

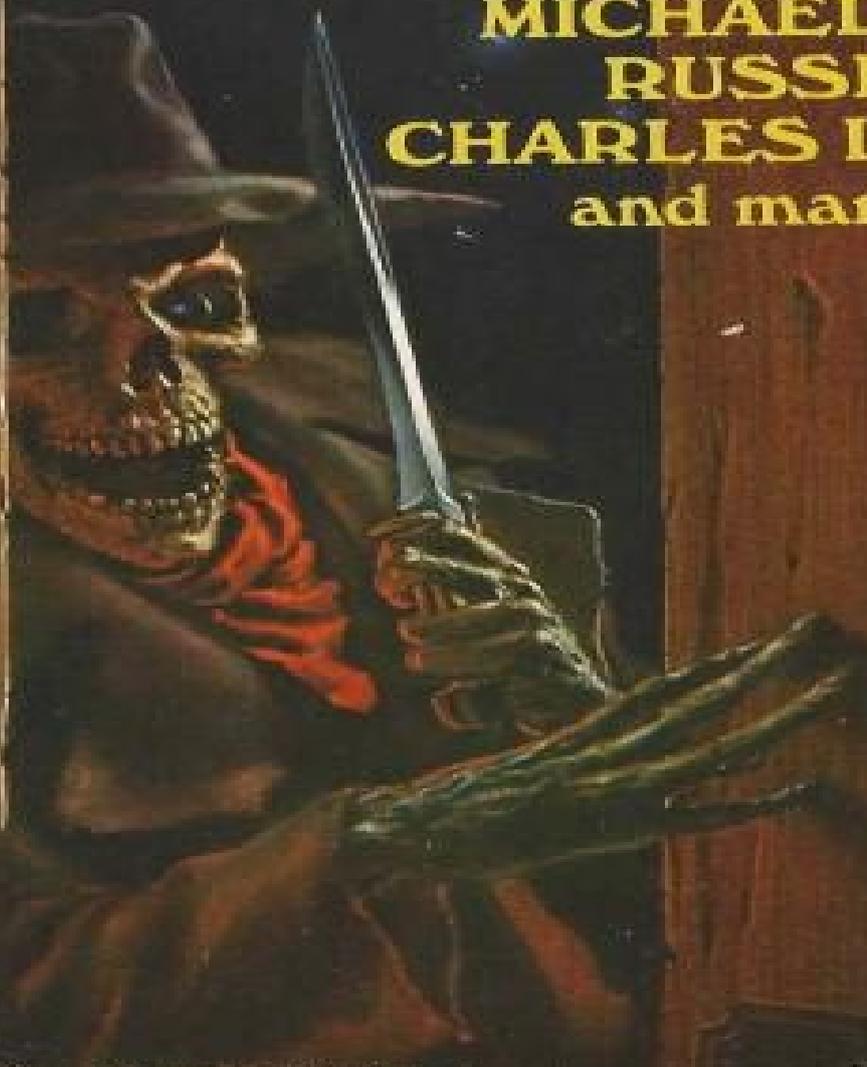
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THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES SERIES VI

Edited by Gerald W. Page

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and many more...



The Year's
**BEST
HORROR
STORIES**

Series VI

Edited by
GERALD W. PAGE

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DEDICATION

To my grandfather,
William E. Grindle.

First Printing, July 1978

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INTRODUCTION

In 1957 Joseph Payne Brennan began a small magazine called *Macabre*, which ran short weird fiction and poetry. It differed from professional magazines in several respects, notably its small circulation, and the lack of newsstand distribution; but it was not quite a fan magazine in the sense of the science fiction fanzines, either, principally because it was trying to provide a serious outlet for horror writing that did not exist at that time in any professional magazine.

When this series of anthologies was launched a few years ago, there still was no regular professional magazine devoted to horror fiction. Today things are a little better. Magazines as diverse as *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Mike Shayne Mystery*, and *Penthouse* make it a point to carry good horror fiction with some frequency. Anthologists as astute as Kirby McCauley, Ramsey Campbell and Charles L. Grant are preparing books of original stories. Where, just a few short years ago the challenge of putting together a book such as this one lay in finding enough good stories to include, today there is the anguish of deciding what must be left out because there is only so much space available.

Brennan's *Macabre* is no longer published, but in a large part the current growth of the horror field owes much to *Macabre* and its successors. It is true, of course, that at the demise of *Weird Tales* magazine in 1954, the anchor of the field became August Derleth through the agency of his editing and publishing of the Arkham House line of books. But since Derleth's death in 1971 the small semi-professional magazine has played an increasingly important role in the field.

There are many such magazines today. Most of them are of negligible quality, or else geared to forms of fantasy other than horror (particularly to heroic adventure). Only a few of them can attract the sort of writing talent necessary to draw notice, and the majority are put together by people whose editorial abilities and taste are more hopeful than developed. But despite this, a surprising number of these magazines are good, and there are two of them—specializing in horror fiction—that stand out clearly as the field's current leaders: *Whispers*, edited by Stuart David Schiff, and *Weirdbook*, edited by W. Paul Ganley.

Whispers has clearly attracted the most favorable attention of any horror magazine, of any sort, since *Weird Tales*. In 1976 it carried a short story titled "Sticks," written by Karl Edward Wagner, that won the August Derleth Award as the year's best short fiction. Winning such an award in the science fiction and fantasy field is an unheard-of achievement for any story published in an amateur magazine. In 1977 the magazine itself won a World Fantasy Award. There has been an anthology of stories from *Whispers* (along with some new material by *Whispers*' regulars) published by Doubleday, and another is reported on the way. Schiff's taste in fiction is good and he's demonstrated the ability to attract regularly writers of the stature of Fritz Leiber, R. A. Lafferty and Manly Wade Wellman.

Weirdbook has been around a bit longer than *Whispers*; it recently published its tenth anniversary issue. Over the years it has relied heavily on newer writers, along with established names, and the result has been a certain unavoidable unevenness, although this has lessened in recent issues. But this has paid off for the magazine, too. There are three writers whose work to date has been largely confined to semi- and non-professional markets, but who have shown notable talent: Janet Fox, Charles Saunders and William Scott Home. All three have appeared in *Weirdbook*. Home, in fact, has been one of the magazine's major contributors. Ganley's championing of Home—a writer who

sometimes difficult, but who is usually vivid and often original—may well be his major contribution to the field. This is a fact that hasn't gone unnoticed among other writers, especially professional who are starting to contribute to *Weirdbook* in increasing numbers.

It isn't easy to predict the future for magazines like *Whispers* and *Weirdbook*. Certainly the immediate future looks good. Right now the state of the horror market is limited. It consists of magazines which specialize in other types of stories but allow in an occasional weird tale, a few hardback anthologies of new material, and the non-professional magazines. It's a strange complementary mixture, too, with the diverse markets seeming to draw strength from one another.

But if a new professional horror magazine should manage to establish itself—by no means an assured task—it would be hard to say what the result would be on the existing markets. The irony might be that such a magazine would find itself with a real fight on its hands, trying to compete with the amateurs.

—Gerald W. Page
Atlanta, Georgia

AT THE BOTTOM OF THE GARDEN *by David Campton*

What could be more appealing, more homey, than a garden—a British garden, at that, boasting an array of flowers and hedges and other such charming Old World items. Murder, for example. Who would Dame Agatha Christie or Dorothy Sayers have done without those gardens which seemed always to hold—if not an interestingly slain corpse—at least an incriminating footprint among the roses. And didn't John Dickson Carr seem as fond of victims among daisies and in summer houses as he was of them in hermetically sealed rooms? And that's all well and good, but that's not the sort of thing, strictly, that belongs here, and we take some pride in the fact that we can offer you the following story which, while it takes place in a garden, ignores the grim specter of crime and provides us with, instead, a thing of no more menace than the play of children . . .

“Mummy, why has Ineed got furry teeth?”

