone as it curled about his feet, his knees, his body, his stiffly erect head. Only with his will might he control this force—creator and destroyer before the earth was formed. Behind the dreadful veil that hung about him, his face showed the grimness of the ordeal. Vapor swirled and eddied swifter, denser every moment. Sant knew the pains of death, the pangs of rebirth, but he endured, and at last stood free.

Back to its living source the vapor sank as he moved forward to the lowest altar-step. He had received a baptism, and nothing in this place, dedicated to evil, might harm him in this hour.

He looked up instantly at the altar. The spare young figure knelt in rigid stillness now and every line expressed tense prodigious effort of concentration. A voice continuously rose and fell, but not Stephen's voice—the timbre was fuller and more richly modulated, a trained and powerful instrument whose deep notes held the sound of far-off stormy seas.

It was Mark Zennor's voice that rose and fell—rose and fell in magic compelling cadences! Zennor calling on his dark gods, reiterating his impious vows, drawing to his service a vast army of the damned.

Velvet-shod, Sant moved another step upward. And now he blotted out his own personality that it might make no impingement on the etheric waves of evil which the worshipper was drawing to himself. On all sides he felt strong pressure of occult power—subservient, dominated by the man at the altar above him.

"Bring him back to me!"

The words thrilled through his brain, for he could not obey them now. This man kneeling by the great Stone of Sacrifice was Stephen Lynn's human habitation merely. Within it, controlling, drilling an unaccustomed body to its ritual, was Mark Zennor's proud satanic brilliant mind.

"Bring Stephen back to me!"

Impossible now. Zennor had long ago too thoroughly prepared his ground, too completely trapped his victim from the first moment of their contact. He listened intently. The words rapped out firmer, quicker, more peremptory now. The climax approached.

The great chapel, circular in shape, had

walls that rose curving, darkly luminous, satin-smooth as the petals of a vast black tulip, to meet a vaulted roof—their polished surface broken by squat archways behind which darkness lay like a crouching beast of prey.

Above the huge slab of the altar-stone was a reredos of red alabaster, a screen some thirty feet by ten. It was powerfully illumined from behind, so that its carving stood out in bold relief and a trick in the lighting gave a sinister effect of constant movement.

This screen was a vivid presentment of a human sacrifice. Bound on the stone-altar, a woman appeared to writhe and quiver. Her long bright hair rippled down to a deep trough about the altar-base. Into this same trough trickled a thin dark stream of blood from a knife which pierced the victim's body. About the altar stood tall candles whose flames danced in frenzy.

And behind the candles' flare and flicker, at each of the four corners of the altar, a veiled figure towered. Menacing, gigantic, these figures were the only immovable objects on the screen, and they achieved by their fateful stillness—in contrast with the surge and movement of all else in the picture—an effect of final inescapable doom. Dark crescent moons poised above each veiled head of these four attendant genii bearing Hebrew characters which read—EARTH. WINTER. NIGHT. DEATH.

And now Sant saw the black-clad figure—the body of Stephen Lynn, torn and wrenched, trembling from head to foot in diabolic ecstasy, arms flung wide, head bent backward so that light from the suspended globe beat full and fiercely down upon the upturned face. Louder—louder rang the great triumphant organ voice, pealing out into the unclean silence of the chapel's gloom, beating against the curved and shining walls which sent back clashing paens of tremendous harmony—

"Thus I have conquered, ye Genii of the Twelve hours!

Thus are all things subdued to my Will!

By wisdom I have pierced Truth.

By intelligence I have cast down idols.

By strength I have bound Death in chains.

By patience I have fathomed the Infinite.

Now is the Universe wholly revealed to me.
Ye Terrible Ones! Princes of the kingdoms and
heavens of Phazuph, of Sialul, of Aeglun,
of Aclahayr,

I, who have worshipped and obeyed, shall serve
no more.

Princes of Earth, of Air, of Fire, of Water,
The Four Elements you rule are as dust under my
heel.

I am invulnerable—beyond Death and change
forever.

The six wings of Bereschott cover me.
The Rock of Yesod beneath my feet.
Bow down in homage! BOW DOWN!

Sant, his eyes on the tense convulsed
figure, saw it sway. Its outflung arms
dropped.

