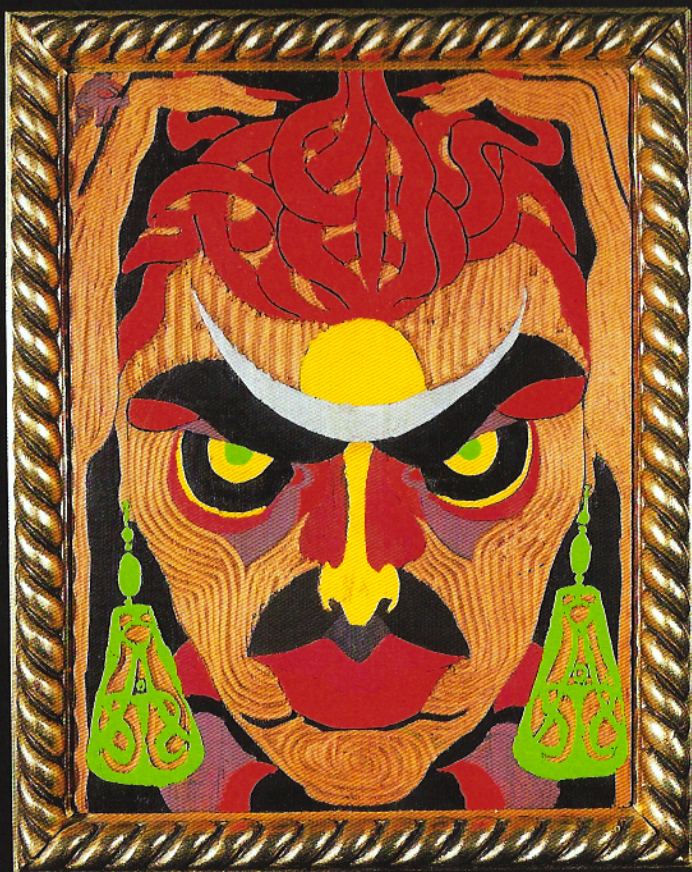


SLAKEWAND & THE DARKER STRAIN



KENNETH GRANT

SNAKEWAND and **THE DARKER STRAIN**, and other tales to follow, were written in the wake of rituals performed over a period of seven years in an occult Lodge named *New Isis*.

Many were the magicians and mediums who passed through the Lodge, and some of them feature in these tales. Their mundane personalities may not have appeared unusual to casual observation, but when elongated and siderealised by the unique perspectives which their magical roles created for them they achieved an apotheosis, an epiphany. This extraordinary phenomenon demonstrated the heights and the depths which human nature is capable of scaling, and of fathoming, in the delirious frenzy inspired by their art.

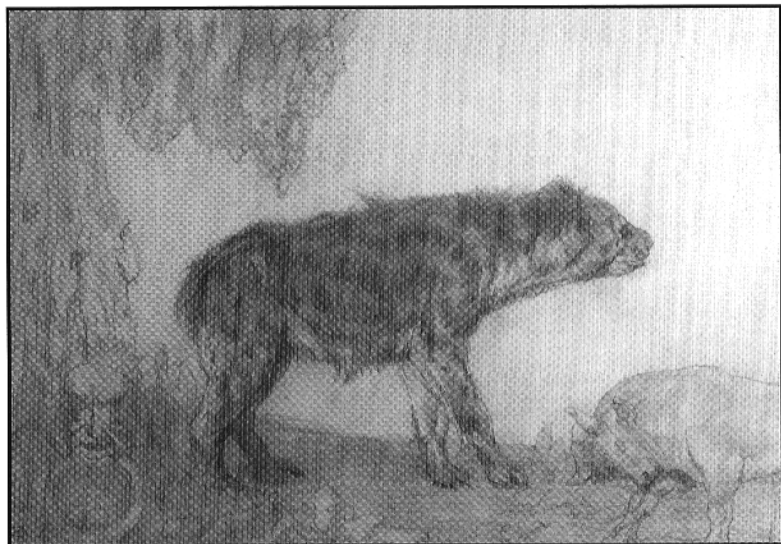
The tales are likewise orientated to the other side of a reality rarely glimpsed outside a magically charged Circle.

The theoretical and practical bases upon which the tales stand have been expounded in depth in the series of *Typhonian Trilogies* bearing the titles appended in the accompanying list.

continued on back flap

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Austin Osman Spare, 1929

SNAKEWAND & THE DARKER STRAIN

KENNETH GRANT



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Snakewand

*In Memory
of
AUGUSTE BUSCHE
Maker of Idols
Carver of Dreams*

• •

1

The sound of footsteps receded. The closely curtained window lightened faintly before Gail was aware that he had gone. The sound of footsteps trailing off into the unlighted night haunted her. She hovered between dream and waking. A bright scarf encircled her neck, a gay garland of twisted flowers which emphasized her nakedness as her fingers fluttered over her smooth white spoiled perfection.

He came as a knife in the dark, his white teeth flashing in the dark, all dark was his skin. It was as if night had taken form, blackening her utterly.

And then she heard the drumming. Almost inaudible at first, but insistent, with a complex rhythm that seeped deeply into her, stirring a fold of memory she could not instantly locate. Awake now and conscious of her surroundings she tried to utter some articulate sound, but something hindered her. She seemed capable only of following the insidious rhythms as they throbbed through her mind.

Standing on the landing without, she listened intently. The drumming here was more subdued and finally faded to silence. She groped her way to the stairhead and, like a spectre, floated down the stairs, paused outside a door, listened, and, suddenly conscious of her nudity, drew back momentarily, then went on.

As if the drumming in its ceasing had changed into living air, Gail became aware of another rhythmic sound, the sound of breathing, a sleeping breather. The breath rose and fell in regular waves, filling entirely the dark room which she entered. Two gleaming eyes regarded her, two barely visible pinpoints of light suspended in space. A furry form brushed against her, the eyes vanished and the sleeper stirred. There was a sudden blaze as the awakened occupant switched on the light. Looking up at Gail were eyes of clear cold sapphire, all the more remarkable in that they were set in an ebony face.

"What you here for, hell-cat wid no clothes on?"

A lithe body slid to the floor, its feet snaking into slippers lined with white fur and dazzling like snow in contrast. Gail stared mutely at the splendid form before her.

"Don't fret, Zila", she pleaded. "I had it again, that frightening dream, and the drumming went on long after I awakened."

"Aw, shut up. Here, put dis on!"

Zila tossed the girl a turquoise-coloured shawl and she herself slipped on a dressing-gown. She could not hide her intense curiosity at the sight of so white a body. Her full violet-stained lips always parted a little when she saw Gail like that, and it lent to her face the likeness of a black mask in which her abnormally translucent eyes flickered like a serpent's tongue. Gail felt a rising flush tint her face.

"You wakea me up now four nights. Why you not have real men like d'other girls; like me, like Rosa? You drivin' yersel' crazy wid dis dream-man. Why not have love normal, den you sleep widout dis dreaming".

Zila spat disgustedly and, withdrawing her foot from its furry sheath, rubbed the moisture into the carpet with her toe. Gail contemplated Zila's foot, thinking how much it resembled a hand; the toes were as long, almost, as her own fingers.

Although Zila treated Gail with disdain, she had a fondness for her which she could not explain, and it irritated her. Gail's

glance comported an insult to her anatomical peculiarities, which were not unusual in one of her ancient race. She was of the nobility, though Gail could not understand this any more than she could understand Zila's way of life, which sickened her.

After pouring a drink, which Gail declined, and offering to make coffee, which she also declined, Zila looked at her with intense exasperation as she sat dejectedly on the bed. Zila drank her rum and helped herself to more. The sleek and furry shadow with the eyes jumped on to Gail's lap and she stroked it absentmindedly. Then she stood up and touched Zila very tenderly, and Zila saw that she was white, very white, much whiter than usual, and trembling violently.

"It is not for want of sleep that that body is exhausted. Zila! Why do you do it? Why do you not wait?"

Zila had risen to her feet and was glaring at Gail with her great clear dangerous eyes. Gail thought how like an animal she looked just then.

"You little fool!", screamed Zila, but it was not a scream, it was a choking explosion which burst from her lips like muffled thunder. She seized Gail by the shoulders and shook her violently, but the girl did not wince; she was encapsulated in a glacial cask; her virginity numbed her, froze her, she could feel only a loathing in her heart. When Zila spoke again it was as a lance rowelling her body.

"We don't last long as you, you hear? We haven't time likea you. We gotta burn up quick while we still gotta young".

She tore open the dressing-gown, exposing her ripe full breasts which quivered now with storm. Gail gazed at them. Like exquisite fruit they jutted, firm, aggressive, demanding. All the colours of darkness were contained in their satiny moons. Around one of them were fresh indentations. Gail fell suddenly upon the bed, sobbing hysterically. She felt Zila's hot breath as she crouched over her; it was like the sound of the drumming again invading her, driving against her. Zila pulled

away the shawl, revealing the dazzling sweep of Gail's back. A cascade of auburn hair tumbled down it like a river of gold fused with copper. Sinking upon her, Zila began stroking it, and the furry shadow with the eyes leapt on to the dressing-table and turned on the pair an inscrutable gaze.

"Honey!", whispered Zila, "there's gonna be a *juba*¹ tomorrow night at the Grotto. Won't you come longa me, honey; mebbe you meet some one dere!"

2

Gail struggled to recall the events that occurred after she had left Zila's room, but her mind was numbed. Then the drumming returned; softly, insistently, it pulsed through her being, and with it came a clear mental impression of the fanlight above the entrance-door of the house she occupied. Zila's room was first left on the ground floor. Gail was beginning to remember. She saw herself standing outside Zila's door and staring unseeingly at the sole source of illumination: the fanlight which admitted a grey vaporous light, crepuscular and cold. Then a pair of eyes fused with the image in her mind, the pin-point glinting eyes of a beast, the eyes that had first met hers in the darkness of Zila's room. These expanded now into great clear wells of sapphire, and then faded like a lamp slowly extinguished, and another pair of eyes, dark, narrow, with burning red pupils, directed at her their baleful glare. She remembered trying to scream, but the eyes held her spell-bound. By some obscure alchemy of identity the fanlight had become the window of her soul, and the awful eyes were peering

¹ A Voodoo term denoting 'a dance'; also 'a ghost'.

through at her, cutting her like a knife. She felt essentially exposed, infinitely more naked than when she had walked into Zila's room.

Then she remembered Zila herself, and how, after Zila had invited her to the Grotto, long after, Gail had stirred from an unnaturally deep sleep and seen what she had seen. She did not dare evoke that final image of Zila, for she knew that the woman was no longer wholly human, that she was the shell of some beast-soul which breathed through her, and used her body for the satisfaction of ambiguous cravings.

As she lay in her bed, mute with the horror of what had been done to her, she knew also that Zila was in some way connected with the dark dream that possessed her each night. Zila simulated contempt when Gail spoke of her dream-lover, but she knew intuitively that her experiences did not surprise the other woman. Yet despite herself, Gail found that she was waiting impatiently to accompany Zila to the Grotto. Her limbs ached excruciatingly, yet not with the cold; she had been sapped of some vital spark, drained of an essential energy, the loss of which had bound her to Zila and made her subject to the other's will.

Again the image of the hall-window unfolded its fan of misty light, and she seemed to see writhing and twisting forms issuing into the house like puffs of smoke, and taking possession of all within it. And the drumming, which had been continuous throughout her effort to remember, throbbed with a more resonant vibrancy until sleep, snowing down silently from the fanlight, finally enveloped her.

At this point I, the recorder of events so far, must step into the picture.

A short time after the *juba* had begun at the Grotto Club on Frall Street, in the centre of the town of Belpham, I noticed a change in the atmosphere about me. I had brought along three or four friends who wanted to enjoy the function, but as regards myself I had an additional purpose, which was to inspect a pair of Voodoo drums newly arrived from San Prez. They were said to possess a quite unusual *timbre* and unfamiliar decorative designs. Having developed some proficiency in the handling of some of the more complex rhythms, I was eager to see the drums and, if possible, to try them out.