Mrs. Williams ignored the question and tried to concentrate on the recipe in front of her. The breeze through the open kitchen door fluttered the page of the magazine propped up against the saucepan in which last night's milk had been boiled. Mrs. Williams had the uncomfortable feeling that the saucepan was going to be needed in a hurry. She ought to have more saucepans, but where could she put them? That was the trouble with this kitchen: there was not enough shelf space, and the equipment was always in the wrong place. She was not such a bad cook, or even as accident-prone as her husband suggested. The kitchen was just badly planned. The fish-slice had fallen behind the refrigerator, but how foolish to hang a fish-slice over a refrigerator: luckily it would not be needed until Friday.

“Please shut the door,” she pleaded as a draught flicked the page over. She dabbed at the magazine with the wooden spoon, leaving a blob of something white and sticky in the middle of the recipe. She sighed, and fumbled in the sink for the dishcloth. Conviction was growing that this experiment was developing into a disaster.

These days she was finding the disposal of remains more difficult. When she was lucky some results could be garnished and served up as something else: certain sauces could be sliced, and occasional moulds might be poured. At worst, though, as when washing powder had unaccountably insinuated itself into a mixture and even the birds had refused the offering, it could lie for days on the lawn, advertising her incompetence; and after the occasion when a failure with rice had blocked the lavatory she had never dared to flush away a mistake. These days an inedible mess was destined for the dustbin, and she had to endure her husband's raised eyebrows if he caught a glimpse or whiff of it. After nine years Mr. Williams no longer complained about the cooking, but it seemed that he could not control his eyebrows.

Mrs. Williams wiped dough from the page, and peered at the small print through flour-fogged spectacles. It seemed to her that there was always something missing in the instructions.

The kitchen door banged.

“Add the dry ingredients.”

“Mummy!”

Where was the ginger? She was sure she had taken the packet from the cupboard with the other things. Ah! No, that was dried sage. Why couldn't manufacturers label packets more clearly? Mr. Williams jerked the cupboard open. A small jar fell out and smashed: well, it could be cleared up

later. She grabbed at a cylindrical box; flipped the lid on to the floor; and shook a teaspoonful of cur powder among the other dry cake ingredients.

“Mummy, why has Ineed? . . .”

On the stove something boiled over.

Mrs. Williams sank into the kitchen chair, and ran a hand over her head. Bits of cake mix were le sticking in her hair.

“Why don’t you listen to me, Mummy?”

Dimly, through a haze of conflicting thoughts, Mrs. Williams became aware of her daughter. Sh caught the tone of complaint in the child’s voice.

“What were you saying, dear?”

“I knew you weren’t listening to me.”

“Mummy was listening, darling. Mummy can listen and get dinner ready at the same time.” No what could they have for dinner?

“I was telling you about Ineed.”

“Enid, dear,” corrected Mrs. Williams automatically. There was half a cold meat pie in the pantr even though that would mean having cold pie for two days running. “Her name is Enid.”

“She calls it Ineed.”

“That is up to her. But the name is pronounced Enid.” And they could have rice pudding afterward There was no shortage of rice pudding.

“But why has she?”

“Why has she what?” Or semolina, or tapioca, or sage. Nothing drastic could go wrong with a tinn milk pudding—apart from burning the saucepan.

“I told you, Mummy. Furry teeth. Why has Ineed got furry teeth?”

Why was it so difficult to concentrate? Why did recipes never turn out like their pictures? W couldn’t she talk to a child on a child’s level?

“I’m sure Enid hasn’t got furry teeth, darling,” said Mrs. Williams. “She was just saying that.”

“But she has, Mummy. She showed them to me.”

“Did she, darling?” Or would a tin of fruit be better? Plums, perhaps. Was there enough milk left t make a custard?

“Yes. She took them out, and showed them to me. They were furry all over.”

“Then she ought to see a dentist.”

“You don’t understand, Mummy. That’s the way her teeth are. Fur all over them. She let me feel before she put them back. It was quite soft—like a kitten’s back.”

Mrs. Williams felt a sudden ache at the back of her eyes. She could no longer ignore the brow mess sticking to the top of the cooker. With a bit of luck she might get most of the chaos cleaned u before Eric came home, and raised his eyebrows.

“That’s very interesting, dear,” she said. “Now run out and play again. If you’re a good girl, we’ have plums and custard for dinner.”

The child turned toward the kitchen door.

“You weren’t listening,” she accused her mother. “You never listen. You don’t care about Ineed You don’t care about anything.”

Then she was gone.

Mrs. Williams took off her glasses, and rubbed her eyes, smudging flour on her eyelashes. Sh tried. Honestly she tried. If she didn’t try, there would be fewer failures to throw away. If she didn try, they could live on corned beef, and crisps, and baked beans. If she didn’t try so hard there wou

be more time to spare for Geraldine. As events were turning out, was Geraldine doomed to be another of her mother's failures?

Geraldine wore thick-lensed spectacles, like her mother. Geraldine had her mother's flat features, unhealthy complexion, and dust-colored hair. Geraldine was prone to sickly headaches. Geraldine had uneven teeth. Like her mother, Geraldine was not very bright.

What had the girl been talking about? Another child with peculiar teeth? Fur? Imagination? Geraldine had shown so few signs of having any imagination that it was a pity not to have encouraged her now. But the cooker had to be cleaned.

Once, during the cleaning, Mrs. Williams paused. Who was Enid anyway? Then she kicked over a bucket of dirty water, and the thought was washed away.

Geraldine did not mention Ineed again for several weeks. Mrs. Williams was dimly aware that her daughter had a little friend. Once she saw them playing together by the hedge at the bottom of the garden. It was a thick hedge and had originally formed the boundary to the field on which this part of the housing estate had been built. With rare sensitivity, the builders had left it undisturbed. The two children were sitting together in the shadow of the hedge. The other child seemed smaller than Geraldine, dark-haired and very thin. At that distance Mrs. Williams could not quite make out what the children were doing. It seemed almost as though the dark one had unscrewed one of her hands and passed it to Geraldine for inspection. Although Mrs. Williams knew that her eyesight was at fault—she must have her eyes tested again when she could find the time—she felt vaguely uneasy, and rapped on the window. The children scurried out of sight, making Mrs. Williams feel guilty. She had blundered again. Geraldine did not make friends—she reflected her mother's insecurity when dealing with other people—at least her own mother need not frighten away the few friends she had. Mrs. Williams made a mental note to encourage Geraldine's new playmate. Perhaps the little girl could be invited to tea? Well, perhaps not to a meal; but invited to—something. However as the good intention grew vaguer, so did the impetus, and finally Mrs. Williams did nothing. As Geraldine did not mention her new friend, Ineed became a cloudy figure in the background of Mrs. Williams's ever-cluttered mind.

It was Mr. Williams who was responsible for bringing the matter up again while they were having dinner. It had been a successful meal: roast chicken (which Mrs. Williams had bought from the delicatessen) and salad. Mr. Williams had found only one caterpillar on his lettuce and had quietly pushed it to the side of his plate. They were all finishing their ice cream when her father noticed that Geraldine was no longer wearing the braces on her teeth.

He was not angry because he was never angry; however he pointed out that Geraldine had made a promise to take care of the braces until her teeth had been straightened. Geraldine smiled at him, showing all her teeth. It was a delightful smile that almost made one forget the thick spectacles, the lank hair, and the pasty complexion. Moreover, her teeth were perfect.

Mr. Williams put down his spoon and stared across the table.

"May I see them again?" he asked.

Geraldine grinned. Her teeth were even, white and sparkling. They even seemed to have lost the yellow tinge.

"Remarkable," said Mr. Williams. "Had you noticed, mother?"

Mrs. Williams hadn't noticed. She did, however, notice the implied rebuke in the question: he expected her not to have noticed the child's teeth.

"I'm sure I should have done so sooner or later," she murmured.

"Mummy wouldn't notice if I lost my head," muttered Geraldine.