The dark head leaned back—back until
Sant could see its greenish pallor, and half-
veiled eyes. Rigid, entranced, the spirit
within him caught up into dark swooning
ecstasy, Stephen fell back slowly, slowly
into Sant's waiting arms.

“FRIDAY afternoon! A few more hours,
Adrian—only a few hours now.”

Sant glanced at Rosaina, got up from his
chair and began to walk up and down his
study. Presently he lighted a pipe, let it go
out between his clenched teeth as he paced
to and fro. He looked out across his garden
where violets, anemones and jonquils braved
February winds and tall daffodils danced to
its piping. His absent gaze followed the
course of a valley and rested at last on the
stretch of ocean beyond. Gray, turbulent as

his own thoughts, the Atlantic lay under a
leaden sky. His brooding look dwelt on it
as if in this vast element he found ease for
his soul.

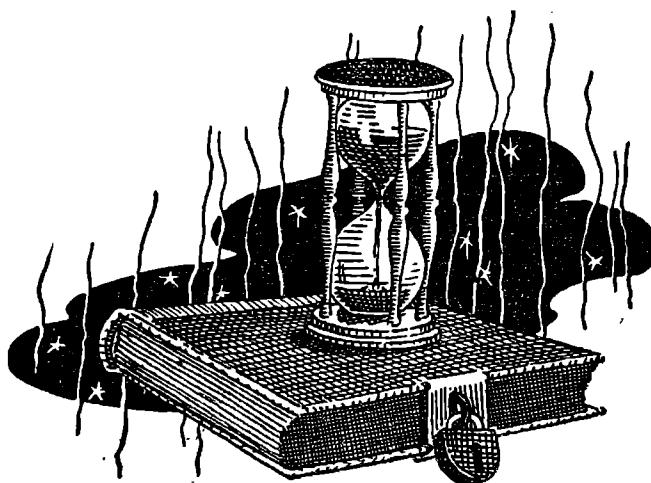
“Adrian!”

He turned back to Rosaina, sitting by
the fire, his heart contracted with pity at
sight of her. How altered since Zennor's
death! Not all the tragic years of her mar-
riage had broken her as these few days of
torturing anxiety for the man she loved.

Sant's burden grew heavier as he met
her eyes; she looked so lost, so wild, so
grief-stricken; her body seemed transparent
in the firelit dusk; her golden hair was
lifeless and faded, the delicate lines of
face and neck painfully evident, the amber
eyes two deep pools of weariness. Body,
mind and spirit could endure little more.
And yet they *must!* And tonight. There
could be no halt in the tremendous impetus
of the occult rhythm of events. Zennor,
through his chosen medium, Stephen Lynn,
could not himself alter the impending cli-
max now. Tonight he gained all, or lost
all. There was no middle course.

He had challenged the Four Ancient
Ones, and must prove their master or be
forever enslaved. Tonight he must achieve
the goal for which he had striven since his
first incarnation on earth by offering the
Perfect Sacrifice to complete the Triad of his
protection.

Tonight! That much Zennor had revealed
through Stephen on the day of the funeral
while Sant watched in the chapel. And be-
cause it was tonight, Sant knew his enemy



feared him and his influence; for Zennor's own baneful star would not be at its zenith until the next moon's waning, in the Tenth Hour, called Malaen.

The genii of that Hour were strong and slaves to Zennor's will. They had been the heat of his blood, the shadow of his body, the breath of his nostrils when—in his first life on earth—he had, in shaggy beast-like form, run on all fours through forests of the north, forests dug up now as coal from under the crust of the world. Tonight these genii would serve him well. The Hour was favorable—but less favorable than the Tenth Hour, called Malaen. Zennor would have been stronger in the next moon's waning.

He went back to Rosaina, drew up a chair beside her. No hint of anxiety showed in the tranquil face he turned to her. He did not doubt her courage now, but he doubted whether the frail hold she had on life would carry her through the ordeal required of it. And she must live. *She must defeat Zennor on this plane while in the flesh.* Divorced from her body, he could not help her. Her ego and Stephen's too would be incorporated with Zennor's, made one with his damned soul.

She voiced his thoughts.

"I shouldn't have lasted another twenty-four hours. Another night. The night, oh God! Adrian!"

He bit hard on his pipe-stem and nodded.