One of my friends – Sylvestre Steem – had introduced me one evening to a man named Troyle who had had the good fortune of finding what promised to be a very rare type of tympanum. Troyle wanted to save details of his discovery for a future meeting which he suggested should take place on his return from Africa, where he had gone after leaving San Prez. He seemed to have taken an exaggerated liking to me, or so I then thought. On my part, I was rather repulsed by the man. His presence communicated to me a curious sense of unease which it took me a long time to shake off. However, he was, I thought, the only person within leagues of Belpham who could lead me in some of the more complicated rhythms. But that night at the Grotto I met one who surpassed us both in knowledge and dexterity.

The club was swarming with the usual gaily attired crowd. A small group, on a dais festooned with ropes of liana, played Jazz with an air of impassive nonchalance which detached it from the clamouring dancers. The air was heavy with the odours of clarin, patchouli, perique-tobacco and sweat, and the heat hung in almost tangible drifts.

Steem beckoned to me over a sea of heaving bodies and I

began weaving my way towards him. As I pressed through the crowd, the band swung into a fast brassy number that initiated a sudden surging movement. Partners were seized and wheeled about. A pair of dark arms encircled my neck and I stared into eyes, remarkable eyes, of pure sapphire. They were Zila's. Whirled into the dance, I felt her body close with mine. She was slippery with sweat, and under the rippling velvet of her body's heat I could feel the vibrancy of the woman's vitality. Caught in the instant and sudden hysteria of the *juba*, I became bodily hypersensitive. Zila clamped her lips to mine, darting her tongue into my mouth with short sharp stabs. She felt like a reptile in my arms, rousing me with the urgency of desire imparted like a flame. Locked together we swirled to the centre of the floor. Women spun round like tops whipped to a frenzy, frocks gaping or rolled breast-high. There were bitings and stompings; a white hand gripped me, chafing my loins with nails already red with blood. And then the complex figure of the dance unwound into its component parts once more as couples dropped out, or lay moaning, one above the other.

As Zila fell from me in sheer exhaustion I noticed a pale girl with glazed eyes and auburn hair. She appeared like a wraith, a zombie, her face so totally unhuman that the impression engendered in me such a sense of alarm that I was unable to forget it. Its temporary abeyance in my mind was due to the fact that my friend Steem was beside me. I could see that he had not participated in the general jamboree.

"They've gone berserk tonight", he said acidly. "The damage is considerable. Breckner won't be pleased when he gets back".

I smiled at my friend's pragmatic comment. Breckner was the owner of the Club. Truth to tell, I was completely winded and felt like dropping.

"That Zila creature's not human", I exclaimed. "Who the hell introduced her here?"

Steem smiled a slow enigmatic sort of smile.

"Come and see the drums", he said, steering me through the crowd to Breckner's private suite.

"Have they really arrived?"

"They have really arrived, and they're beauties!"

Frowning, he added: "The patterns puzzle me, though I'm sure they're *Petro* drums."

Zila had explained to me the difference between the *Petro* and the *Rada* rites of Voodoo, but I was too excited just then to recall her comments, and I felt particularly annoyed with her at that moment. The thought of her, however, recalled the face of the pale girl with the auburn hair who had recently passed like a spectre before me.

Steem was eyeing me queerly. I pretended not to notice, and gazed unseeingly at the objects he was holding up for inspection. I stood about absentmindedly for a little while, mumbling.

"Damn it; what's the matter with you? Aren't you interested?" I was; *intensely* interested. The drums were the main reason for my being at the Grotto, but just then my mind was paralysed by the memory of the spectral mask which haunted me. But as I handled the drums my mind decided to function again. I was genuinely, disgustingly doting. They were perfect specimens – but of what? One could not say 'of their kind', for I had no earthly notion of what kind were the instruments which Steem had handed me. They were braced like *Petro* drums, and the gut was indubitably sheepskin; but a curious irregularity in the hollowing of the wood, and the unfamiliar band of designs circling the top, and girdling the middle, proclaimed them to be a pair indeed, but – to my mind at least – nothing else; and I prided myself on extensive and exact knowledge where these matters were concerned. I looked bewildered, and Steem grinned.

"They are a headache, aren't they?"

The noise outside made conversation next to impossible, but

at that point it began to subside to a mere hum, like the drone of bees on a summer evening.

Then came the ungovernable urge to start experimenting. Steem laughed softly, and taking the smaller drum, he beat out a *Petro* rhythm – an invocation of the *loa*² – which I took up and answered on the larger instrument. To my surprise the response was not as I had expected; there was no clear resonance but a muffled and somewhat muted concussion. I could see that Steem thought likewise.

I became suddenly aware that silence prevailed everywhere except in the room we occupied. Not a sound proceeded from the crowded club, which I knew to contain hundreds of people at that moment.

We went on beating out the invocation which Steem had initiated and I noticed an odd look in his eyes, an expression of bewilderment which turned to alarm. He was looking straight at me and a mounting terror was spreading like a cloud across his features, while his hands continued to beat out in perfect time the *Petro* invocation. Then the door of the room burst open, and closed with a slam. Still we played on, but I knew without even turning my head that the girl with the ghostly face had come amongst us. My hands executed their movements automatically, as if enacting a part requiring no volition. Again I heard the door open and close with a bang. Steem had left. Other than this I knew nothing, nothing other than that some intelligence had possessed me; some will other than my own was causing a subtle change in the rhythms I drew from the drums. A quite unfamiliar pattern emerged, and a slower, more resounding vibration filled the room.

Totally enthralled by this remarkable phenomenon, it was some time before I realised that the intruder was within my line of vision. Arched backwards, with hands touching the floor

² Voodoo gods.

behind her head, her body began pulsating and twisting in response to the drumming. Her thin turquoise-coloured shawl had fallen open, leaving her naked. On her legs and belly, convulsed now with powerful spasms, were serpentine lines painted in vermilion suggestive of blood. It did not dawn on me, vivid and startling as the impression was, that the markings repeated the design on the drums themselves. On the latter, however, they were painted in green so deep as to appear almost black. On the living flesh the markings were vitalized, so that a sinuous life appeared to animate them.

The dance she performed was so indescribably obscene that the *banda* at its most extreme would give no inkling of it. I did not once see her face, though she circled round me repeatedly. Always as she turned, pivoting on her own axis, her hair would fall across her face, or her arms and breasts would obscure it. The circle she traced around me gradually diminished until it seemed she must drop, exhausted. Intense heat pervaded the room, and my hands felt detached; yet they struck the drums deftly, like two bloodless clappers.

With the girl's gaining proximity I succumbed to her provocative onslaught. The snakes of vermilion had surely assumed an independent and entirely malignant existence. They crawled upon her flesh, now streaming with sweat, and I distinctly saw them coil outward into the atmosphere between us, their blind blunt heads swaying, their tongues stabbing the air about me. Then I was caught about the waist, and the drumming hands – they could not be my hands – were turning a darker shade, yet still they fretted out the rhythm.

My clothes fell from me as if their seams and stitches were disintegrated. In a frenzy of desire and terror combined, I saw a coiling vermilion shape slither around me as an encircling flame, a flickering tongue which caressed me in the most flagrantly sensual manner.

I have said that my hands were of a hue darker than usual,

and that they felt detached in a way I cannot explain. They were now turning black, as with corruption, and as I observed this I also became aware of a feeling of inner separation; that is to say, my mind similarly became detached, disorientated. I was splitting into two distinct entities, one of which was not myself. The essential 'I' was fading away, vanishing, and yet I existed, vividly aware of having changed, and yet of continuing in some other body. The sensation was profoundly frightening and I panicked; yet, as in a cataleptic dream I had occasionally experienced, I found myself exulting. Coincident with enormous dread there also existed an equally enormous exhilaration and sense of freedom. I was no longer white skinned but an ebony-hued massive individual instinct with great power which yet was extreme weakness, for it was compelled by a blind hunger which I, as I, could not understand.

And then another change occurred. The black body became blacker, but the hue of the skin was not the dark veil merely of African blood, no mere product of generations drenched and dyed by tropical suns; it was the darkness of animality. It was at this moment that some part of me coolly recalled the gist of a statement I had once read and pondered: the deep dye of the dark races is not evidence solely of origination in Equatoria, but also of animal ancestry and proximity to pre-human stages of evolution. I knew instinctively that it was possible to return along devious lines of evolution to remote atavisms, and that a certain combination of vibrations could trigger a reversion to pre-human types of existence; that profound and terrible transformations of consciousness can be effected by the manipulation of little-known vibrations, all of which I had heard of in connection with the cults of Voodoo and Obeah. Zila had told me many things about them.

I was conscious of an overpowering odour. The change that had affected me had also affected the room and its other occupants. I tried desperately to realise that I was at the Grotto

Club; that some uncanny and baleful property of tympany had possessed and dislocated my consciousness.

In the feeling of being two; of being human and animal, white and black simultaneously, I sensed also an identity of which I was absolutely certain, and I wielded a strange power; that of being able, at will, to transform my bodily structure into non-human, even perhaps non-terrestrial shapes.

The odour brought with it stray associated images. The rank and fetid stench of the swamps seemed somehow to have infiltrated the building, as if the reek of the jungle had invaded one's drawing-room, permeating it with sickly fumes, with savage scents. The place was indeed a grotto. It was as if the walls of the club had fallen apart, dissolved into a swampy terrain. A shambling lope had displaced my usual mode of locomotion. I covered distances swiftly, and emitted convulsive cries which terminated in shuddering laughter, or shrill screaming chuckles. Before me, always a little ahead, the girl moved obliquely as a sleepwalker moves, gliding rigidly like a column of greyish light in which her eyes burned vacantly. She turned suddenly to navigate a wall of rock, and at that moment I sprang.

5

I closed the door softly under the fanlight and was approaching the stairs leading to Gail's room, when a door opened on the left of the hall. Zila stood lolling against the jamb, her large unnatural eyes mocking me. I was so intent on seeing Gail that the intrusion of an image other than hers caught me off guard.

"You did me a good turn at last", I remarked sourly.

Zila approached the foot of the stairs, her expression one of suppressed fury.

"Yes!", she hissed. "The little fool! Who would have thought she would fall for de rubbish you pack!"

I made to go on upstairs, but she placed her hand on my arm; her attitude suddenly changed.

"Why you do dat, honey? You know de Baron's³ savage, 'live or dead. Worse, now dead! Him ev'rywhere."

She spoke rapidly, her breath hot upon my cheek. Then she glanced up the stairs, and I thought I detected in her a fear of being caught detaining me. After which she gazed directly into my eyes. I could never resist the full impact of them; they were like cloudless summer skies with a black sun in each of them. She urged me gently to her door. I hesitated, thinking how unreal it all seemed. This sordid tenement dwelling had once been a graceful mansion, its front door flanked by sculptured beasts, and was yet surmounted by the elegant if mouldering tracery of a fanlight in the Adam style. Its beauty was at once fragile and massive. Dark and gloomy now, the passage in which we stood was illumined solely by the meagre light which filtered through the fanlight's dusty grime. The only living things at that moment in all the sighings and groanings of the dead and decaying structure were Zila's eyes. They shone with an interior light made all the more intense by the darkness of her skin.

"You've been lying in wait for me", I said lamely.

She was drenched in perfume and dressed in a leopard-skin smock which stopped short of her knees. A curious dull stone adorned her neck, nestling in the declivity at her throat. I stared at it, trying to resist her compelling gaze, then I followed her into the room, feeling like a minor facing a charge for some

³ Baron Samedhi, or Carfax, is the Voodoo equivalent of the Devil, and the Lord of the Crossroads.

trivial offence. With a laugh of triumph she flung herself into a chair and crossed her legs. Her pelt rode up with the stress of her movement, displaying the fancy borders of her stockings. She lit a cigarette and tossed the packet to me, mocking me with her eyes as if chiding me for what I had intended doing.