~~"Now, now," rebuked her father; but he was too pleased to sound really severe. "I must say the dentist did a good job. He warned us that it might take over twelve months, but this has taken less than six weeks."~~

"Ineed did it," said Geraldine.

"I really ought to congratulate him," went on Mr. Williams.

"Ineed did it," repeated Geraldine.

"Ineed?"

"Geraldine has a little friend called Enid," explained Mrs. Williams. "Enid, dear. Do try to remember that. It's Enid. You must ask her round for tea, or a glass of lemonade, or something."

"She's shy," said Geraldine. "She isn't ordinary. So she only makes friends with people who aren't ordinary. Like me and Barry Mapel. Barry can't walk properly because he has twisted legs. Ineed has got holes where her ears should be, and her teeth are covered with fur."

"Really?" said Mr. Williams. "Of course one doesn't usually write to one's dentist, but I expect he'd like to know that we appreciate what he's done."

"Ineed took all my teeth out," said Geraldine. "It didn't hurt at all."

"I'm so glad," said Mrs. Williams, sniffing. Had she remembered to turn the light out under the milk for the coffee?

"Ineed said that she'd never seen teeth like mine before. They were so twisted. So she straightened them before she put them back. She rubbed them white, too."

"After all," said Mr. Williams, "a professional man must take a pride in his profession."

"I asked her if there was anything she could do about my headaches, but she said that she'd have to think about it."

"The laborer is worthy of his hire," quoted Mr. Williams with some satisfaction.

A hissing and spluttering came from the kitchen. With the speed and precision that long practice had tempered into second nature Mr. Williams strode into the kitchen, turning out the light under the milk with one hand, and reaching for the dish-cloth with the other.

Mrs. Williams sat back with a sigh, and tried to pick up the threads of half-heard and dimly remembered conversations.

"This Enid. Doesn't she live near here?"

"Hereabouts."

"I suppose her family has just moved into the district."

"Oh, no. They've lived here a long time. As long as anyone can remember, Ineed says. Years and years."

"Longbarrow hasn't been built all that long, dear," mused Mrs. Williams. "The estate was quite new when your father and I bought this house. I remember having to wade through mud to inspect it. What is Enid's other name?"

"She hasn't got another name."

Mrs. Williams, listening to the sounds of the mopping-up operation in the kitchen, did not want to become involved in a childish argument, and did not press the question.

"You must ask her round some day. You know I like to see your friends." She thought she heard the rattle of coffee cups. "Play on the lawn or something."

"Ineed doesn't like people to look at her," mumbled Geraldine. "She thinks they laugh at her nose."

"I'm sure we're much too polite. I wonder if Daddy wants a hand with the coffee."

"I'm going to make her do something about my headaches," said Geraldine. "I'm going to make her

promise.”

“I expect you have some jolly games together.”

“She says that the headaches happen right inside my head, but she doesn’t know yet how to get inside. She’s not sure how I’m put together. So I’m going to get the book. With pictures. Then she’ll have to promise. She mended my teeth when they were twisted, didn’t she?”

“I always liked that dentist,” said Mrs. Williams. “So young and so enthusiastic.”

“She says my eyes ought to get better at the same time. Then I shan’t have to wear these glasses. She snatched them off, and squinted short-sightedly at her mother.

“Ah, coffee!” crowed Mrs. Williams.

With a sigh Geraldine replaced her glasses. Ineed was right. They didn’t understand. They would never understand. No wonder Ineed wanted to avoid them. She and Ineed understood each other. Ineed was going to find a way to get inside her head. Geraldine knew where the book was kept—in the locked bookcase that was never dusted. The book had pictures of people without clothes, without skin, and without flesh. *That* should show Ineed how people were put together. It even had a picture of the green sponge called a brain. When Ineed saw that, she would be able to stop the headaches, and to make her eyes see as well as anyone else. She only needed the book.

Mrs. Williams eventually found volume two of the encyclopedia open on the lawn. The pages were stained with grass cuttings, and the covers curled in the afternoon sun. Mrs. Williams had no idea how the volume came to be out there, but she was used to finding things where they ought not to be. So she returned to the house with the book. She did not associate Geraldine with its removal until she later found the child in a state of near hysteria.

Mrs. Williams heard the sound coming from her daughter’s bedroom—half-screaming, half-sobbing. She found Geraldine lying face downward on the bed. For a while the child would not answer no matter how gently questions were put; instead she drummed her feet, beat the pillow, and screamed.

Eventually Mrs. Williams was able to make out words. “She promised. She promised I should be next.” The trouble with Geraldine was then correctly diagnosed as an attack of temper.

Mrs. Williams sat on the bed, and waited for the storm to subside, having learned from experience that this treatment was the most effective. At last the sobs died away, and the little girl looked up. She had hurled her spectacles into the corner of the room, and her eyes were inflamed, rubbed raw around the lids.

“Feeling better now, dear?” asked Mrs. Williams mildly.

“I hate her,” said Geraldine.

“Tell Mummy all about it.” She tried to put an arm around the child, but found the position too awkward to keep up. “Who did it, and what did they do?”

“She mended Barry’s legs,” sniffed Geraldine.

Mrs. Williams hunted for a handkerchief. “Go on, dear. Mummy’s listening,” she said, wondering where she could have tucked the spare one that she always kept handy for when she lost the first.

“She took them off and straightened them and then put them back again. Now he can walk as well as anyone.”

“That’s nice,” murmured Mrs. Williams. “Just a minute, dear, while I fetch a piece of toilet paper. Then you can blow your nose.”

“But I was supposed to be next,” bellowed Geraldine as her mother pattered toward the bathroom. “She was going to look inside my head. That’s why I took the book to her. Instead she used it to mend

Barry's legs, and didn't do anything for me at all. She said she still wasn't sure because the inside of my head wasn't like the inside of her head, and my eyes weren't like her eyes. I know her eyes are different, but that doesn't mean she can't do anything about mine. Does it?"

"Of course not, dear," agreed Mrs. Williams absently, returning with a great loop of paper, and making a mental note to renew the toilet roll, knowing already that she would be the one to be caught. "Here you are. Wipe your eyes. And your nose."

"How can I make her do it?" whined Geraldine. "What can I do?"

"Let's put on our thinking caps, shall we?" said Mrs. Williams, trying to sound bright. "Now where did you throw your spectacles?"

Geraldine vaguely indicated the wall at which the glasses had been thrown in the first onslaught of her rage.

"She can do it. I know she can. I've seen her do things. She has very long fingers, and she can . . ."

"Oh, dear," murmured Mrs. Williams as she picked up the pieces. "Now I've trodden on them."

The spectacles had snapped in half. One lens was cracked, and Mrs. Williams's heel had pressed on the other, shattering it.

"You'll need a completely new pair," she went on. "And I really don't know what you'll do without them. You won't be able to watch TV or to read or anything. Right in the middle of the summer holidays, too. I don't know what you'll do with yourself."

To her irritation she realized that Geraldine was smiling. It was a slightly malicious, worldly-wise little smile: the sort of smile that no eight-year old has a right to be smiling.

"You're a very naughty girl, dropping your glasses where I—where anyone could step on them," she cried. "I ought to . . ." Her imagination gave out, and her voice with it; partly because she had no idea what she ought to do, and partly because the child's smile worried her. "I'll tell your father," she added weakly.

"Now Ineed will have to do something," said Geraldine calmly.

"Oh, damn Enid," snapped Mrs. Williams. "And as you're in your bedroom, you can stay here 'til teatime. Yes, you can stay here until your father comes home. Then we'll hear what he has to say about buying new glasses."

She left the bedroom and slammed the door behind her. On the landing she paused, wondering whether she ought to have locked the door, or whether she ought to go back and apologize; then at last deciding to leave everything to Eric. Her husband might have irritating eyebrows, but he always knew what to do in an emergency.