"Even though you sat outside my door to keep watch, to prevent his coming to me, he sent his devils to torment me. Your drugs gave sleep to my body but my spirit suffered. In the shadows—in the silence I could see my body lying there, while I—myself—was forced to listen to what They said—what They said!"

"The main thing was that you slept. Your reason was saved in spite of all he could do."

He had never let her see how perilous he knew those dreams of hers to be. He only marveled at the strong beautiful balance of her mind that retained its sanity in spite of them.

A BUMP at the door heralded the sturdy old housekeeper with a tea-tray. She was the only servant Sant had permitted to

stay on since the ceremony he had witnessed in the chapel. He refused to expose two younger maids to the danger of Stephen's presence in the house, or, rather, to the satanic malice of the mind now in possession of Stephen's body.

"I'll go myself to let Mr. Lynn know that tea is ready," he told the old servant.

Mrs. Poldhu nodded. She was a rather formidable old woman, afraid of no one and given to expressing her opinions very forcibly indeed. She'd summed up Stephen as "the spit of that old toad, his uncle Mark Zennor" and had flatly refused to speak or look at him.

"Plaze yourself, sir. 'Tesn't no consarn o' mine."

Sant left Rosaina setting out the tea-things. Hároon Er-Rasheed lay before the fire, bestowing passionate attention on one large paw which failed to meet his standards of cleanliness. Mrs. Poldhu waddled off to get more coal for the dying fire.

Sant searched the garden in vain. Satisfied that Stephen was no longer there, he hurried indoors again. He hadn't been in the least concerned about the tea question but had seen, from the window, that Stephen was warily approaching a gate on which a blackbird sang in the dusk. Sant didn't wish a repetition of a savage little incident he and Rosaina had witnessed yesterday when Stephen had revoltingly injured a dog that had snarled at him.

That was his voice! Sant hurried. The door of the study, where he'd left Rosaina, was open.

"Stand still, little fool!"

The words rang out.

"This is to punish you for locking me out at night. Now, you yellow beast—*jump!*"

Sant leaped to the door and was in time to see Hároon Er-Rasheed between Stephen's hands, his belly flattened to the ground, ears back, golden eyes black with terror. At the word "jump!" the animal shot forward as if from a gun.

Rosaina stood, white, agonized unable to stir a muscle. Her shriek and Stephen's laugh synchronized with Sant's lightning dash. He caught up the yellow cat from the fire on which it crouched, its eyes glazed and fixed on Stephen's face.

The animal stubbornly resisted Sant. It

fought to free itself, struggled furiously to obey the will of the mocking devil in Stephen's eyes. Sant held it in iron hands, and faced its tormentor.

"Mark Zennor!" his voice was barely a whisper. "You exceed your powers. Release this animal—I lay my command on you!"

In Stephen's eyes such cold blind hatred flared that Rosaina cried out again. But Sant moved nearer to his enemy, stared him between the eyes—stared until the dark fire in them was quenched, until their lids drooped. In sullen obedience his hand brushed the big cat's head. He muttered a low-breathed word.

The Persian jumped half the width of the room, halted to turn eyes of blazing yellow fire on Stephen, dashed like a crazy thing through an open window, flashed across a lawn, up over a wall, and away. Stephen also vanished from Rosaina's sight.

He went slowly, but his exit was even more spectacular than that of the unfortunate beast. Again she cried out in stark terror, for he disappeared without moving at all.

"He is here with us, Rosaina. He is perfectly visible to me. But you are, in part, subject to him. He has intoxicated your vision by a trick. *Will* yourself to see him—here, take my hand."

A touch of it, and she regained control. She saw Stephen walking toward the door.

SANT looked after him as he went from the room.

"He lost control too. I've tried for that revelation from the start. Oh, it was an infinitesimal moment of anger merely, but enough—enough to work on. He's at a disadvantage in his borrowed flesh."

Rosaina trembled, but with anger now, rather than fear.

"Adrian! Your poor cat—won't you go and look for him?"

Her indignation burned so fiercely that she couldn't fathom his apparent indifference. He gave her a long keen look.

"You are very angry. Good! It will stimulate you. But don't worry about Hároon. Mercifully he wasn't injured; the fire was almost out and his fur's thick. He'll forget when—when we've saved Stephen."