"You don't do dat usual, honey; not go by Zila's room 'thout knockin'."

She could be irresistibly kittenish, and adopted this attitude now as I sat at the foot of the bed near her chair. She flexed her legs, and having released the shining stockings she began to peel them off with infinite deliberation. She was smothered in patchouli. My throat had gone dry. I poured out a glassful of clairin from the bottle she kept by the bed, and gulped it down. I was engulfed in the gentle warmth of her scent. With a swift upward motion she drew off the smock and flung it aside. Her breasts shivered with the movement, and her long sleek legs uncoiled like snakes as she rose from the chair and moved towards the bed. Nothing but the dull stone adorned her.

The reek of her scented flesh, combined with the overpowering proximity of her presence, goaded me to the acme of pleasure, yet I watched our limbs close as if I observed the scene from a distance. She lay moaning and hissing, her nostrils dilated, her eyes staring up into space, or perhaps they themselves were fragments of space snatched from the atmosphere. They glowed with the colour of rose; my own fire was flashing from them. Her pupils were black stars rolling in skies shot through with blood. I was aware of a word, or a name, chiselled deeply and with minute precision in the stone at her throat: *Bultungin*. I muttered the three syllables again and again; the rhythm of it was like a drum-beat. I laughed hysterically. Zila seemed not to have heard the word, but my laughter incensed her.

It was then that I heard the drumming; softly at first, then louder. Zila shrieked and tore away from me, leaping from the bed as if she had been stung.

"You go now; quickly!", she hissed: "Quick! No time!"

She was pulling on a wrap and urging me to dress. I was conscious of impending danger, but of what kind I could not imagine. It was a formless dread connected with the drumming, and with the word I had uttered.

She pushed me through the back door of the room, and as I looked back apprehensively it was to see her clutching convulsively at her throat, at the dark green stone. Her fingers seemed abnormally long, like talons, the nails sharp and pointed, and they were smeared with something like damp and unctuous clay.

6

I had not seen Sylvestre Steem since the night of the *juba* at the Grotto Club, and when he tapped me on the shoulder at the corner of Brotton Street I experienced an upsurge of panic. He said nothing, but took me by the arm and led me to a nearby café which we occasionally frequented. With coffee before us we both broke into laughter. But I noticed that Steem laughed only with his mouth; his eyes held a hunted and a haunted look.

"Feeling better now?", he asked.

I raised my eyebrows, genuinely surprised by the enquiry.

"Well! You were in a pretty rotten state when we found you, you know. What *did* happen that night?"

I stood up as another wave of alarm enveloped me.

"Sit down", he said gently but firmly. "It's no good running

away from it, whatever *it* is."

I had no idea what to reply because I had no idea what actually had occurred.

"Perhaps *you* can tell *me!*", I said.

He watched me steadily and cast a nervous glance about him. The café was all but deserted. A waitress was perusing a newspaper with painful intensity, following each word with a finger as does a child that is learning to read.

"Doctor Melrose said you had some kind of seizure. You were literally frothing at the mouth, though deathly still, and lying on the floor in a queer twisted attitude as though you had thrown yourself over a cliff. But your eyes were the really shocking spectacle: bulging and glazed and straining. Like the eyes of a... of a..."

"...beast hunting its prey". I finished the sentence for him as memory flooded back, illuminating some of the darkest moments of the whole fantastic episode.

Again I rose, this time upsetting the coffee. Steem pushed me back again into my chair. The girl awakened as from a guilty dream and brought a swab to clear up the mess. From her neck depended a small dark gem which pulsed and changed before my eyes until it resembled the green stone worn by Zila. As it swayed with the girl's exertions it assumed a reddish hue and glowed from the darkness of the dress against which it hung. I must have emitted a cry, or noise of some kind, for the girl looked up and recoiled. Steem grabbed me by the arm and dragged me away.

We hurried along Brotton Street, turned up Crayley Way and over the footbridge to the quarter of the town in which I lodged. At the door of number nine he left me, advising me to see Doctor Melrose.

I stood shivering on the doorstep despite the evening's

warmth, and, conscious of the curiosity of passers-by, I went indoors.

A chance resemblance between the stone which Zila wore and the gem I had just seen, had stirred a series of memories simultaneously pleasant and unpleasant. I poured myself a drink and sat down in a state of frustration mingled with formless dread. I did not switch on the lamp; I wanted to think. The flashing luminosity of neon signs across the street stabbed the murk of the room with a rhythmic glare. As I rose to slam down the shutter I caught sight of a reflection in the mottled mirror over the bed, on the wall opposite to my chair. As in those lurid flashes of lightning which abruptly reveal objects in a strange and terrifying manner, only to plunge them into profounder blackness a moment later, I saw two of me: a glaring, haggard white face, and a dark, overshadowing shape in which two pin-points of orange-red light glowed balefully.

The passing car – or whatever it was that momentarily illuminated the room with flaring headlamps – thundered by, and a deeper darkness gave way once more to the alternating lights of the neons. I switched on the bedside lamp, and with an enormous effort of will gazed once more into the mirror. My face, green-tinged and ghastly against the patterns of a villainous flowered wallpaper furred with fungus, stared dumbly back at me. Behind my head the flowers and the fungus seemed alive and writhing. I could all but hear the putrid sap oozing along the veined trellis-work which connected the odious blooms with the shadows lurking outside the bilious circle of lamplight. And I heard, or thought I heard, the beating of a drum; or was it the pounding of my heart?

A book lay on the bed. I took it up, but not understanding a word of it, flung it down in fury. I threw open the window in the hope that an incoming current of air, however fetid, might dispel the rank closeness of the room. A woman was sauntering along the street. As she drew abreast of number nine I saw her cast

a furtive glance at the window through which I peered. I drew back into the shadows before she had time to see me. She hesitated momentarily, moved on, then looked back once or twice as if she suspected someone were following her. I leaned far out of the window, unable to explain to myself why I should be so interested in the passing of a stranger, when I saw her cross the footbridge and, to my surprise, slope off Crayley Way and head in the direction of Vermont. In an effort to forget my anxieties I found myself wondering why she had glanced up at my window on her way to Vermont – if that were in fact her destination – and what business she might have, heading for so lonely a spot at that late hour.

A few moments later I was dashing down the stairs with no special plan in mind when I nearly collided with Gail, who was on her way up. We both stopped and glared at one another. I had not seen her since the incident with Zila, and suspected she had come to remonstrate with me.

"Where are you going?", she enquired evenly: "You look like a madman; what has happened?"

I lowered my eyes in a miserable state of indecision, then I seized her by the shoulders and shook her violently.

"Where are the drums?", I screamed at her. "I'm going to smash them".

She tautened in my grasp, and in the half-light I could see that she was determined not to tell me.

"Steem has them", she replied simply.

"That's a lie", I said.

"Don't you think we'd better talk upstairs?", she murmured, and urged me unresistingly back to my room. When the door was closed, she rounded on me, her eyes flaming accusingly:

"You began all this. You know the drums were stolen from..."

She suddenly stiffened and clamped her jaws together; she would rather bite off her tongue than finish that sentence. I

stared at her uncomprehendingly.

"What do you mean! A man named Troyle acquired them in..."

"Acquired them?", she blurted, derisively. Her eyes blazed, and she raised her voice, which was tremulous with suppressed sobbing. Then she flung herself on the bed and buried her head in the pillows.

A pool of rich auburn lay beneath the lamp, still alight on the bedside table. I felt sickeningly disorientated and profoundly curious about the meaning of it all. Gail's accusations and violent emotions; my obsession with the drums, which seemed to sound continuously in my head with a rhythm recalling the word I had glimpsed on Zila's stone; the scene at the Grotto; the behaviour of Steem. What did it mean? Why had Gail come here? Where had I been going when she appeared on the stairs?

I held my head. Gail's body was spreadeagled, face downward on the bed, and her skirt had ridden above her knees. I remembered the snakes and pulled it up completely. She twisted over like an eel, and there was a sneer on her face. She read the query in my eyes.

"You are in love with Zila". She sat upright on the bed. I was taken aback by the swift change of subject, until I realised there had been no change. Some of the truth then dawned on me.

"It was Zila who sent you to the club that night", I said slowly, and it was as if another person had spoken. The voice sounded infinitely distant and thin, not my own. I was dazed, dumbfounded, and an unaccountable anger possessed me. I turned towards the door and stood undecided for several seconds. The sound of Gail's striking a match caused me to turn. In the mirror over the bed a vague and nebulous mist was writhing into unutterably lewd forms. It was all imagination projected on to the smoke from Gail's cigarette, *but it was someone else's imagination, not mine*; I swear it was not mine.

For a moment I stood motionless and then averted my gaze

from the horrible apparitions which mouthed dumb obscenities from the mirror's depths. Underneath it, Gail lay totally exposed, her dress furled like a garland of flowers at her throat. Her smooth white body was soft as satin, and as cool in the lamplight. Her auburn hair coiled over the white pillows; only her legs appeared black and shot with silver fire as the lamp-light caught the sheen which streaked like lightning through the finely woven mesh of her stockings.

It must have been quite an hour later when she rose to go. I drew her back tenderly. She cooed, and caressed me, constantly resuscitating the desire which she as constantly slaked with the ice of her body. Then she said she should go.

"Where does friend Troyle live?", she asked, her hand already on the door.

"At Vermont – when he is at home. He travels a lot; I don't think he's back ..."

I did not finish the sentence. She was looking at me queerly.

"Vermont?", she repeated softly.

The name reminded me of the incident that had occurred before Gail's intrusion. Vermont was to have been my destination that evening. I ran to the stairhead, but Gail had gone. Leaning over the banister I saw grey dawn filtering through the fanlight.

The way to Vermont lay beyond Belpham Cemetery, a little to the north. Once the cemetery was passed the track soon dis-

appeared in a morass. The route was virtually without signposts, abounded in bogs and, where vegetation became dense, in actual swamps. I had not gone that way before; for the only time I had been to Troyle's place, he himself accompanied me. We had then made a long westerly detour, through Bromlingham and Staverson, in order to avoid the morass. Few townspeople ever ventured further than Belpham, and the regions beyond were shunned with superstitious dread; and because the inhabitants of Belpham never expressed themselves verbally, the dread seemed all the more emphasized by brutish silence on the subject. I had to admit to sensing a most unpleasant atmosphere. The way lay through clumps of phallic-shaped weeds which waved their mauve heads above the steaming marshes. A more sinister terrain it would be hard to imagine. The total absence of animal life added to the eeriness of it, the only sounds being the heavings of the unctuous ground.

I had had some slight experience of swampland in South America and the Congo, and the present terrain brought one such region vividly to mind. Although not on so vast a scale, the land beyond Belpham possessed all the atmosphere which the densely sweet-sour fetor of a luxuriant flora exhales. The stifling odours, which had all the pungency of fumes, caused an appearance of movement where none was possible. The quakings and bubblings of the uncertain ground, which certainly did move, produced the sensation of balancing precariously on a fluid surface from which coiled an efflorescent and perpetually twisting vegetation. The mottled mauve tentacles which dangled from tall and bulbous plants appeared to be clenching and unclenching their tapering feelers, which terminated in five finger-like ribbons. The total effect was one of a constantly pullulant breathing. The entire region seemed alive, despite its lack of animal existence.

The realisation that I lived comparatively near such a place came as a shock. I knew now why Troyle had advised me to

take the longer route. And I realised, too, that I had strayed from the course I had mapped out before leaving my lodgings. I had reckoned that by heading steadily north, the ridge at Vermont would become visible a few miles beyond Belpham cemetery on the extreme outskirts of that town. From then on the ground rose gradually for miles to the fringes of Vermont, the ridge itself lying high above the town and well beyond it. As it was, I had travelled several miles and was now plunging steeply down into increasingly dense thickets of vegetation. If I were to reach Vermont before nightfall, I had somehow to ascertain my position and revert to the proper course, or abandon the venture. The idea of floundering nocturnally in such a morass alarmed me, and I began retracing my steps. For some time I beat about without gaining higher ground, and a sense of panic seized me. The light was failing fast and I was becoming hopelessly confused and exhausted. Add to which the fact that the place seemed suddenly instinct with malevolent life. I paused for breath, and as I did so, I became conscious of a disturbance in the undergrowth nearby. What I saw to my left, between two enormous fungoidal growths which flourished close to each other, rooted me to the one firm strip of land that seemed to exist for miles around.