Mr. Williams decided that there had been faults on both sides. He thought that Mrs. Williams ought to make more of an effort to understand the child and to enter into the spirit of her fantasies. Geraldine had an imaginary friend called Enid, who took off people's legs and straightened them, and Mrs. Williams ought to enter into the game. No wonder the child flew into a tantrum. On the other hand Geraldine must learn to control her feelings, especially when they resulted in expensive breakages; however, the child had been sufficiently punished and could now be allowed downstairs.

As Mrs. Williams retired to the kitchen feeling vaguely hurt—but fortunately just in time to catch the steak before it was irrevocably burned—Mr. Williams called upstairs.

"It's all right, Geraldine. You can come down now."

There was no reply.

"Geraldine, this is Daddy. I want to talk to you about, er, about Enid."

There was still no reply. Either the child was asleep or she was being obstinate. Mr. Williams went upstairs and found the bedroom empty. Of course that was typical: to send Geraldine to her room, and

then not to be sure that she stayed there. Mr. Williams quickly smothered the spark of rising indignation because he prided himself upon being a reasonable man. Anyway the girl couldn't be far away. He looked out of the bedroom window.

There were two tiny figures by the hedge at the bottom of the garden. The height and distance made them look almost like dolls. One figure was bent over the other. By her dress she must have been a little girl, though she was incredibly thin, and her hair seemed to shine dark green in the late afternoon sun. Then she straightened up, and Mr. Williams could see the other figure more clearly.

"My God!" he shouted.

He charged from the bedroom and almost tumbled headlong in his rush down the stairs. He crashed through the kitchen and into the garden, screaming as he ran. "My God! My God! My God! My God!"

Mrs. Williams dropped a bowl of mashed potatoes and hurried after him.

The little girl with the leaf-colored hair, intent on the task before her, did not turn as Geraldine's father and mother raced the length of the lawn. The frantic parents were spurred by the sight of what lay on the grass under the hedge. Geraldine's headless body was spread-eagled on the grass. Her head lay some distance away, face upward. There was a hole where one eye should have been, and even as they ran toward the children, they saw the dark-haired girl pluck out the other eye.

Mr. Williams seized the child's shoulder, and at last she looked around. He glimpsed something so deformed that the mind at once rejected, and would later refuse to recall except in nightmares; pale, phosphorescent, wrinkled skin of something that had lived for many, many years in the dark; bulging eyes giving a sickening hint that they might be extendable; gill-like slits for ears, and a drooping snout instead of a nose.

Mr. Williams swore, tightened his grip, but the creature twisted in his grasp. It reached up, its finger-like tentacles curling round under his arm. Immediately a pain tore through his muscles as though they were being removed with a white-hot scalpel. His arm flopped useless to his side.

There was a rustle in the hedge, and the thing was gone. Mrs. Williams was on her hands and knees by the remains of the child. She made vague fluttering motions with her hands. It was the same gesture that her husband had seen her make many times before, kneeling by a piece of broken china and waiting for someone to fetch a dustpan. Except that this time she was giving voice to little high-pitched moans.

With his good arm Mr. Williams patted her shoulder. He told her to stay there and touch nothing until the police arrived. Then he went to the telephone. He knew the correct procedure for occasions such as this.

The eyes lay staring where the creature had dropped them. Mrs. Williams vaguely hoped that someone would be able to put them back. She noticed that Geraldine's mouth was moving, but guessed that this was only a muscular spasm, just as a chicken is reputed to run around after its head has been cut off. She did not recognize that the lips were forming words.

"Ineed!" the head wanted to cry out. "Let Ineed put me together again. Didn't you ever listen to what I told you about Ineed? I shall be better after she has put me together again. Where is Ineed? Ineed! Ineed!"

But divorced from lungs and larynx, no sound came from the mouth, and Ineed would take care never to be seen in Longbarrow again. Without Ineed, the head and body had to remain apart.

They were buried like that.

SCREAMING TO GET OUT *by Janet Fox*

If you have ever wondered what editors talk about when they get together, one answer is that they discuss writers. A few months ago, Grant Carrington (former associate editor with *Amazing* and *Fantastic*) and your obedient servant were conversing, and whose name should crop up, but that was Janet Fox. Her handful of stories had left an impression on both men and the question was—why weren't more of them appearing? Well, this past year more did appear, including this small gem about a man who bit off more than he could chew, and a woman who couldn't.

The city shone with a gauzy sleazy phosphorescence as things do in the later stages of decay. He could move through it, unthinking, unfeeling, in perfect safety, and though a lot had happened to make him what he was, at this moment he might as well have existed forever in this state, a suspension between blind exaltation and despair. But it must not be imagined that he knew this about himself any more than a rat is aware of its own prowess in the gritty levels just above bare survival. If it paused to consider, it would no longer be a rat.

He cruised in the dark, anonymous car until he felt the hunger come on him. That last one had been good. He remembered her face, ugly even before the tears streaked it and made her eyes red and swollen and her expression, that of an animal suffering and not knowing the reason why.

"You're like the Kleenex I blow my nose into," he had said.

She had pulled a sheet over her nakedness. Her body was ugly, too, bony and underdeveloped. He always chose the ugly ones. They seemed his legitimate prey in a world that worshipped physical beauty. She had started crying then in a satisfying way, the half-repressed, agonized sound of an adult's crying. Her inner self was as unattractive as the rest of her; no resources there, though she had probably been told at some point in her life that plain girls had "character." He had called her a couple of appropriate names and left, whistling down the street past the crumbling facades of the buildings, the castoffs of a technological society, the skeleton of a ruined bike, rusty blades of an electric fan, beer cans, and got into the car as one shoulder into a comfortable garment. The torn and sagging seat accommodated itself to his weight and the motor coughed into tenuous life.

He had read about her later in the paper. How she had closed all the windows and doors and turned on the gas. That was icing on the cake to him. The landlady (nosy old bag) had smelled the gas and had gone upstairs just in time to save her. That was even better, he thought. Let her live, that was the ticket. A suicide that failed was even better than one that succeeded. He had felt sated for days after that one, and was almost chary of trying again because the next one might not measure up.

Even though with each encounter it seemed he carried something away, it must not be thought that he did what he did with any malice. That it was something he could do and so did was all the explanation there was.

He drove up to a drive-in restaurant and watched the car hops go in and out with clockwork precision, parading their majorette legs in white short-shorts. They were safe from him and showed little interest in waiting on him, choosing instead the cars that spilled over with wise-cracking, rude talking boys. He left the car and went inside and sat at a table where he ordered a coffee and drank it in measured sips. No one noticed him particularly because he wore that best of all disguises in the city, a face like everyone else's. Only the expressions moving quickly across his face at times

insinuated a deformity of the spirit.

He looked around the room. Even though the place had a surface semblance of shining newness, careful eye could see everywhere the signs of decay and ultimate fall. Corrosion had begun to eat in a circular pattern at the metal feet of the shining pseudo-marble tiles. There were bum scars where someone's cigarette had melted the gleaming black plastic tabletop. But he really didn't see these things as individual phenomena, because he himself was a part of the larger phenomenon which was slowly eating the city and all the people, its component parts.

She was behind the counter so that only half her bulk was visible, stomach rising to meet the pendulous breasts straining the white fabric of her uniform, chins, stacked one upon the other, sloping downward like tallow melting, features a distorted blur of protruding cheeks, doughy white skin, tired wise eyes like something peering out, a prisoner beneath the weight of all that gross flesh. What was it they always said about a thin person screaming to get out? He ran his tongue rapidly across his lips. She moved serenely like some huge sea beast, and she had deft, seemingly boneless white hands that worked swiftly, almost with a life of their own.