She was goaded to new activity. The shock of the beautiful friendly beast's punishment, remembrance of his glazed eyes fixed on Stephen's grinning face, and his shining yellow fur with gray smoke curling up about his body, stung her to fierce anger and revolt.

"You're right. He shall not take Stephen from me—he shall not! I'll fight, I'll fight to the end now. That poor cat's eyes—Stephen shall never . . . oh! I'm ready, Adrian! That devil shall not win!"

He knew her present condition could not last, but it all helped. Anger would die down, her mood of hot reckless indignation cool. Only staying-power counted. But this would strengthen her will. Everything turned finally on that.

"There's work for both of us to do before midnight. And I want to emphasize once more that it's very important you should go of your own free will tonight. I must remain here, working for you, helping to strengthen your will with my own. But it is Zennor's chosen Hour and I may not interfere with what he does. Don't evade Stephen. Offer yourself a free victim for the sacrifice. And concentrate ceaselessly, on your purpose to save Stephen."

"Yes! Yes!" she whispered, "I must hold him! Save him!"

"Hold him, save him," emphasized her companion. "And now there's no time to



transported to a world Rosaina couldn't conceive of.

She recollected the yellow Persian's queer interest in these literary labors, how he'd leaped up at the faint rustle of twig on paper when a new symbol had been drawn, how his eyes, their pupils distended to the edge of the iris, had followed the movements of some invisible moving thing about Sant's chair.

Poor beautiful Hâroon! She bent to her task with tightened lips.

BY SLOW degrees she became aware of her surroundings. When first Stephen led her to a throne-like seat, she could make out nothing in the pungent dusk. Now the great chapel was revealing itself; and, instructed by Adrian though she was, her heart stood still at the revelation.

Her throne was in the exact center of the great circular floor. Behind it, and on either side, curved the shining walls.

Before her stood the altar with its reredos which, from this distance, she saw only as a burning patch of light.

She scarcely glanced at the great dazzling globe of metal in midair, so afraid was she of its will-numbing magic. She fixed her gaze, rather, on the man who moved to and fro before the altar in its refracted rays—going about his awful business.

Her chill, slender hands clasped the snakes' heads of polished ebony that formed two arms for her seat. The elaborate ritual that was to culminate in her death was begun. She recalled Adrian, shut up in his study, bent over his desk, concentrating on her, sending out his strong will to aid her own. Strengthened, steadied, she then deliberately thrust aside this mental image and gave her whole attention to Stephen and his profane and terrifying preparations.

Mark's sin-eater—Mark himself now, save for the thin veil of flesh that masked his hell-born vicious soul. It was Stephen's straight strong body there, kneeling at the altar. It was his dear hands, his dark head, his face and eyes and lips. Oh! it was everything—and it was nothing. The mad cruel smile, the eyes' wild glare, the towering merciless pride that blazed behind this fleshly screen were Mark's alone.

Mark's sin-eater. And how deep was

lose. You've got those books and papers? Good. Concentrate for your life—and his. No need to lock ourselves in tonight. Stephen will be at Lamorna House—until he comes for you."

He was at once absorbed, drawing strange symbols on ancient brittle papyri where faint tracery of lettering showed. After examining these faint marks through a glass for minutes at a time, he repeated them aloud. At the last word—all he said being perfectly unintelligible to the girl—he would scratch a new sign on the papyrus under his hand with an alder twig which he kept charred at a naked flame on his desk.

He'd been at this for two days and two nights, slaving like a man possessed, muttering, writing, glaring at the dirty old papyri,

every sin of the dead printed upon this face and body of Stephen Lynn! The voice that rang in deep imperious rhythm was altogether Mark's. Stephen's had been notably clear, eager, flexible, with a trick of rising inflection that she adored.

Ah! This was Mark! That he moved and spoke in Stephen's guise made him more awfully Mark Zennor. Not a glimpse of the real Stephen. Not a spark of his own ego burned in the temple of his body; its altar light was quenched and Mark's dark soul was in possession.

Rosaina's courage wavered. Suppose Adrian was wrong? Suppose Stephen could not, after all, return to his habitation of the flesh for the promised moment? Suppose she failed to recognize the moment if it came? What had Adrian said?