Literally cradled in the quivering tentacles of one of the plants was a woman's body, alive and exulting in the viscous embrace of her floral lover. Supported by a green-blotched stunted arm bristling with pilose spikes, her body hung between the plants while one of the fleshy tentacles caressed the length of her in a revolting simulation of amorous play.

The spectacle was so utterly unnatural and so incongruous in that desolate miasma that it took considerable time for it to register upon my mind. So intense was my absorption, so fascinated by its sheer vileness, that the sound which had first drawn my attention to it only then reasserted itself. This was the cooing sound which the woman emitted as her lover drew

her closer to its vegetal anatomy. And behind this obscenely lilting murmur I detected the rhythmical beating of drums, exceedingly penetrant, but of so low a pitch that I sensed rather than heard the vibrations, much as Redskins sense the approach of distant horses. When I succeeded in releasing myself from the thrall of the scene I remained motionless and surprisingly cool-headed. Now that the initial shock had passed, my senses were alert for some sign of animal life. Any animal, I thought, would have been preferable to the abnormalities which surrounded me.

But another shock was in store for me. Drawn, as by a magnet, to the coupling which proceeded unconcernedly before me, and in trying to blot out the image of the creature whose nature defied analysis, I had fixed my gaze on the woman's face. Wreathed as it was in a lewd grimace, I nonetheless recognized the features of the woman who had glanced up at my window on the night of Gail's visit.

8

With the fact that I had lost my way in a physical sense came the worse realisation that I had somehow strayed entirely from regions of normal mundane event. Some inexplicable and occult process had resulted in an alarming *perichoresis*. I knew where I was, for I recognized the grotto, and I struggled to view my situation as soberly as the facts permitted. This was not the Grotto Club on Frall Street; that were indeed a dream. No! Surrounding me, here, was the reality of which the Club was the delusive projection into the present of

the grotto that existed before time had begun to be measured. I began to see, now, that the club on Frall Street, built of bricks and mortar, so near in physical space to the scene of my present experience, was as the outer garment or body to this, its soul; that it peopled its clearly defined spaces, its rooms and its dance-floor, with creatures as unlike the human beings that gathered there, as the bricks and mortar were unlike these monstrous plants of the primordial swamp.

Concomitant upon this conviction, I became aware of another sound. It resembled a shrill laughter which, I supposed, issued from the violated woman. It rose and fell, steadied itself, rose again, then faded away in a series of piercing chuckles. I stared about me, but there was no sign of life apart from the revolting congress I have just described. The hell-shriek was repeated. Shaking violently, convulsively, I realised that the laughter came from my own lips. It was then that I experienced difficulty in turning my head, in looking right, left, or rearward, without first slewing round my whole body. I stared down at myself and found I had no hands; protruding from my arms were dark claw-like appendages. Consciousness became muffled, obscured, as I fell headlong through rifts in the morass, and hurtled back through aeons of time reflected on the surfaces of thin vapours which wreathed into forms I had seen before, and recently, in a cracked mirror in the room off Crayley Way. And then I saw – the Others.

At first I took them to be wolves or jackals. The darkness would have been absolute but for a phosphorescence which shimmered over the swamp, eerily outlining the contours of vegetation. By its light I saw not wolves or jackals, but vague resemblances to long extinct species of hyaena. And in a shadowy but parallel vision I recognized them as frequenters of the Grotto Club. This realisation seemed not as incredible as that I myself loped swiftly and surely over the quagmire, bent on attending some nameless sabbath.

The cacophony which destroyed the uncanny silence of the swamp, unsealed within me latent cells of vitality. A savage exultancy swept through me, for I knew that the woman was becoming one of Us, re-membering again her primal form, assuming again the furry pelt, the cravings of the Pit, atavisms dormant in all forms of matter until the *Bultu* drums release them. I cursed Troyle and his insane meddling with the Black Arts.

The woman swayed, slipped, slithered on the green slime of the plant's flesh, her body convulsed as by an electric current. A slow infusion of sap suffused her flesh, which glowed with a greenish radiation. It was ghastly to witness that inoculation with the venom of "Hell's own worm".

What link existed between the prowling hyaena and the noxious flora, I could not guess; what black horrors of transubstantiation were being enacted, I did not know. I know only that a devil introduced its sperm within that tenement of flesh and bone which now appeared to dissolve as its paroxysms increased. With each shuddering spasm the woman changed before my eyes. From the dusky hue of her once-human form she turned to pitch, then her limbs shrank and crenellated, became sericeous. The transformation of the face was beyond description. Mercifully for me a pair of large sapphire eyes intercepted my vision, and Zila was gazing at me impudently! Perhaps it was because I knew her that I could not accept the hideous process of protoplasmic reversion that was being effected, insidiously, in the three of us. To me, Zila still appeared as a woman, still infinitely desirable, in a brightly striped pelt which bristled from her back and shoulders, like those priestesses of dark unhallowed rites who, in ancient times, assumed the animal hides of their totems, endowing themselves thereby with the superhuman potencies of Beasts.

"Where is Gail?", I cried impulsively.

It was not a cry in the usual sense of the word; it was a savage

knife-stab clicking-sound such as preceded human speech. But Zila understood, and her face contorted with a spasm of rage. The next moment her breasts seemed to fold in upon themselves as the hide enveloped her completely. I was confronted with a ferocious beast, snarling and rampant. Miraculously, there burned within it the essence of the woman that had been but a moment earlier. And in the truer hides and hidings of our far flung ancestral atavisms, we came together. She reared up hindwards, and in the violence of our explosive impact, all human consciousness faded; the mind slipped, reeled, unhinged itself, as we participated once again in forgotten ecstasies.

9

On regaining a sense of the present, I found myself in darkness in a confined space redolent of patchouli and the fumes of clairin. A slowly rhythmic breathing filled the space with sound. I was sprawled on a bed with Zila beside me. I switched on the lamp, scarce daring to look at the hand which performed the action, slipped from the bed, and left the room. As I stepped over the threshold, Zila stirred slightly and the light swam over the mounds of her haunches, jutting like ebony moons above the snow of the sheets. I closed the door very quietly. A sickly radiance billowed through the fanlight, and two reddish stars in the distance glittered like eyes peering in as I stared out of that infernal house.

When I returned I found Zila awake and smoking; her long fingers closed round the cheroot with a curiously simian grace. I noticed the reek of dank clayey stickiness that still clung to

them, and I knew now what it was, for I had just washed away all traces of the substance from my own hands – and feet.

She lay back languidly on the pillows, naked and provocative. But I was determined to know what was transpiring in this house that threatened not only my sanity but my continued existence as a human entity. Zila smiled mockingly. The overpowering glamour, which she was always able to project, incensed me. Just outside the circle of light lay a dark cylindrical object in an oblong box. Something about it fascinated me. I leaned over and picked it up. To my surprise it was exceedingly heavy and appeared to be made of ebony, richly carved with twining serpents that gave to its otherwise smooth surface a slightly nodulous texture.

The smile deserted Zila's lips.

"Put it down!"

"What is it?" I asked, genuinely interested.

She hesitated before replying, and her eyelids fluttered down fanwise, not quite closing her eyes but leaving two crescents of white. She resembled a barbaric idol lost in the contemplation of mysterious beatitudes.

"It is called a snakewand", she said.

I detected a tremor in her voice and sensed an attitude of watchfulness, but my senses warned me too late to save me from what followed.

"It belonged to de Baron; it can change suddenly into a deadly snake... and strike!"

Her voice rose from a mere whisper to a sudden shriek.

I clutched the thing in both hands with the purpose of bludgeoning her to death. I struck with all my force, but lithe as a panther she rolled off the bed. The snakewand fell with a thud into

the declivity of the pillow which her head had just vacated. I regained my balance instantly, but as I turned she sprang upon me with the speed of lightning and I went down beneath her. She was cool and controlled, though her eyes smouldered dangerously and reddened like a beast's, as she pinned me to the floor by squatting on my chest and placing her feet on my arms. I lay breathless for some moments, playing for time, gathering strength to break loose. I soon realised that she was equipped with more than a knowledge of sorcery. She sneered and applied with her heels a gentle pressure to my armpits. The movement ground the soles of her feet more deeply into me until the pain became excruciating. Then, having paralysed me, she relaxed and fell forward as if she would dive through the floor beyond my head. As she did so her legs fanned out and drew themselves upward, as in swimming, so that when her body descended, her abrupt reversal from violence to desire aroused me instantly.

The next thing I knew was that she was forcing a bottle between my lips. I gulped down stinging clairin, stared about me in bewilderment, still as far from the secret as ever, and too exhausted to care. She seemed to have forgotten or forgiven my attempt to murder her, and lay beside me gazing at the ceiling with an expression of sheer vacuity in her incredible eyes. As usual, her all-compelling magnetism enthralled me, but even she had been unable to banish my anxieties. I wanted to know what had happened to Gail; what had happened in the grotto; and, above all, what had become of the drums. I believed that if they were destroyed, this madness would leave Belpham, and this damnable house would be stripped of its powers.

I knew that Gail had gone, but I was determined to discover what Zila knew. My experience in the grotto was due, I supposed, to excessive heat, fatigue, and the effects of malodorous gases. I refused to credit the affair of the woman and the plant; as for hyaena...

I stole a furtive glance at Zila. She lay crooning and drooling

like an imbecile. It occurred to me that when she loved like that she was some other person, or perhaps...

I sat up with a start. I knew now. She was possessed by an evil *loa*, by some powerful spirit she called the Baron, which she was able to invoke at will. Or was she, too, subject to fits of possession and involuntary transformation?

I remembered some of the things Gail had told me the evening she had hindered my pursuit of the woman bound for Vermont. The Baron was known by many names by every black that had ever come out of Africa, no matter where he had finally settled. Baron Samedhi, or Cimitière, Doctor Saturday, or Seth; no matter what the name, he was an occult phenomenon, revered and dreaded alike. He was the embodiment of all witchcraft and evil sorcery. He stood at the crossroads of people's lives in both a physical and a metaphysical sense, for at the crossroads are performed, even today – as I was beginning to realise – the rites requiring his infernal sanction.

Gail told me that Zila had met a human embodiment of the Baron in South America; had been his mistress and apprentice, and that he had begun to initiate her into the mysteries of the most ancient craft. Whether in the dreaded rites of the African *Ogboni*, or in the Voodoo practices of the West Indian *Zangbeto* and *Zobop* Cults, the Baron as chief of the *loa*, or spirits of Power, must first be invoked. This particular embodiment, to whom Zila had unconditionally submitted, had died a sudden and mysterious death and, according to Gail, his astral shade haunted the atmosphere in various bestial forms.

I had scoffed at Gail's story, content to lie beside her, fondling the strands of auburn hair which surmounted her unusually pale face. But here in Zila's room, lying beside one whom I knew to be possessed of superhuman cunning and knowledge, I began to accept the possibility, at least, of there being a grain of fact in the fantastic tale I had heard.

I knew from hearsay, and from the accounts of certain travellers, of the existence of dark cults such as the *Zobop* and the *Zamradiel*. After death, their votaries are believed to continue existing in a weird half-life, in the shapes of werewolves, vampires and other occult entities. Such legends, I suspected, were fabricated to intimidate and terrorize the simple minds upon which they were intended to work, nearly always for temporal gain. But there were more hideous cults with aims less obvious; I had heard of strange trances and magnetic sleeps wherein...