Like him, she too was able to be what she was without thinking about it. As she worked, her white hands lifted toward her face French fries dripping with oil, sandwiches oozing mayonnaise, candy bars richly coated with chocolate, hiding in their centers crunchy, oily nuts. Although she did not bother to wonder why she was allowed to eat up this much of the profits, the manager was able to figure up how much he made on a worker who was never sick, never late, never complained and who worked untiringly at substandard wages. She did not wonder about it because she did not realize she was eating all these things. She lived almost every waking minute with a hunger that was a dull ache inside her and seemed to have nothing whatever to do with the rich foods her hands were continually putting into her mouth. Sometimes she tried to think about herself, who she was, but she could only feel herself as a mouth, empty and salivating for something, she didn't know what.

He studied her heavy body as she moved back and forth behind the counter. What must she look like naked: an outré buddha, shaped by dirty hands from a wad of dough, then allowed to rise . . . and rise. He smiled at the thought, and she orbited toward him, greasy patches shining on forehead and cheeks.

"D'you want it warmed up?"

"What?"

"Your coffee."

"Oh. Yeah. Business slow tonight?"

And she started, all the way through the layers of fat, as though she wasn't used to having anyone notice that she was human, let alone address a remark to her, let alone a man!

"Yeah, yeah, it is," she said in a small, strangely unresonant voice. They looked at each other, each seeming to awaken from a sleep. There was a meeting here, as of two large though dormant powers testing strength, then each subsided and for the moment slept again.

He toyed with the coffee cup, playing at self-consciousness. "What time do you get off work? I suppose it's late."

"About twelve."

"Is it . . . all right if I pick you up? It's just that I . . . get lonely sometimes. You know how it is?" And he knew that she did know.

"Okay."

He put a quarter on the table and left hastily, not sure that he would be back. He sensed a strength in her where there should be nothing but weakness. Well, he didn't have to come back, not if he didn't want to.

She allowed her hands to attend unerringly to her tasks, unaware of everything except the hunger that now seemed to intensify. She never understood it, and tried to appease it by eating, but it rarely went away.

Rain began to tap insistent fingernails against the plate glass. The car hops squealed and ran for cover, and since it was getting late, the manager let them go home. They laughed and chattered among themselves, then scattered into the wet night. To her they were alien creatures. She could not imagine their lives, and she couldn't remember ever having been as young as they were. She didn't try very hard to recall. There was a dim memory of a damp, dark, closed-in space. She stopped trying to remember and thought instead of the nice young man. Her mind spiraled out into the rainy night, though willing him to come back.

The windshield wipers worked violently against the torrent of wind-driven rain. Not even rain could cleanse the city; the stuff in the air polluted the rain, giving it a chemical smell; the water in the gutters was brown, yearning toward sewers that underlay the city in myriad dark channels. He eased the car into one of the parking stalls before the deserted drive-in. The place looked haunted with its girls departed, its neons blinked out. He thought for a moment that she hadn't waited, then he saw the bulk of her outlined in the dim glow from a street lamp.

The rain didn't matter to her; she walked toward him placidly as if she didn't feel it. Her ponderous form was grotesque, draped in a wrinkled tan raincoat and her sparse hair hung around her face in limp strands. Then she was inside the car. He felt the seat go down the extremity of its springs. She brought with her the smell of wet hair, wet clothing and some other scent, not really unpleasant, not perfumed. He was suddenly comfortable in her presence, as though her size was something to lean against.

"A good thing I came back for you. You'd get soaked walking home. You need someone to take care of you." That line always appealed to them. "What's your address?"

"415 Fenwick."

"That's quite a ways. Do you walk every night after dark?"

"Yeah."

"I'd think you'd be afraid."

"I'm not." A statement of fact.

The car was one of the few on the rainblack street. Water was dashed across the windshield and hissed under the tires. She didn't speak further but sat, imposing and imperturbable. It should have made him nervous, but somehow it didn't. For all her weight she didn't seem quite real. It was as though he might look away for a moment and look back to find her gone.

He entered her street. The buildings sagged subtly one against the other, their facades crumbling off in layers. Gaping stars in windowpanes attested to emptiness. "Have you lived in this neighborhood long?"

She stopped and tried to think. "I've lived here . . . all my life, she said, surprised to realize that was true. White bodies writhing and the beginning of the hunger.

"The city's funny," he said. "You think of it as civilized, and maybe some parts of it are nice and safe, but there are back alleys, deserted buildings, cellars, perfect hiding places for—" He stopped himself, his imagination straining but not quite able to conclude something that had been clear at the beginning. He slipped his arm around her, hoping to offer reassurance, but she only looked at him in an odd way, so he removed his arm, and was glad of it. The wet raincoat had a clinging, yeasty quality. Perhaps she was one of the ugly ones who had come to terms with herself as she was. These were not vulnerable to him, but (his hunger prompted him) this one did not really have that feel.

He pulled the car into a parking space beside many other empty spaces before a building

anonymous as others along this street. The rain washed in rhythmic waves across the roof. He got out and went around to open her door. She would not run and he did not have the strength to compel her. The rain pelted them as they walked from the car to the door of her building.

A flight of stairs carpeted with a threadbare, colorless runner, squeaked, he supposed, familiarly under her weight. The staircase and hallway was dimly lit by flyspecked light fixtures of antique design. The walls displayed their many coats of paint in peeling layers, green, cream, blue, green again. Someone had scrawled obscenities in a childish hand. The hallway was littered, broken toys, bits of mold-colored organic matter.

Someone who was not what he was would have felt pity to see the squalor in which she lived, but he was pleased. That would make it easier for him.

She opened the door. The apartment seemed only a continuation of the corridor. Mildew had added subliminal designs to the cheap flower-printed wallpaper. The furniture was that predictable collection of odds and ends that inevitably ends up in a furnished room. There were no pictures, pillows, rugs or books to show that someone had even attempted to make a home here. He was discomfited. That was wrong; they all had the nesting instinct; he depended upon it. Sometimes he promised marriage and saw the ghosts of suburban ranch houses and magazine-ad children flicker in their eyes.

"I'll put on some dry clothes. I'll bring you a blanket. No, don't turn on the lights. At work my eyes get kind of tired."

He imagined her night after night groping about the darkness like some huge blind grub in its burrow. Why wasn't she being giggly and coy about the changing of clothes? She tossed in a blanket and he undressed and wrapped himself in it.

She came in carrying two jelly glasses with wine in them, her massiveness enhanced by a shapeless bright pink house coat with ruffles at neck and sleeves. It was old how he was surprised by her bulk each time he saw her. She sat down on the couch, causing him to slide down the slippery cushion until he was pressed against her in the hollow formed by broken springs. Her bloated face swam before him, the image in a bad dream, indistinct in the dimness. There was only the insistence of the rain against the windows. He took her hand or did she take his, and her skin was moist, faintly adhesive. She squirmed out of the robe, her body immense and white, the flesh bulging and folding upon itself. As she put her arms around him, he had the dream-like sensation of warm water lapping gently against his body. At first her largeness was comforting, a great warm wall of flesh, then he felt himself falling . . . into? it? Her body became liquescent and began to engulf him. Darkness surrounded him and when he attempted to scream, his mouth was filled and he gagged. He struggled as the corrosive acids in her body began to digest the outer layers of his skin. As she lolled back she remembered briefly the dark underground place where she had, as one pale larva among dozens, burst from the egg and how she had grown to resemble, through protective mimicry, the occupants of these structures.

By morning her body would eject those indigestible parts, the teeth, the hardest parts of the large bones, and she would carry them down into the burrow and place them beside the several dozen eggs that she had deposited there. She lay, sated, on the sofa, what looked like a huge woman in a dainty pink house coat. She had assuaged the hunger this way before but she didn't know how many times. It was hard for her to remember. In the morning she might even wonder what had happened to the kind young man who had driven her home.