"Stephen will come. He *must* come. Zennor may not offer sacrifice without first allowing Stephen to return momentarily to his own body once more. Beyond all question you will see him again in the flesh."

Fear drove hope away, rode her leaping thoughts.

"He is not here—the man I love is not here. This is a devil, a monster, it is Mark. He has tricked Stephen, destroyed him, thrust him down to hell—his eyes—Stephen's kind gentle eyes—that cat, how his eyes were held by Mark's! . . . Stephen's too, he must obey, torture himself, he is a slave—a slave like that animal! Stephen! But there is no Stephen—he has no body, no soul, he doesn't exist! Stephen!"

But love still struggled to believe.

"I must wait. One moment there will be, one brief moment! I shall meet him face to face in the living flesh. My dear! My beloved! And I will hold him fast—fast for ever. No one shall take him from me. He will come and I will hold him fast—fast—"

And now the chapel lights grew dim. The suspended dazzling globe of metal dulled to a pale moonglow. Black candles, tall watchful guardians about the altar-stone, bowed trembling heads of flame, bowed down to their sockets, wavered—died. Only the *reredos* still blazed, its restless secret fire more brilliant, more incandescent as globe and candles failed.

Stephen turned from the altar, advanced with stately purposeful deliberation, down

the five steps, across the chapel floor. Now he stood before Rosaina and in his brilliant eyes she saw Mark's demon enthroned, triumphant.

"Come!" he commanded. "I am ready. You are chosen to share this Hour with me."

She felt his fingers close upon her own; their heat burned her, their cruel strength appalled. This was Mark, all Mark indeed. How well she knew that fierce hold, how her nerves shrank at its familiar possessiveness!

He led her to a thin, blood-red crescent of moon that gleamed in its first quarter on the marble floor. Vast eagles' wings outstretched in fiery lines behind the wicked knife-edge of the moon.

"Stand here."

Obediently she placed her feet upon the sign. She felt its poignant blade's sharp agony. The High Priest, hands of iron on her shoulders, faced her with rapt cruel face down-bent.

"Receive her, oh Prince and Ruler of the Air! This is the victim appointed to fulfil my Destiny. Before Time began I chose her from all the worlds that are. Her blood shall seal my vow."

She felt the beat of great wings; the air about her vibrated and fanned her coldly on the cheek, cold as the breath from mountain heights, cold to the heart it struck—but the High Priest's face of triumph chilled her very soul.

He led her to the east, where a half-moon showed—a fountain of living water rising beside it. Here again he dedicated her, calling on all the waters of the earth to witness his power.

By the three-quarter moon dark earth was strewn, and, standing here, she knew the smothering darkness of the grave. Only the unrelenting hand that guided her, the deep voice that pealed in trumpet-call, summoned her again from what seemed her tomb.

And now he set her feet upon the last ominous moon in whose full orb moved that potent deadly cloud—soul of all that is—ageless—indestructible—accursed.

A brazier of fire stood close by. The High Priest drew a tiny phial from the folds of his robe, shook its powdered con-

tents on the red coals. Flame leaped in a twisting clear blue pillar to the roof, spread across it, streamed down the walls again.

The High Priest's voice rolled in thrilling music above the elements' fierce roar:

"Rulers of Fire—above the earth, within the earth, about the earth!"

Michael! Samuel! Anael! Hear me now!

The appointed Hour is come! The Victim is prepared

Receive my Sacrifice! Receive my Sacrifice! Receive my Sacrifice!"

As the third loud cry rang echoing round the chapel's flaming walls, one single spear of glittering white fire thrust upward from the cradle of its being—from the deadly ovoid cloud within the full red moon. The priest's hand closed swiftly about the fire-spear, bent it to brush Rosaina's forehead, released it with a muttered word. Instantly the spear vanished and all the fiery walls and roof grew dark once more.

Down to his knees sank the High Priest. His lips touched the red moon's rim. Three times he did obeisance, three times he murmured words of power. Then he rose and faced the victim.

Rosaina, at touch of the shining spear, felt deadly mortal chill invade her body—a sense of doom paralyzed every faculty.

It was too late to struggle, too late to fight! Stephen was lost! And she must die! She must let go—let go—let go. . . .