My cogitations were short lived. Zila moaned and twisted beside me, her eyes bulging horribly. Was it the onset of some sort of fit, epileptic perhaps, or worse? I heard a soft rustling, not unlike that of dry leaves scattered by a breeze. In the gloom beyond the lamp's range I saw an ebony box which had, no doubt, fallen from the table during our recent struggle. The sound came from that direction. A sibilant susurrations, resembling the hissing of a gas-jet, replaced the rustling, and it seemed to issue from the foot of the bed. A few inches above the rail, swaying slowly from side to side, I saw a black snake. Its tongue flickered, a brilliant pink against the shadows beyond, and then it slid on to the bed and rippled along the sheet between Zila's parted feet.

My gaze was rivetted to the creeping horror that was flowing over the bedrail, yet I was fully aware also of the woman beside me. She was still crooning softly, dreamily, coaxing the thing with a lascivious lullaby; and although the words were in an unfamiliar tongue, I knew their meaning. She was calling it by endearing epithets which, under the circumstances, were so utterly hideous that they roused within me dim memories which lay just outside the threshold of consciousness. I should say of *human* consciousness, for something else within me responded. I knew instinctively that she was inviting the reptile to feed.

Of the spectacle that followed I remember each detail. The creature slithered towards Zila and mounted one of her legs, its black body blending with her own. All that could be seen of it was a flash of pink lightning as its tongue flickered, and the beady brilliance of its eyes. Then it wormed its flattened head into Zila's cleft.

I tore away my gaze as the woman squirmed beside me, her mouth frothing and venting unutterable obscenities. I looked around the room, searching vainly for the snakewand; it was nowhere to be seen.

Before the significance of the fact registered with full force, my attention was drawn once more to Zila. She lay motionless now, though a subtle suggestion of movement remained, as if an electric current were passing through her body. Her mouth was open, her eyes were glazed. I had once seen a mesmerized person enter a magnetic sleep and exhibit similar symptoms of absenting consciousness. The muscles at the corners of her mouth began to twitch violently, and I saw the reptile withdraw its head and glide slowly over the mound of her belly.

My only hope lay in the fact that the creature appeared totally oblivious of my presence. When its head emerged from the valley of Zila's breasts, it ceased all movement, poised as if carved in wood, of which substance I swear it had been made when so ineffectually wielded by me. But there was no doubt that I had awakened it from its unnatural sleep.

I was now able to observe it closely. It differed from any reptile I had previously seen, although the variations may have been teratonic or peculiar solely to this particular species. I remembered the snakes I had seen – or thought I had seen – coiling about Gail's legs on that unforgettable night at the Grotto Club. Gail had related some fabulous account of a Hottentot snake known as the *Gabeb*, which was believed to have genitals and to have connection with women whilst they slept. She further told

me that the Fetish priests of Hwida held the serpent sacred because it was potent to induce a trance-like sleep. This had been achieved before my very eyes. I had seen enacted a form of magical congress almost as disturbing as the coupling of the woman with the swamp-plant. Here was the secret of the Pythonesses and of those mysterious Oracles of Samothrace, Delphi, Dodona and Thessaly. Zila's oracular fissure was the mouthpiece of a monstrous speech *simulating the human*, and intent on acquainting *me* with facts which I later verified. These concerned an initiation I had unsuspectingly undergone at the instigation of a diabolical spirit, a spirit that was now using Zila and the snakewand as vehicles of transmission.

The 'speech' began with tittering laughter followed by a hideous mimicry of the human voice, harsh and metallic, or like the buzzing of bees. But I was not listening to the words. I was conscious only of one appalling fact. The hyaena alone of mammals has power to simulate the speech of the human species. And it spoke to me from the living transmitter which lay beside me: no longer the human being I knew as Zila, but an abomination animated by the ophidian medium of blackest sorcery.

The thing was, strictly speaking, neither human nor animal, but a spectral manifestation imbued with perverted cravings. It fed like a vampire upon the essential oils of its victims. As the *Bultu*, or Spectral Hyaena, it slew and slaked its lust for blood, and as the *Gabeb* it drank the plasma of the victim's vitality mingled with the *menstruum* of the Priestess who had drained it off. The thing had fed upon my own seed, which Zila had received through the spells and sexual glamour she had cast over me. Circe to my swine, she possessed the secret of magical transformation and could truly change men into beasts.

The Baron drew from such as Zila a lingering half-life in regions unsuspected by ordinary people. Gail too had offered such a feast on the night of the drumming. On that night I had been infected for the first time; had become, unwittingly, one of a

devilish crew that would swell in number to include all Belpham if the madness spread, if the drums were not destroyed.

The idea became an obsession with me: the drums must be destroyed. And with the idea came the further realization that the drumming had persisted throughout the events I have just described. Not for one moment did the rhythm cease. It pervaded the room, the house, the mind, until consciousness exploded and gave birth to half-crazed abnormalities that were neither flesh nor spectre, black nor white, human nor beast, but hybrid horrors such as the ancients described in certain hidden and forbidden books.

I heard in the offbeat frenzy of the drums the audible manifestation of that Double Current, the ultimate symbol of which was the *Bultu*, the fabled monster sprung from an abominable miscegenation: the ravening jackal of the desert with the Ethiopian lioness. The hyaena, as totem, was symbolic of all half-lives, all twilight states, all crossed breeds and crossed roads: interweaving, seeping, coiling, worming its *neither-neither* sexuality into flesh, and stamping with the Mark of the Beast all those forms through which it satisfied its savage hungers. Wherever the *Bultu* drums were heard, there upsurged the primordial atavisms. Wherever a soul was caught in the meshes of their rhythms, no matter how distant or near in time or in space, it was compelled to attend the Sabbath where all its desires were fulfilled, and in return for which it was bound to infect by its crimes all other souls it encountered. Belpham was the centre of this pestilence, a hellish circle that would eventually encompass all other places as the pack swept forward on its nocturnal forays.

But if the drums were destroyed...

Gail had learned from Zila all she knew of these sorceries, and Gail in turn had told me enough to enable me to piece together the fragments of an odious history. This concerned the Baron and, as I was to discover, one who was locked with him in deadly combat for Cult supremacy.

I believed the drums to be at the root of the trouble, Gail's and my own. With Zila it was different. By surrendering unconditionally to the evil power that used her, she had passed beyond the bourne of humanity. Moreover, she proseletyzed ardently for the Cult and willingly seduced any and everybody marked down by the Baron. But the latter's immediate and most urgent aim was the spiritual annihilation of the Sorcerer who had deprived him of his earthly embodiment. Gail knew that the two in their struggle for supremacy might sweep back into Chaos the whole of humanity.

Again according to Gail, the cultists of the *Bultu* pass unrecognized in ordinary life, whereas the *Zobop* – an organization referred to openly in books on Voodoo – attend Sabbaths in some ways similar to those described by authorities on the more obscure phases of European and New England witchcraft. According to one such authority:⁴

Zobop commit their crimes at veritable sabbaths... They are guided to the assembly-place by the sharp rhythm of a small drum. This instrument has the peculiar quality of being audible to each member at a prodigious distance while remaining inaudible to passers-by even when they are quite close to a band of *zobop* lying in wait.

The drums which Troyle had sent had not spoken openly, but subtly, obliquely, in a muffled manner. They struck some chord of affinity and activated some occult mechanism of receptivity in

⁴ Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*.

prospective victims. Such responses, as in Gail's case and in my own, were often compelled by prior and involuntary surrender. Thus it was that the woman headed for Vermont was able to respond to a call inaudible to those without the cult.

In none of the more recondite books which I consulted did I find an open reference to the most abhorrent cult of all, that of the *Bultu*, or Spectral Hyaena. Gail was too fearful to tell me anything definite beyond the fact that the secret word used by its votaries epitomized the peculiar beat of the drums, and was a verb meaning "I transform myself into a hyaena". I did, however, later find reference to an ancient account of travel in mysterious places, and to the people of Kabultiloo, the "Place of the Spirit of the Hyaena". These folk, like the leopard-men of the infamous African society, donned the skins of their totem; but unlike the leopard-men, the *Bultu* cultists underwent an actual magical transformation.⁵ I discovered also that Kabultiloo was the region from which the sentient swamp-plant derived. I had seen the plant reflected in the mist of methane, which acted as a conveyor of hallucinogenic images; and although not immediately present to the senses, the plant actually existed, far away, at the nerve-vortex of malign influences such as were now pouring into Belpham.

As I have said, the plant was not a figment of imagination, although my interpretation of it may have been. In a vastly remote antiquity, and perhaps on the site of the wasteland beyond Belpham, peculiarities of terrain promoted the growth of a type of flora about which the ancients appear to have known more than present-day botanists. References occur in the old *grimoires* to unguents compounded of the sap and bark of certain plants, shrubs and trees. One salve in particular is associated with the transvection of witches to sabbatic trysting places, whilst others induce magnetic sleeps and transformation of identity.

⁵ The reader interested in this Cult will find more about it in the author's novel, *The Darker Strain*.

Amongst the equipment of African *bokors*, or witchdoctors, are little sachets containing pastes or fluids which are almost always trance-inducing and possessed of the power to change consciousness. They differ from unguents with which patients and victims are treated, being used to transform the sorcerer himself into the image of his totem, or into the semblance of some beast. The *bouda* of Ethiopia, the home of the blackest magic of antiquity, had the power at sundown of turning himself into a hyaena and of resuming his human shape at dawn. The change was facilitated by a decoction of herbs, and belief in such infusions is common from the Sudan to Tanganyika. The Moroccan *Berbers* record instances of human beings who are nocturnally active in the form of these beasts, and who cannot be shot dead.

The woman embraced by the fungus was energising it by applying its tentacles to those centres of her body which, when stimulated in a special manner, respond to the occult radiations exuded by the plant. The swamp beyond Belpham emanated a sickly and noxious odour caused by a combination of methane and the exudations of the rank vegetation which flourished there. The fumes were so overpowering that I succumbed to the hallucinations already described. But it is almost impossible for me to sift the products of fancy from latent and ancient memories of the swamp itself, memories reified by the fumes which somehow reactivated the Inner Eye, that atavistic and occult organ of pre-human vision that is now atrophied in humanity at large. One thing is certain, however: I had experienced a transmogrification into loathliness beyond all imagination. As I lay beside Zila I tried to ascertain, quite calmly, if she were changing physically as I imagined I had changed on previous occasions. She lay exactly as the Voice had left her. How it had gone, or where; indeed, how it had ever come, remained a mystery. Yet I had seen the snakewand wind into her, and it brought to mind words which Troyle had once

quoted on the few occasions I had met him:

The obeah and the wanga; the work of the wand and the work of the sword; these he shall learn and teach.

They were spoken originally to Aleister Crowley, the notorious occultist, by a non-human entity known as the Great Beast which occasionally used him as a transmitter. One of the transmissions came to be known as the *Book of the Law* which Troyle, in Voodoo terms, referred to as the *Book of the Loa*. Troyle, who had at one time been a high-ranking member of Crowley's infamous O.T.O., was himself an enigmatic personality. He was massive, mentally and bodily, and possessed of implacable will. He was also deeply versed in matters relating to the darker manifestations of life and death, and I wished now that I had paid more attention to his words. My sole interest at the time had been drums and drumming. I was regarded as something of an authority, and, full of *hybris*, disdained to lend an ear to what I then considered rank superstition. Now I was determined to see him again.

"What you say jes now, honey?"

Zila's voice startled me. It had resumed its natural lazy drawl and the sonorous *timbre* told me that it was Zila who spoke, not another. But it was not pleasant to think that but a few minutes earlier an alien and malignant will had animated her body. I repeated the quotations and when I reached the word *sword*, Zila sat up.

"You know, honey, what dat means?"

"What *what* means?", I asked, surprised that she should pick on that particular word. Had she been oblivious of the thing she had temporarily housed?

"Sword", she said sharply.

"I don't know what you mean. A sword's a sword. Yes, of

course I know what it means".

"You know nothing", she spat at me. "Appearances are phoney. After all this..."