UNDERTOW *by Karl Edward Wagner*

Karl Edward Wagner's Kane, the anti-hero of heroic fantasy, is known to thousands of readers who have discovered him in such novels as *Darkness Weaves*, *Bloodstone*, and *Death Angel's Shadow*. Kane is a mysterious figure, powerful sorcerer, capable swordsman, shrewd soldier, and often a villain who might prove a match for Conan (a fact you might keep in mind in reading this story). Wagner has said something to the effect that Kane is drawn from the Biblical story of Cain, if only in inspiration. The story that follows is a horror story in the tradition of those marvelously flavorsome tales which Clark Ashton Smith and Robert E. Howard used to produce for *Weird Tales* in its hallowed heyday. It concerns Kane at his most villainously grim and demonstrates why he has become so popular, and shows also that Wagner is a writer about as skilled as anyone now writing this sort of thing.

"She was brought in not long past dark," wheezed the custodian, scuttling crab-like along the rows of silent, shrouded slabs. "The city guard found her, carried her in. Sounds like the one you're asking about."

He paused beside one of the waist-high stone tables, lifted its filthy sheet. A girl's contorted face turned sightlessly upward—painted and rouged, a ghastly strumpet's mask against the pallor of her skin. Clots of congealed blood hung like a necklace of dark rubies along the gash across her throat.

The cloaked man shook his head curtly within the shadow of his hood, and the moonfaced custodian let the sheet drop back.

"Not the one I was thinking of," he murmured apologetically. "It gets confusing sometimes, you know, what with so many, and them coming and going all the while." Sniffing in the cool air, he pushed his rotund bulk between the narrow aisles, careful to avoid the stained and filthy shrouds. Looming over his guide, the cloaked figure followed in silence.

Low flamed lamps cast dismal light across the necrotorium of Carsultyal. Smouldering braziers spewed fitful, heavy fumed clouds of clinging incense that merged with the darkness and the stoniness and the decay—its cloying sweetness more nauseous than the stench of death it embraced. Through the thick gloom echoed the monotonous drip-drip-drip of melting ice, at times chorused suggestively by some heavier splash. The municipal morgue was crowded tonight—as always. Only a few of its hundred or more slate beds stood dark and bare; the others all displayed anonymous shapes bulging beneath blotched sheets—some protruding at curious angles, as if these restless dead struggled to burst free of the coarse folds. Night now hung over Carsultyal, but within this windowless subterranean chamber it was always night. In shadow pierced only by the sickly flame of funerary lamps, the nameless dead of Carsultyal lay unmourned—waited the required interval of time for someone to claim them, else to be carted off to some unmarked communal grave beyond the city walls.

"Here, I believe," announced the custodian. "Yes. I'll just get a lamp."

"Show me," demanded a voice from within the hood.

The portly official glanced at the other uneasily. There was no aura of power, of blighted majesty about the cloaked figure that boded ill in arrogant Carsultyal, whose clustered, star-reaching towers were whispered to be overawed by cellars whose depths plunged farther still. "Light's poor back here," he protested, drawing back the tattered shroud.

The visitor cursed low in his throat—an inhuman sound touched less by grief than feral rage.

The face that stared at them with too wide eyes had been beautiful in life; in death it was purple bloated, contorted in pain. Dark blood stained the tip of her protruding tongue, and her neck seemed bent at an unnatural angle. A gown of light-colored silk was stained and disordered. She lay supine, hands clenched into tight fists at her side.

“The city guard found her?” repeated the visitor in a harsh voice.

“Yes, just after nightfall. In the park overlooking the harbor. She was hanging from a branch—there in the grove with all the white flowers every spring. Must have just happened—said her body was warm as life, though there’s a chill to the sea breeze tonight. Looks like she done it herself—climbed out on the branch, tied the noose, and jumped off. Wonder why they do it—her as pretty a young thing as I’ve ever seen brought in, and took well care of, too.”

The stranger stood in rigid silence, staring at the strangled girl.

“Will you come back in the morning to claim her, or do you want to wait upstairs?” suggested the custodian.

“I’ll take her now.”

The plump attendant fingered the gold coin his visitor had tossed him a short time before. His lips tightened in calculation. Often there appeared at the necrotorium those who wished to remove bodies clandestinely for strange and secret reasons—a circumstance which made lucrative this disagreeable office. “Can’t allow that,” he argued. “There’s laws and forms—you shouldn’t even be here at this hour. They’ll be wanting their questions answered. And there’s fees . . .”

With a snarl of inexpressible fury, the stranger turned on him. The sudden movement flung back his hood.

The caretaker for the first time saw his visitor’s eyes. He had breath for a short bleat of terror before the dirk he did not see smashed through his heart.

Workers the next day, puzzling over the custodian’s disappearance, were shocked to discover, on examining the night’s new tenants for the necrotorium, that he had not disappeared after all.

I. Seekers in the Night

There—he heard the sound again.

Mavrsal left off his disgruntled contemplation of the near empty wine bottle, and stealthily came to his feet. The captain of the *Tuab* was alone in his cabin, and the hour was late. For hours the only sounds close at hand had been the slap of waves on the barnacled hull, the creek of cordage, and the dull thud of the caravel’s aged timbers against the quay. Then had come a soft footfall, a muffled fumbling among the deck gear outside his half-open door. Too loud for rats—a thief then?

Grimly Mavrsal unsheathed his heavy cutlass and caught up a lantern. He catfooted onto the deck, reflecting bitterly over his worthless crew. From cook to first mate, they had deserted his ship a few days before, angered over wages months unpaid. An unseasonable squall had forced them to jettison most of their cargo of copper ingots, and the *Tuab* had limped into the harbor of Carsultyal with shredded sails, a cracked mainmast, a dozen new leaks from wrenched timbers, and the rest of her worn fittings in no better shape. Instead of the expected wealth, the decimated cargo had brought barely enough capital to cover the expense of refitting. Mavrsal argued that until refitted the *Tuab* was unseaworthy, and that once repairs were complete, another cargo could be found (somehow), and the wages long in arrears could be paid—with a bonus for patient loyalty. The crew cared neither for h

logic nor his promises, and defected amidst stormy threats.

~~Had one of them returned to carry out . . . ?~~ Mavrsal hunched his thick shoulders truculently and hefted the cutlass. The master of the *Tuab* had never run from a brawl, much less a sneak-thief slinking assassin.

Night skies of autumn were bright over Carsultyal, making the lantern almost unneeded. Mavrsal surveyed the soft shadows of the caravel's deck, his brown eyes narrowed and alert beneath shaggy brows. But he heard the low sobbing almost at once, so there was no need to prowl about the deck.

He strode quickly to the mound of torn sail and rigging at the far rail. "All right, come out of that," he rumbled, beckoning with the tip of his blade to the half-seen figure crouched against the rail. The sobbing choked into silence. Mavrsal prodded the canvas with an impatient boot. "Out of there, damn it!" he repeated.

The canvas gave a wriggle and a pair of sandled feet backed out, followed by bare legs and rounded hips that strained against the bunched fabric of her gown. Mavrsal pursed his lips thoughtfully as the girl emerged and stood before him. There were no tears in the eyes that met his gaze. The aristocrat's face was defiant, although the flared nostrils and tightly pressed lips hinted that her defiance was a mask. Nervous fingers smoothed the silken gown, adjusted her cloak of dark-brown wool.

"Inside." Mavrsal gestured with his cutlass to the lighted cabin.

"I wasn't doing anything," she protested.

"Looking for something to steal."

"I'm not a thief."

"We'll talk inside." He nudged her forward, and sullenly she complied.

Following her through the door, Mavrsal locked it behind him and replaced the lantern. Returning the cutlass to its scabbard, he dropped back into his chair and contemplated his discovery.

"I'm no thief," she repeated, fidgeting with the fastenings of her cloak.

No, he decided, she probably wasn't—not that there was much aboard a decrepit caravel like the *Tuab* to attract a thief. But why had she crept aboard? She was a harlot, he assumed—what other business drew a girl of her beauty alone into the night of Carsultyal's waterfront? And she was beautiful, he noted with growing surprise. A tangle of loosely bound red hair fell over her shoulder, framed a face whose paleskinned classic beauty was enhanced rather than flawed by a dust of freckles across her thin bridged nose. Eyes of startling green gazed at him with a defiance that seemed somehow haunted. She was tall, willowy. Before she settled the dark cloak about her shoulders, he had noted the high, conical breasts and softly rounded figure beneath the clinging gown of green silk. A emerald of good quality graced her hand, and about her neck she wore a wide collar of dark leather and red silk, from which glinted a larger emerald.