She stood watching the High Priest as he moved from her, up the five steps, up to the altar. He reached it, turned to face her, lifted his arms until his black silken cloak stretched like wings on either side of a scarlet sheath-like robe. Higher leaped the hellish lights behind the reredos. Before its strong pulsating evil, Stephen loomed dark and tall and terrible. He waited for her. He summoned her. She must obey—obey him.

From the caves of darkness that lined the walls between its broad squat pillars, shadows thrust and crowded, worshippers from hell, incorporeal, soundless, shapeless, fluid as water, bodiless as smoke, yet, beyond all words, instinct with power.

The High Priest's congregation was assembled. Rosaina the Victim was summoned. Cold and darkness below, above,

on every side. She moved to the altar like driftwood borne on the ocean tide.

Now she was at the altar steps. Each one's ascent set her a world's width farther off from Stephen. Now she stood in the balefire glow of the altar-screen. The High Priest's hands lifted her, laid her on the altar-stone.

At last she saw the figures on the gleaming quivering reredos, saw herself in the bound victim there, saw Stephen in the High Priest who stood beside the sacrificial stone. And behind the veils of the Four about the altar, she recognized the lewd companions of her dream.

A swift pang of longing tore her for Adrian's help. How sure he had been! How utterly she had believed that Stephen—Stephen himself—would return if only for an instant. Now, turning to the wickedly intent face bent over her she saw Mark, and Mark alone.

Stephen was lost—forever lost. And she must die and go out in the darkness too.

Thin biting cords were bound about her. A knife-blade winked and flashed. Now indeed the end was come. Her eyes stared up into the face bent over hers.

Sudden rending pain stung her failing senses. A veil seemed snatched from before her eyes. Her heart's slow beat quickened to furious pulsing life. Nerve and muscle strained to break the bonds that held her.

"Stephen! Stephen! Stephen!"

Her voice rang through the gloom. The black smooth walls seemed to quiver in response. All the hurtling swarming shadows jostled closer.

"Stephen! Stephen!"

Again the dark walls trembled. Closer pressed the demon shadows.

"Stephen! Come to me! Come to me!"

The High Priest's face bent lower. Dark eyes looked into her own. A faint urgent whisper reached her ears.

*"I have come . . . from hell . . . to you.
Hold me! Save me!"*

"Stephen!" she cried again. "Ah, this is you indeed! Your eyes that look at me. Stephen! I will hold you. I will save you. Keep your eyes on mine. I will never, never let you go!"

And now she died a thousand deaths. Delusion hurled her from world to world

through awful space. Fire burned her flesh from her charred bones. Water drowned her beneath dark mountainous waves. Heavy earth buried her in earthquake shocks. But in flame and rushing water, under the earth or above it in the illimitable aching kingdoms of the air, she saw one thing clearly. She saw the face of Stephen Lynn. Nothing—nothing else.

Fighting, struggling, holding the gates of her will fast locked against Mark's vicious power, she felt a hand in hers. It was Adrian's strong clasp. Adrian's voice spoke across the roar of fire and tumult of water, of crashing rocks and howling winds.

"The Hour is about to strike. Hold fast, hold fast!"

Stephen's face grew clearer. Its look altered. He was smiling down at her. She could feel his warm breath. His strong gentle hands released her from her bonds. His voice spoke, assuring her of safety. His arms enfolded her as she sank, faint with rapture . . . the world about her fading. . . .

"**B**UT Adrian! You did come to me!" she protested. "I saw you, heard you. felt your hand in mine."

"Probably. All of me that really *is* me. But my body didn't move from this room, this table, this chair you see before you."

Rosaina looked round the room. Sun streamed in from open windows. A blackbird's exquisite liquid song opened the very gates of heaven to its listeners. She turned to Stephen once more.

He put out a hand to touch her own.

"Yes! Still here, darling."

"I can't—I can't believe it. The three of us together at last—safe—happy—free!"

"And Mark—" she shuddered. "Tell me, Adrian, I want to know before we forget him—utterly. What happened—what does our freedom mean—to *him*?"

Sant put out a quick warning hand. His answer came muffled, almost a whisper:

"Forget, forget, Rosaina! His dark soul is in bondage. It is not safe, even in thought, to follow him now."

Stephen's arm drew her to him. His eyes adored her.

"Rose, golden Rose! Remember only that we are happy—free—at last."