She flung her arm upward and outward as if to include the room and all beyond it in one comprehensive gesture: "And yet you still say sword is sword! You have seen something of 'the work of the wand', she went on in a calm, modulated tone, like a teacher patiently tutoring a fractious infant.

"I don't believe anything I see, especially when I'm with you", I said.

She put her arms round me. I looked down at her. Her splendid body lied; I knew that a beast of hell indwelt it; yet how the senses delude us! I blinked my eyes. Surely the whole thing had been a nightmare.

She kissed me pettishly. I noticed the dark stone about her neck. It was a shrivelled, blackened thing, no longer bright and gleaming as I had sometimes seen it. She fingered it warily, but said nothing. Later, I was to see a box full of such stones in an unpolished and unprepared state, for the gem with which she toyed was the eyeball of a hyaena, treated in a manner which gave to its wearer not only the power of transforming astrally into the likeness of that beast, but of warding off attacks of hostile sorcerers. I saw it now as it really was: a thing of loathsome corruption. The warmth of her fingers, communicated to its dull surface, caused it to sweat a little until it became glazed with a sheen that brought out the lambent green fire hidden in its blackness. It gleamed in the lamplight and flashed green darts into the darkness which enveloped the rest of the room. Then, in its depths I sensed a movement, a slow pulsing, as of a heart; a slow winking, as of an eye; a slow unfolding, as when Zila uncoiled her limbs and rose with undulant grace. In the spell which it cast over me I saw revealed the arcane significance of the 'sword'.

I saw in the stone a flashing scimitar curve whitely through a black sky, like a wheeling moon gone mad. The image dissolved in a rain of stars which stabilised finally in a constellation resembling *Ursa Major*, the constellation known anciently as 'the thigh'. Then the stars were extinguished and a green scorpion appeared, its tail shaped like the constellation, and suggesting an identity between the tail, the thigh, and the sword or scimitar. The interchangeability of these symbols was thus confirmed in an unequivocal manner.

The scorpion vanished and a labouring woman appeared in the depth of the stone. Followed an enactment of the primal and basic division accomplished by the woman – the living prototype of the sword – the divider of one into two, as mother and child. And as if to confirm the ultimate identity of all these symbols, the one with another, the scimitar again appeared. It was static this time and in a shape often represented in the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. The sword was, in fact, a form of the Wand of Great Magic Power used by the priests of old Egypt.

I understood from all this that "the work of the wand" concerned the masculine, positive element in the magic of transformation, whilst that of the sword referred to the work of the woman, the priestess, wherein the Great Magical Power ultimately reposed.

The vision reminded me of a design I had seen in a modern recension of *The Book of Thoth*: the figure of a woman poised on tip-toe and clasping the phallic-shaped shaft of a large sword, as if illustrating another phrase of the *grimoire* beloved of Troyle: "Let the woman be girt with a sword before me". This design now materialised mistily within the stone.

According to occult lore, the primal power was sexual; and

because the female was the first divider-into-two, the first transformer of the One into the Many, the sword became a symbol of her Great Magic Power.

I have recorded these impressions in detail because it shows how some of my problems were solved. Ever since Troyle had quoted the phrase, I had often pondered the meaning of "the work of the wand", but had not suspected anything occult in the reference to the sword, though the words as they stood made no particular sense to me. And I now understood the phrase about the woman girt with a sword *before* me, because of the female's chronological priority as the original wielder of magical power.

I was reminded of a passage in a work on Simon Magus, by Hippolytus⁶, which I later re-read and which I here transcribe;

There is an incorruptible essence potentially present in every human being... It is the very ground of existence, the procreative urge, which is of fiery origin. Fire is related to blood, which is fashioned warm and ruddy like fire. Blood turns into semen in men, and in women into milk. This 'turning' is interpreted as "the flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life. The tree of life is guarded by the turning, or transforming, sword. If the flaming sword turned not, then would that fair tree be destroyed, and perish utterly; but if it turneth into semen and milk, and there be added the Logos and the place of the Lord where the Logos is begotten, he who dwelleth potentially in the semen and milk shall grow to full stature from the littlest spark, and shall increase and become a power boundless and immutable, like to an unchanging Aeon". Simon's description of the creative essence, the true arcane substance, corresponds in every detail to the *uroboros* or mercurial serpent of the alchemists... It begets and sacrifices itself and is its own instrument of sacrifice... One of its symbols is the scorpion, which stings itself to death.

Perhaps I make too much of nebulous phantoms, projecting

⁶ Hippolytus, *Elenchos*.

them into hallucinations which objectified themselves in the stone as vague shadows of subconscious atavisms. Yet the power of these spectral impressions was such as to burst into actuality within a few seconds of my seeing the visions themselves.

I noticed a darkening in the stone, as if a lamp were being extinguished. The image faded and a void of darkness encroached upon it with tongues of black flame.

My attention wavered; I was brought sharply to my outer senses. The stone, like a black spider, appeared to leave its nest in the declivity at Zila's throat, and crawl slowly towards the channel of her breasts. Or perhaps the illusion of movement was caused by something which occurred within the talisman itself. What I had mistaken for the legs of a spider were tongues of black fire now exploding from the stone like flowers of darkness and billowing along the body of the woman beside me. Followed an acrid stench of burning flesh. I swung off the bed in a panic and my head hit something very hard, so that my last impression was of being whirled down an endless funnel to the accompaniment of a deafening wail. When I came to my senses again I was in the midst of pandemonium.

12

Sylvestre Steem, strolling leisurely along Brotton Street, was suddenly aware of commotion. Shrill cries were fluting the heavy air which somnolently smothered Belpham in blankets of heat. He hurried on, and turning a corner, saw figures flying to and fro. He turned another corner and entered Frall Street.

Ugly black clouds, sparsely shot with saffron tongues of fire, bloomed from a tall and narrow house that was vaguely familiar to him. He stood motionless, rooted to the spot. Wild figures and cries floated past him and mingled with the clouds of smoke. The inhabitants of the street were pouring from doorways, gapping from windows, clambering over railings. A clamour of shouting, coughing, and retching surged all about him. He realised he was unpleasantly close, that when the walls bulged outward he risked simultaneous burial and cremation.

Through a rift in the smoke he saw an open window and a terrified face peering out; then a pair of legs swung on to the window-ledge. Rising unsteadily to her feet and flattened against the window-frame behind her, a woman swayed dizzily for a fleeting moment, then pitched forward and was lost in billows of smoke. A blood-freezing scream shot up and the crowd scattered all ways in an endeavour to get clear.

Steem was not a strong man, nor was he possessed of exceptional courage, but unlike those around him he took stock of the conflagration and wondered why so little flame accompanied so vast a volume of smoke. Like a fog it was patchy in places, and with a coolness that surprised him he ran up the uneven flight of steps to the door which stood slightly ajar. Inside the house he choked and spluttered. A crowd of girls gibbered and clamoured down the staircase as Steem groped his way towards Zila's room. Streamers of furling smoke puffed and belched on all sides, writhing along the floor in waves which mounted the staircase in suffocating coils. A low-pitched vibration seemed to well from within the room as half-naked girls, awakened from sleep or whoring, poured past him.

Steem found difficulty in pushing open the door, half choked as he was, but as yet he had encountered no flames within the house itself. He noticed the swift blackening of everything touched by the smoke as it ran along the walls, the floor, the lintels. He glanced behind him and saw that it filled the entire extent of the hallway,

twisting inward like a gigantic talon clenching and unclenching before the soot-darkened fanlight.

Zila, crouching low on the bed, gazed into Steem's eyes as he entered the room. The sapphire skies were bloodshot and bulging; the woman's whole body was bloated. He saw the smoke caper along the window-frames in thin powerful rivulets which met oncoming currents flowing from the opposite side of the room, and enclosing them both in a circle of sweltering fog.

Steem swayed. The fumes all but suffocated him as he dragged Zila from the bed and through the fetid swamp, the swirling black gases of which engendered fantastic hallucinations. She screamed, struggled, kicked, bit. She pointed behind her into the depths of the room, which was but a smoke-filled jungle.

Fire-extinguishers were playing upon the house thick jets of foam. The dead woman in the area, her shroud a flowered petticoat, was the first object that met Steem's gaze on emerging from the hall. He fell down the steps and Zila's body thumped and bumped down after him.

I found myself in an unfamiliar place, quite unaware of how I had arrived. Perhaps I was dreaming a charred and blackened dream, or the very Spectre of Corruption had appeared before me. My surroundings may have been formed indifferently of drifting smoke, tangled seaweed, or unctuous slime, for everything appeared in shadow. The spectre's smile was smoke, lazily coiling with elastic ease into features which writhed on a

host of noisome faces. And scores of eyes glared out of the mist. They had rolled from a burnt-out box, and I remembered Zila's talisman. Prone upon the floor, I stared stupidly at her store of uncut gems. A loathing, more intense than that evoked in me by the phantoms of the smoke, now seized me. Although I have said I was prone upon the floor, the statement requires correction. My body indeed lay there, a dead and blackened thing, its eyeballs staring fixedly at the eyeballs of dead hyaenas, which Zila in her madness used as magic charms. Yet was she mad? I recalled her quoting some ancient account of this beast:

...in quantity of body like a wolf, but much rougher haired, for it hath bristles like a horse's mane all along his back, and the middle of his backe is a little crooked or dented, the colour yellowish, but bespeckled on the sides with blew spots, which make him looke more terribly as if it had been so many eies. The eies change their colour at the pleasure of the beast, a thousand times a day, for which cause many ignorant writers have affirmed the same of the whole body, yet can he see not one quarter so perfectly in the day as in the night; and therefore he is called *lupus vespertinus* a wolfe of the night. The skilful *Lapidarists* of Germany affirme that this beast hath a stone in his eies called *Hyaena* or *Hyaenius*; but the ancients say that the apple or puple of the eie is turned into such a stone, and that it is imbued with this admirable quality, that if a man lay it under his tong, he shall be able to foretell and prophesie of things to come, and if a man lay it under his member, he shall breed a monster of such power as shall dominate the worlds. Their backbone stretcheth itself out to the head, so as the necke cannot bend except the whole body be turned about, and therefore whensoever he hath occasion to wry his neck, he must supply that quality by removing of his whole bodie⁷.

I turned away from the eyes although my body lay still and

⁷ Quoted in *The Elizabethan Zoo* (London, 1926; Etchells & Macdonald).

stared at them. And the eyes glared back. It took time and an unconscionably immense effort to understand that the eyeballs in my body were as dead as those that had rolled like a child's marbles across the furry ashes of a carpet scorched to cinders. To my surprise I found that I could move with ease. Everywhere, blackness, silence, night; and yet I could see the forms I am describing although no apparent light existed to reveal them.

A lugubrious object presented itself; a cake of blood had painted with its dark pigment the heavy piece of furniture against which I had smashed my head when the black fire came. Lying near it in a deeper gulf of darkness lay the shining black snakewand, the rigid penis of a dead priest embalmed by Zila's infernal art. A silvery exudation, like the wake of a snail, wound an astral stain upon the nigrescent floor. Bedclothes dangled; limp, ectoplasmic arms not terminating in hands yet grasping ineffectually at the snakewand, impotently laving it, their astral movements generating a barely perceptible stress in the atmosphere, which actually stirred the charred flakes of crumpled bedding.

As for myself: I had separated finally from the body on the floor. It did not at the time occur to me to imagine that I tenanted any particular body. It was too dark to notice details, and my attention was so distracted by my surroundings that I omitted entirely to question the terms of my own existence. I knew merely that, somehow, somewhere, I was, I existed with consciousness of an immediate environment, although I was not quite clear as to how, or why, I was where I was. The sensation, although dream-like, was not in any way vague; it was as vivid as a waking experience. Its singularity lay perhaps in the paradox of being able quite distinctly to see objects in utter blackness. And the fact that I was slowly rising in the air, or on the air, borne aloft as by a zephyr, did not astonish me. The scenery was too fascinating, too absorbing. I was in the tall burnt-out house on Frall Street, surrounded by hunks of charred flesh,

nigrescent furniture, flame-seared metal and flapping window-frames. And yet, from the oleaginous flooring of the basement to the scorched under-tilings of the roof, sprung the trunks of leprous trees which towered above me, alive with the febrile activity of jungle life.