No, thought Mavrsal—again revising his judgment—she was too lovely, her garments too costly for the quality of street tart who plied these waters. His bewilderment deepened. "Why were you on board then?" he demanded in a manner less abrupt.

Her eyes darted about the cabin. "I don't know," she returned.

Mavrsal grunted in vexation. "Were you trying to stow away?"

She responded with a small shrug. "I suppose so."

The sea captain gave a snort and drew his stocky frame erect. "Then you're a damn fool—or maybe I think I'm one! Stow away on a battered old warrior like the *Tuab*, when there's plainly no cargo to peddle to sea, and any eye can see the damn ship's being refitted! Why, that ring you're wearing would buy you passage to any port you'd care to see, and on a first-class vessel! And to wander these streets at this hour! Well, maybe that's your business, and maybe you aren't careful of your trade—but there's scum

along these waterfront dives that would slit a wench's throat as soon as pay her! Vault! I've been in port three days and four nights, and already I've heard talk of enough depraved murders of pretty girls like you to . . ."

"Will you stop it!" she hissed in a tight voice. Slumping into the cabin's one other chair, she propped her elbows onto the rough table and jammed her fists against her forehead. Russet tresses tumbled over her face like a veil, so that Mavrsal could not read the emotions etched there. In the hollow of the cloak's parted folds, her breasts trembled with the quick pounding of her heart.

Sighing, he drained the last of the wine into his mug and pushed the pewter vessel toward the girl. There was another bottle in his cupboard; rising, he drew it out along with another cup. She watched carefully sipping from the proffered mug when he resumed his place.

"Look, what's your name?" he asked her.

She paused so tensely before replying: "Dessylyn."

The name meant nothing to Mavrsal, although as the tension waxed and receded from her bearing he understood that she had been concerned her name would bring recognition.

Mavrsal smoothed his close-trimmed brown beard. There was a rough-and-ready toughness about his face that belied the fact he had not quite reached thirty years, and women liked to tell him his rugged features were handsome. His left ear—badly scarred in a tavern brawl—gave him some concern, but it lay hidden beneath the unruly mass of his hair. "Well, Dessylyn." He grinned. "My name's Mavrsal, and this is my ship. Aid if you're worried about finding a place, you can spend the night here."

There was dread in her face. "I can't."

Mavrsal frowned, thinking he had been snubbed, and started to make an angry retort.

"I dare not . . . stay here too long," Dessylyn interposed, fear glowing in her eyes.

Mavrsal made an exasperated grimace. "Girl, you sneaked aboard my ship like a thief, but I'm inclined to forget your trespassing. Now, my cabin's cozy, girls tell me I'm a pleasant companion, and I'm generous with my coin. So why wander off into the night, where in the first filthy alley some poor ridden drunk is going to take for free what I'm willing to pay for!"

"You don't understand!"

"Very plainly I don't." He watched her fidget with the pewter mug for a moment, then added pointedly: "Besides, you can hide here."

"By the gods! I wish I could!" she cried out. "If only I *could* hide from him!"

Brows knit in puzzlement, Mavrsal listened to the strangled sobs that rose muffled through the tossed auburn mane. He had not expected so unsettling a response to his probe. Thinking that even effort to penetrate the mystery surrounding Dessylyn only left him further in the dark, he measured out another portion of wine—and wondered if he should apologize for something.

"I suppose that's why I did it," she was mumbling. "I was able to slip away for a short while. So I walked along the shore, and I saw all the ships poised for flight along the harbor, and I thought how wonderful to be free like that! To step on board some strange ship, and to sail into the night to some unknown land—where *he* could never find me! *To be free!* Oh, I knew I could never escape him like that, but still when I walked by your ship, I wanted to try! I thought I could go through the motions—pretend I was escaping him!"

"Only I know there's no escape from Kane!"

"Kane!" Mavrsal breathed a curse. Anger toward the girl's tormentor that had started to flare within him abruptly shuddered under the chill blast of fear.

Kane! Even to a stranger in Carsultyal, greatest city of mankind's dawn, that name evoked the

specter of terror. A thousand tales were whispered of Kane; even in this city of sorcery, where the lost knowledge of prehuman Earth had been recovered to forge man's stolen civilization, Kane was a figure of awe and mystery. Despite uncounted tales of strange and disturbing nature, almost nothing was known for certain of the man—save that for generations his tower had brooded over Carsultya. There he followed the secret paths along which his dark genius led him, and the hand of Kane was rarely seen (though it was often felt) in the affairs of Carsultyal. Brother sorcerers and masters of powers temporal alike spoke his name with dread, and those who dared to make him an enemy seldom were given long to repent their audacity.

“Are you Kane’s woman?” he blurted out.

Her voice was bitter. “So Kane would have it. His mistress. His possession. Once though I was my own woman—before I was fool enough to let Kane draw me into his web!”

“Can’t you leave him—leave this city?”

“You don’t know the power Kane commands! Who would risk his anger to help me!”

Mavrsal squared his shoulders. “I owe no allegiance to Kane—nor to his minions in Carsultyal. The ship may be weathered and leaky, but she’s mine, and I sail her where I please. If you’re set on . . .”

Fear twisted her face. “Don’t!” she gasped. “Don’t even hint this to me! You can’t realize what power Kane . . .”

“What was that!”

Mavrsal tensed. From the night sounded the soft buffeting of great leathery wings. Claws scraped against the timbers of the deck outside. Suddenly the lantern flames seemed to shrink and wave. A shadow fell deep within the cabin.

“He’s missed me!” Dessylyn moaned. “He’s sent it to bring me back!”

His belly cold, Mavrsal drew his cutlass and turned stiffly toward the door. The lamp flames were no more than a dying blue gleam. Beyond the door a shuffling weight caused a loosened plank to groan dully.

“No! Please!” she cried in desperation. “There’s nothing you can do! Stay back from the door!”

Mavrsal snarled, his face reflecting the rage and terror that gripped him. Dessylyn pulled at his arm to draw him back.

He had locked the cabin door; a heavy iron bolt secured the stout timbers. Now an unseen hand was drawing the bolt aside. Silently, slowly, the iron bar turned, crept back along its mounting bracket. The lock snapped open. With nightmarish suddenness, the door swung wide.

Darkness hung in the passageway. Burning eyes regarded them. Advanced.

Dessylyn screamed hopelessly. Numb with terror, Mavrsal clumsily swung his blade toward the glowing eyes. Blackness reached out, hurled him with irresistible strength across the cabin. Pain burned across his consciousness, and then was only the darkness.

II. “Never, Dessylyn”

She shuddered and drew the fur cloak tighter about her thin shoulders. *Would there ever again be a time when she wouldn’t feel this remorseless cold?*

Kane, his cruel face haggard in the glow of the brazier, stood hunched over the crimson alembic. *How red the coals made his hair and beard; how sinister was the blue flame of his eyes . . .* He craned intently forward to trap the last few drops of the phosphorescent elixir in a chalice of ruby crystal.

He had labored sleepless hours over the glowing liquid, she knew. Hours precious to her because these were hours of freedom—a time when she might escape his loathed attention. Her lips pressed

tight, bloodless line. The abominable formulae from which he prepared the elixir! Dessylyn thought again of the mutilated corpse of the young girl Kane had directed his servant to carry off. Again a spasm slid across her lithe form.

"Why won't you let me go!" she heard herself ask dully for the . . . *how many times had she asked that?*

"I'll not let you go, Dessylyn," Kane replied in a tired voice. "You know that."

"Someday I'll leave you."

"No, Dessylyn. You'll never leave me."

"Someday."

"Never, Dessylyn."

"Why, Kane?"

With painful care, he allowed a few drops of an amber liqueur to fall into the glowing chalice. Blue flame hovered over its surface.

"Why?"

"Because I love you, Dessylyn."

A bitter sob, parody of laughter, shook her throat. "You love me." She enclosed a hopeless scream in those slow, grinding syllables.

"Kane, can I ever make you understand how utterly I loathe you!"

"Perhaps. But I love you, Dessylyn."

The sobbing laugh returned.

Glancing at her in concern, Kane carefully extended the chalice toward her. "Drink this. Quickly—before the nimbus dies."

She looked at him through eyes dark with horror. "Another bitter draught of some foul drug to bring me to you?"

"Whatever you wish to call it."

"I won't drink it."

"Yes, Dessylyn, you will drink it."

His killer's eyes held her with bonds of eternal ice. Mechanically she accepted the crimson chalice, let its phosphorescent liqueur pass between her lips, seep down her throat.

Kane sighed and took the empty goblet from her listless grip. His massive frame seemed to shudder from fatigue, and he passed a broad hand across his eyes. Blood rimmed their dark hollows.

"I'll leave you, Kane."

The sea wind gusted through the tower window, swirled the long red hair about his haunted face.

"Never, Dessylyn."

III. At the Inn of the Blue Window

He called himself Dragar . . .

Had the girl not walked past him seconds before, he probably would not have interfered when he heard her scream. Or perhaps he would have. A stranger to Carsultyal, nonetheless the barbarian youth had passed time enough in mankind's lesser cities to be wary of cries for help in the night—and to think twice before plunging into dark alleys to join in an unseen struggle. But there was a certain pride in the chivalric ideals of his heritage—along with a confidence in the hard muscle of his swordarm and in the strange blade he carried.

Thinking of the lithe, white limbs he had glimpsed—the patrician beauty of the face that cool

returned his curious stare as she came toward him—Dragar unsheathed the heavy blade at his hip and dashed back along the street he had just entered.

There was moonlight enough to see, although the alley was well removed from the nearest flaring street lamp. Cloak torn away, her gown ripped from her shoulders, the girl writhed in the grasp of two thugs. A third thug, warned by the rush of the barbarian's boots, angrily spun to face him—sword streaking for the youth's belly.

Dragar laughed and flung the lighter blade aside with a powerful blow of his sword. Scarcely seeming to pause in his attack, he gashed his assailant's arm with a upward swing, and as the other blade faltered, he split the thug's skull. One of the two who held the girl lunged forward, but Dragar sidestepped his rush, and with a sudden thrust sent his sword ripping into the man's chest. The remaining assailant shoved the girl against the barbarian's legs, whirled and fled down the alley.

Ignoring the fugitive, Dragar helped the stunned girl to her feet. Terror yet twisted her face, as she distractedly arranged the torn bodice of her silken gown. Livid scratches streaked the pale skin of her breasts, and a bruise was swelling out her lip. Dragar caught up her fallen cloak and draped it over her shoulders.

"Thank you," she breathed in a shaky whisper, speaking at last.

"My pleasure," he rumbled. "Killing rats is good exercise. Are you all right, though?"

She nodded, then clutched his arm for support.

"The hell you are! There's a tavern close by, girl. Come—I've silver enough for a brandy to put the fire back in your heart."

She looked as if she might refuse—were her knees steadier. In a daze, the girl let him half carry her into the Inn of the Blue Window. There he led her to an unoccupied booth and called for brandy.

"What's your name?" he asked, after she had tasted the heady liqueur.

"Dessylyn."

He framed her name with silent lips to feel its sound. "I'm called Dragar," he told her. "My home lies among the mountains far south of here, though it's been a few years since last I hunted with my clansmen. Wanderlust drew me away, and since then I've followed this banner or another's—sometimes just the shadow of my own flapping cloak. Then after hearing tales enough to dull my ears I decided to see for myself if Carsultyal is the wonder men boast her to be. You a stranger here as well?"

She shook her head. When the color returned to her cheeks, her face seemed less aloof.

"Thought you might be. Else you'd know better than to wander the streets of Carsultyal at nightfall. Must be something important for you to take the risk."

The lift of her shoulders was casual, though her face remained guarded. "No errand . . . but it was important to me."

Dragar's look was questioning.

"I wanted to . . . oh, just to be alone, to get away for a while. Lose myself maybe—I don't know. I didn't think anyone would dare touch me if they knew who I was."

"Your fame must be held somewhat less in awe among these gutter rats than you imagined," offered Dragar wryly.

"All men fear the name of Kane!" Dessylyn shot back bitterly.

"Kane!" The name exploded from his lips in amazement. *What had this girl to do . . . ?* But Dragar looked again at her sophisticated beauty, her luxurious attire, and understanding dawned. Angrily he became aware that the tavern uproar had become subdued on the echo of his outburst. Several faces had turned to him, their expressions uneasy, calculating.

The barbarian clapped a hand to his swordhilt. "Here's a man who doesn't fear a name!" he announced. "I've heard something of Carsulyal's most dreaded sorcerer, but his name means less than a fart to me! There's steel in this sword that can slice through the best your world famous mastersmiths can forge, and it thrives on the gore of magicians. I call the blade Wizard's Bane, and there are souls in Hell who will swear that its naming is no boast!"

Dessylyn stared at him in sudden fascination.

And what came after, Dessylyn?

I . . . I'm not sure . . . My mind—I was in a state of shock, I suppose. I remember holding his head for what seemed like forever. And then I remember sponging off the blood with water from the wooden lavabo, and the water was so cold and so red, so red. I must have put on my clothes . . . Yes, and I remember the city and walking and all those faces . . . All those faces . . . they stared at me, some of them. Stared and looked away, stared and looked compassionate, stared and looked curious, stared and made awful suggestions . . . And some just ignored me, didn't see me at all. I can't think which faces were the most cruel . . . I walked, walked so long . . . I remember the pain . . . I remember no tears, and the pain when there were no more tears . . . I remember . . . My mind was dazed . . . My memory . . .

I can't remember . . .

IV. A Ship Will Sail . . .

He looked up from his work and saw her standing there on the quay—watching him, her face a strange play of intensity and indecision. Mavrsal grunted in surprise and straightened from his carpentry. She might have been a phantom, so silently had she crept upon him.

"I had to see if . . . if you were all right," Dessylyn told him with an uncertain smile.

"I am—aside from a crack on my skull," Mavrsal answered, eyeing her dubiously.

By the dawn light he had crawled from beneath the overturned furnishings of his cabin. Blood matted his thick hair at the back of his skull, and his head throbbed with a deafening ache—so that he had sat dumbly for a long while, trying to recollect the events of the night. *Something* had come through the door, had hurled him aside like a spumed doll. And the girl had vanished—carried off by the demon? Her warning had been for him; for herself she evidenced not fear, only resigned despair.

Or had some of his men returned to carry out their threats? Had too much wine, the blow on his head . . .? But no, Mavrsal knew better. His assailants would have robbed him, made certain of his death—had any human agency attacked him. She had called herself a sorcerer's mistress, and it had been sorcery that spread its black wings over his caravel. Now the girl had returned, and Mavrsal's greeting was tempered by his awareness of the danger which shadowed her presence.

Dessylyn must have known his thoughts. She backed away, as if to turn and go.

"Wait!" he called suddenly.

"I don't want to endanger you any further."

Mavrsal's quick temper responded. "Danger! Kane can bugger with his demons in Hell, for all your care! My skull was too thick for his creature to split, and if he wants to try his hand in person, I'm here to offer him the chance!"

There was gladness in her wide eyes, as Dessylyn stepped toward him. "His necromancies have exhausted him," she assured the other. "Kane will sleep for hours yet."

Mavrsal handed her over the rail with rough gallantry. "Then perhaps you'll join me in my cabin."

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