As the simile of the jungle suggested itself, I knew again without the least trace of surprise that two distinct geographical locations had in some obscure manner amalgamated, and that I occupied both the grotto and the house simultaneously; and the grotto *was* the house.

I have mentioned two distinct geographical locations, but the moment I had this thought I knew that three, possibly four or even more such locations were involved.

It was at this stage of my cogitations that I found myself *en route* for Belpham Cemetery, and I arrived at my present situation by being squeezed through the shattered and fire-stained glass of the fanlight.

Idrifted northward, recognized Brotton Street, and like a wisp of smoke unfurled back along Crayley Way and over the footbridge leading to my former lodgings. Habit compelled me; habit and a certain curiosity which, oddly enough, was stimulated by a fear of falling from the footbridge. Below it, the oily black water – sole indication in Belpham of the swamp which lay beyond – bubbled and heaved as if agitated by a shapeless horror pocked by a multitude of suppurating orifices. Although the bridge was firm and solid enough to seem actual, it tended

to deliquesce beneath my tread.

It was not until I ascended the stairs to my rooms that I remembered Gail, and although for a time this extinguished my fears it presented more immediate problems.

I do not know how the idea of Belpham Cemetery suggested itself to me. Perhaps it was my recollection of the evening on which Gail had called to find me in pursuit of an unknown woman. And then, the drums! The whole nightmare was returning with the sound of the drums; caressingly soft at first, then driving the blood through my veins like a river in full spate.

The mirror into which I had gazed as Gail lay on the bed, arrested my attention, and there was now no tobacco smoke to form a basis for the image it reflected. Something indescribably ancient and alien stared back at me, and a sound like the sound of drumming burst from me. But it was not drumming, it was the single word *Bultungin* many times repeated. The transformation was complete, except that some fragmentary particle of consciousness lingered outside the metamorphosis. As a passive spectator it could but witness the antics of a creature for which it had no name, and a nature reeking of the Pit.

I returned some distance along Crayley Way, then sloped off in the direction of Vermont, as the woman had done before me. At Belpham Cemetery I halted. Although it was night-time by mundane reckoning, I could see clearly – as those of my kind can see – and I had the keenest sense of smell to guide me.

Being a beast of blood, I was aware of it then. Or had I scented it from afar, from beyond Crayley Way, right back on Frall Street? Perhaps the power of it had somehow drawn me through the fanlight. It was fresh blood; a small quantity only, mingled with newly-turned mould redolent of swamp-weed. I made a scrabbling sound, as of rodents worrying the earth, as I clawed at massive blocks of masonry. A bleached pediment, surmounted by a shattered urn pouring lilies of stone from its

lip, swayed and toppled earthward with a thud. Roots of strangling bistort had secured it to the plinth of a small crypt, sheltered from the sun in daytime by the out-jutting post of a door set in the side of Belpham's miniature chapel. A steep flight of steps was negotiated in a single leap. Dank aromas and spreading stains, caused by the incursion within the vault of creeping vines interlaced with noxious fungi, temporarily obliterated the bouquet of blood and freshly turned loam.

The place could have been entered with ease, had I known it, without disturbing a single stone. A sloping shaft, which filtered a glaucous light from the interior of the chapel, plumbed the vault at a point near the foot of the steps. At one spring, a crouching beast could have launched itself into the vault. Indeed, I noticed that some such entry had already occurred. Clawmarks in the dust betrayed a recent visitation.

An abnormal hunger, and the urgent realisation that Gail was here, and in danger, contended within me. Wraiths of the recently entombed, bewildered and confused me; few of them had human shapes, though only such were buried at Belpham. But the shades did not interest me; it was the actual physical blood that called, and within my brain the drums gave voice to a need that had become imperious. I was leaping about the vault as if dancing to the rhythms. I thought of Steem, and laughed at the insane nature of our little experiment with the *Petro* invocation, and at his cursed acquaintance, Troyle. The chain of ideas snapped suddenly beneath the impact of a new impression. I had penetrated more deeply into the crypt and found that further progress was impeded by a mass of putrescent ectoplasm, which trembled like a veil across the entrance to a low-arched alcove in which rested a shattered cask. Half in, half out, lay Gail, with serpents painted on her legs. Her auburn hair fanned out behind her, like a metal halo glinting richly in the dull grey light which saturated the place. An unexpected noise startled me and I turned to see the plasmic cur-

tain quiver slightly, as if about to sweep back.

And then all hell broke loose...

15

Breaking as it did upon the total silence, its abrupt onset stunned me. The scurrying of a myriad unshod feet formed a constant background to shrill peals of laughter, a cacophony resembling a cascade of glass, of ice, of metal, a literal avalanche of frenzy. It was as if ice screeched on glass, or as if high-pitched metals strove with each other, glass for shrillness, and ice for the power it possessed of freezing the soul.

I hung, dismal and helpless, watching the spectral figures flying about me. Separately, or in an amorphous mass, they swept round the crypt. When any part of the living chain approached the stone staircase it vanished into the shaft nearby as if sucked into a vortex. Yet not all the whirling matter disappeared. I noticed isolated elements re-coagulating as they were flung to the ground after the suction failed to absorb them.

Whilst observing all this, I recognized one of the elements. It was the shade of a youth whom I had often passed on the streets of Belpham. He had died recently, yet his shade was not human in shape. I have already remarked such a discrepancy in connection with other wraiths, but the horror of it dawned on me as I watched the particles coalesce and assume the form of a hyaena! Zila must have infected half the population of Belpham with the virus of her whoredoms. It was unbelievable that a single brothel on Frall Street had radiated the full force of the invasion.

As these ideas took form I became aware that the laughter had given way to a plangent and lugubrious chanting, accom-

panied by the beat of drums. My pulse quickened; a strange elation seized me, swept through me, shook me like a leaf in a gale. I instantly recognized the *timbre*. *The drums were still in Belpham!* And before me, rending the ectoplasmic veil with a single sweep of its claws, was a creature that directed upon me its malevolent gaze: eyes of intense unsullied sapphire, with a fury in their depths only matched by the astonishment which this unexpected apparition induced in me.

Snarling and shrieking, while the ectoplasmic caul shivered between us, we closed. The impact made us both reel backwards, only to clash head-on again a moment later. A wailing breeze was moaning from the shaft, and the next instant – reversing its current – an even greater suctional pressure was exerted from above. The breeze became a wind which mounted to a whirling tornado. Zila and I slid and tripped over the rock-strewn ground. Flattened against a massive block of masonry, we narrowly missed being swept into the tunnel.

Crouched low on the ground, her belly slashed by the jagged stones, the tips only of her spiked spine stirred in the wind that rushed above her. She drove against the current and sprang upon Gail's body. The pallor of the girl's limbs glistened against the hirsute form of her assailant, and I could see that Zila's form was cloudy and dense in some places, transparent in others. She vainly strove with the materiality of Gail's body. Pausing for a moment, a foam of froth drooling from her ugly maw, Zila looked back as if she in turn feared assault from me.

Splayed against the wall of the vault I remained motionless. It occurred to me then to go to Gail's assistance, but the force of the current made any movement on my part out of the question. I had not Zila's cunning, or her knowledge of these conditions, nor was I yet acclimatized to this lower and darker manifestation of consciousness which resembled twilight, as it vacillated between unremembered atavisms and human identities recently lost or unknowable. Yet I suspected that Gail was

'actual', was still incarnate, but whether dead or unconscious I could not decide.

A further disturbance then occurred. The throbbing of the drums vibrated through the crypt again. Again I recognized the *timbre*, and again came the associative thought: the drums are here in Belpham chapel. The intricate *bultu* rhythms were swamping the last vestigial sense of my identity, the ultimate and yet remaining residual awareness. I struggled towards the light of normal consciousness, but that was all over and past. In a chaos of delusions I fought to accept the fact that I was dead, and yet I lived; not as a spectral replica of my former self, but locked in some crazy beast's mind that had taken hold of astral substance and projected its innate shape as a visible, perhaps a tangible, body. Before slipping over the brink of the abyss I witnessed yet another stage in the transmutation of values.

The serpents painted on Gail once more assumed a life of their own, as they had done at the Grotto Club when she performed her lascivious dance. They now responded to the magnetic caresses of Zila's tongue as she literally licked them into a weird hypnotic animation. The flattened evil-looking heads swayed to and fro. Fixing their gaze with her own, she exerted her will to compel the slippery bodies upward and outward. Once free of Gail's body, they merged in a writhing and explosive copulation suggestive of the Pit that originally spewed them forth. Through the bars of light which the explosion threw across my vision, I saw Gail's form begin to dislimn and dissolve into thin coils of mist. My last thought was that I had witnessed the mysterious magic of Obeah. Zila had combined the Ob and the Od, the two primordial serpents of active and passive astral light in which Matter had reverted to its primal state of fluid chaos. I had watched a subtle interchange of identities, and the return to a state when the exits and entrances of consciousness into matter were determined solely by individual

choice. This primal condition – at one time paradisiacal – had passed away due to the monstrous abuses of the ancient magic. Mind had been cast out, exiled and imprisoned; its penalty: one life, one body; one incarnation, one identity. Now, through the magic of Obeah, the primal state had been revived or recreated in the cases of many individuals in Belpham. Zila possessed the creative and almost deific power of returning consciousness to its original state, but for hellish ends. Gail's body had been decoagulated, magically dissolved, annulled. Like a wisp of smoke enshrouding the barely visible form of Zila, it whirled up the funnel to the beat of the drums.

The ensuing lapse of consciousness obliterated for me further stages of the process. An imperative inner impulse ejected me precipitately from the scene of operations. A sense of urgency accompanied the impulse, and with it came the knowledge that a law, as yet obscure to me, required my immediate withdrawal.

I was whirled backwards and downwards with tremendous velocity. I flew through dark and deserted streets. A town sprawled beneath me. It was Belpham. I was zooming like the wind along familiar pavements, turning corners at shrieking speed, at breathtaking speed; but there was no breath, there was only awareness of going back, of returning, as if to a tomb, as if to rest, everlasting rest.

I remembered I was dead, but I craved my late familiar body; though dead, it were better than this ambling abnormality thrown up or called forth from Chaos.

I hurtled through a glittering crescent of pallid light. It was the fanlight of a tall and narrow house, gutted and blackened. The glass was grimy and greasy where it was not splintered and jagged. It was all dark within, a deep charred blackness, a cremation-ground, a solitude, a way into death, or sleep, or madness. There was a sensation of bumping against some object dangling behind the door, beneath the fanlight; dangling

and swaying in the night air. I gave little thought to it as I passed on into the depths of that silent empty house, on Frall Street.

16

That night had far from spent itself, or the service in Belpham chapel was occurring in dimensions outside time as measured on earth. The memory of quitting my 'tomb' was invariably blotted out, with the exception of a single sensation: that of slithering through the fanlight and spreading over Belpham like a giant holothurian, sentient in every part and possessed of a million sucking mouths.

It was in this organized shapelessness that I oozed down the walls of the chapel against which the derelict urn had stood. I was sentient indeed, but there seemed to be no centrally responsible factor, or sense of self, to claim a personal possession of experience.

The constant beating of drums reconstituted my diffused entity into organized identity, carried over from mundane existence, thus enabling it to relate to more recent experiences. This reanimated entity was now incorporated in the moiety of the *Zobop*, of which I formed a part.

There was no light but the insipid glow emitted by the half-human creatures peopling the chapel like swarms of floundering rodents. A rose of light welled from a circular aperture high above the altar. At first, I thought it was a window admitting moonlight, but I soon recognized the outlet of the shaft through which had been sucked all the larvae contained in the bowels of the building, drawing even from Outside those infected

astral shades which hover over graves. Hosts of *qliphoth* fed on these polluted wraiths, inoculating them with their own foulness. I was astonished to see that not one of the recently buried dead was entirely innocent of relationship with the ghoulis assembly.

The light welled up and abated. It formed a distinct contrarhythm to the drums, which, with each repercussion, built up more and more solidly my awareness of participation in some long-forgotten ritual.

I saw Zila, and our eyes met. There was no shock of surprise, no recognition or response from her of any kind. The thing that was Zila slumbered, did not know me; the spirit that glanced from those incredible eyes was remote, inscrutable, lost in an inner labyrinth of mentation which I could not approach. Upon the altar, which was draped in a shimmering veil of samite, lay Gail. Coiling about the wrought metal of two giant candlesticks, placed one on each side of the altar, were the serpent-symbols of a dark and ancient deity whose Mass was served that night.

The moaning plangent voice intoning a litany I did not understand, but which rendered the drumbeats in terms of a monstrous speech, emanated from a massive figure standing on the steps of a pulpit carved ornately in glistening wood. The figure was vaguely familiar, but my memory was sluggish. I noted with fascination that the man could not turn his head without turning the bulk of his uncouth anatomy. His flesh hung on him in loops of flaccid pallor which reflected the flickering light. He was violently active in the performance of his unhallowed calling, and he periodically raised apparently sightless eyes to the outrance of the shaft, as if expecting Something to appear in response to his evocations. His eyes appeared sightless because the eyeballs were so pale as to be almost invisible; this gave him the semblance of a teratonic slug, blindly pawing the atmosphere before advancing on its slimy course. The pawing was part of a movement he made when beating one of the

drums. I was unable to see what held the instrument in position, but a faintly visible circle near to it indicated a companion-drum, which was not in use.

The situation became clear to me, and with it the recognition of Troyle. His masterly use of the great drum fired me with an overwhelming urge to accompany him, and I knew instinctively that I had to take up my position beside him. He gave no sign of being aware of my presence, but as my fingers tapped again the taut and resilient sheepskin, and as the more highly pitched percussion whined to his deep booming clamour, there was a movement of his whole body and a twisted indescribable smile of recognition.

With the assumption of my proper rôle, many things at last became clear; many images shed their masks, became familiar. Zila flashed at me a vicious smile; looks of recognition dawned in many faces known to me in a casual way during my life in Belpham. All the members of the Grotto Club were there, and I noted that many of them had seemed mere ordinary townspeople out on a spree. Now they foregathered with their own, with their kind, mingling with the undead who lay sleeping only, until the *Zobop* called them forth.

The chanting ceased abruptly, but the rhythm of the drums grew more insistent, wilder, crashing thunderously about the small densely packed chapel. Shapes were changing; things were not as they seemed. Gail was the only actual element in the mad concourse of lambent light and rushing sound, as the larvae of the nether-earth swarmed towards Belpham.

I saw Zila approach the altar, her tongue already flickering over the snakes whose gaping mouths darted their tongues towards hers. Uncoiling from the candlesticks, the tapers of which sizzled with sulphurous pitch, they encircled Zila's body – that of a goddess resplendently dark; only the fragments of an ice-cold sky, which her eyes resembled, seemed detached from the craven sensuality expressed by her whole being.

She danced. I was spellbound, enthralled, transported. Rhythm seemed to flow from me in tremendous waves of power. Each vibrant beat was sent to caress her and to arouse her insane desire to an even higher pitch. Then, suddenly, the form on the altar stirred. It swung sideways so that a rain of auburn hair fanned out against the sparkling samite. Head downward-hung – Gail; her legs bent in the form of an inverted triangle upon the altar top, the soles of her feet meeting, as in prayer. A flower of light blossomed at her loins as if a gibbous orchid-bud had bloomed. And the light was tangible, dark as Nilotic mud, and webbed with a network of meshes along which veined and pulsed the essential oils of magical vitality.

Zila, naked and girdled with serpents, terminated her dance. She crumpled on the altar steps where the candles threw saltant shadows almost as dark as her body.

A great commotion, chaotic yet strangely ordered, abandoned yet curiously controlled, burst out among the congregation as the drums attained a climax of thunder.

An enormous figure hovered over the altar, winged and awful. It extruded from the shaft, the light of which was now concealed by an enveloping cloud. The evocation had not gone unanswered.

A semicircular window in the north, radiant with violent light, blazed down upon the throng, the jagged shards of its violated perfection casting a gigantic diaper on the host swarming beneath. The light increased in intensity and began slowly to revolve until I felt giddy and confused; then a sensation of hurtling through space eclipsed everything.

I was injected into the house on Frall Street by the method now familiar to me. To a casual observer gifted (or cursed) with the necessary kind of vision, it would have appeared as if the contents of a barrel of condensed milk dripped languidly through the shattered fanlight and oozed along the passage to Zila's room. That which remained inexplicable to me, and it came as a shock each time I experienced it, was the physical impact made upon me by collision with an unknown object swaying in the deeper darkness beneath the fanlight itself. Or was the impact of a psychic nature, delusively translated by memory into physical terms *after* I had regained my body, my corpse, in Zila's room? That is to say, it was in recollection only that the question of a foreign body presented itself; for whilst engaged in the process of re-entering the house, I had no individual awareness, but a multiconsciousness that was too vast and too primal to take note of personal details.

It was at the moment of contact with the decomposing, gutted shell of my former body that fragments of personal memory returned to me. I accepted the fact that one of the charred objects, amongst numerous others in Zila's room, had once been my body, a vehicle through which I personally, and I only, had functioned. Why I was bound to return to it periodically I was unable to fathom, but the fact did not worry me any more than putting on an old and discarded article of clothing. I considered it foolish, though for some reason necessary for me at the time. Also, the fact that I often preceded my 'homecoming' by a hurried visit to my former place off Crayley Way – to do what, I could not recall – did not particularly worry me, either. I was far more concerned with identifying the thing that waited upon my entry into the ruins of the house. That it had some occult affinity with me I instinctively realised, but my mind refused to produce any clue that might help me. However, merely to

think of it evoked a distinct series of thoughts. I recalled Zila's quoting a text describing the 'Wolf of the Night'. When she reached the passage about the beast's eyes turning into a stone which had the power of engendering an incredible monster – if lain under a man's member, or upon his own stones – then the sensation of impact with the thing beneath the fanlight came vividly to mind, and I was unable to dissociate the two seemingly irrelevant sets of ideas. I therefore determined to investigate the matter when I next left the house.

At this point an enormous negro entered the room. His face had been more than half eaten away by a ravaging disease, and what remained resembled a charred cork. The whites of his eyes rolled between craters which glistened, not with sweat, but with freshly suppurating cankers that nestled like worms. He was naked and he dragged in his wake a lame leg, like a man trailing behind him a heavy log. If I were dead, he was as near dead as made no difference, yet I shrank from the idea that my only companion was a syphilitic tramp for whom the gutted house provided shelter or asylum.

As he lowered himself heavily on what remained of Zila's bed I noticed a bright metallic band glinting on his wrist. It bore, deeply incised, the snake emblem of the drums, of Gail's painted legs, and of the creatures that Zila had animated by her evil magic. The recognition of them coincided with yet another change in my immediate environment.

By another alarming and occult process I was both in Zila's room on Frall Street, and in another, quite unfamiliar place. What I had mistaken for the skeleton of the burnt-out ceiling, with its crisscross pattern of fire-blackened timbers, now appeared quite differently. I struggled to limit my awareness to my own personality as I had been accustomed to do when tenting a specific human body. But this was next to impossible; I was the centre of impressions that bombarded me from all levels, not only of present activity far removed from me in space. I found myself receiving impressions of past activities

and – far more disconcerting – of events only to be imagined as pertaining to the future. I cannot describe the complexity and immensity of the sensations, certainties, and doubts, that utilized my field of consciousness in conjunction with those belonging to others who had also died: fields rendered boundless by the dissolution of individuality.

The most dominant and urgent impression was that the sleeping intruder was in a vast cage, or cell, suspended high over towering trees, the tops of which were swaying ominously below the level of the floor above, through the joists of which I was now peering. Fixed at intervals upon these joists were magical seals between which glistened sheets of thick glass of a sad bluish tinge. Then I was caught once more in the toils of my old body-complex, and my mind was sucked into the web of decomposing nervous tissues in a manner resembling my ingress through the fanlight. The wider field of awareness became darkened, subsided, and was finally obfuscated. All that remained was a confined and individual awareness of acute terror. It was focused on the metal band which circled the negro's wrist. The snakes had come alive and had shown me visions, as they had come alive on Gail's body, and in the chapel during Zila's rite. The visions I could not totally recall involved scenes of a cage and magic seals. I clung to these ideas in the hope of remembering the complete experience, but immediate events vitiated any attempt at recall. The metal band that gleamed so close to me encircled not an arm, but a phallus, by human standards ludicrously large. It dangled from the shell of Zila's bed, and as I watched, the onset of tumescence swelled it to even greater size, until I thought the metal band would choke out of it so great a flood of sperm that I should drown. But at the critical moment the band snapped beneath the tension, and a blinding flash of light obscured my vision, causing total loss of consciousness. And all this time the drums resounded.

The light-blaze purred over Gail's inverted body; not a white light, but a black and teeming emulsion. Zila and others carried her out of the chapel.

The consciousness of which I had been deprived was this jellying of darkness, seen now as from a vast distance. It was an exquisite experience, recalling the delicious and vague sensations described by Baudelaire, for "there is no sharper point than that of infinity".

The drums resounded beneath my hands. Troyle had disappeared and I saw with astonishment that the flying dexterity of my hands kept both drums beating in perfect time. The entire congregation burst from the chapel in the wake of Zila and her companions, and I drifted with it far north of Belpham.

Beyond Vermont Ridge swarmed the horde of fantastic forms. As it approached and passed Bromlingham we began to encounter the first floral outposts of the brooding swampland where I had lost my way in some other existence far removed from, and yet identical with, the one I now lived.

As we entered the grotto where the woman had united with her dendritic lover, the rhythm of the drums abruptly ceased and the subsequent silence was unnerving. A pale moon rose above wreathes of mist which coiled languidly over the grotto, and a myriad pinpoints of phosphorescence – or were they eyes? – starred the denser darkness. They lent a wholly unearthly appearance to the terrain over which slithered and poured the horde of *Zobop*, soundlessly motivated by some controlling nerve-centre concealed in the shrouding mists.

The mass moved on and on. The moon attained its zenith, and began dipping as we came within a mile or two of Vermont, that desolate fastness of almost impenetrable swampland lying to the north of Staverson and the extreme north of Belpham.

In the crumbling house on Frall Street, a breathing persistently surged and subsided; it pounded through my brain and started the drums beating again. Lush exudations of swampland mingled with the cloying odours of dank breath; the breath of the breathing; the whole house reverberant. Flakes of charred timber fell in a black snow as the structure of the building dislimned, like a giant constellation dissolving. The quaking floor of the swamp deliquesced in gangrenous sinkholes resembling the putrefying blossoms on the wallpaper of my room off Crayley Way. The tentacles of smoke, in the mirror there, were reflected now in the arborescent copulations which I saw enacted in the grotto outside Vermont.

And then the fulsome horde drove on, straight on to Troyle's place. I saw the high tower of his folly, black against an ugly sky; and, right at the top, a globular cage coruscated with light which revealed, fitfully, its only occupant.

I skirted the base of the building, still conscious of the breathings; of the externally inaudible yet innerly insistent beat of the drums as they reached a crescendo. I gazed through a dark window. A heavy door, half open and communicating with the room into which I peered, spread a fan of yellow light over a thick carpet of rank vegetation which had burst through the floorboards. In the inner room a massive figure shambled like a brute demented. The head was shaggy and so set upon the trunk as to appear immovable; only by slewing round the whole body could the creature confront me and the sound of my drummings on the windowpane.

A filthy bloodstained face, hirsute and bestial, was turned in my direction. It advanced as the body bearing it advanced, with a soulless mechanical motion. Except for the odd set of the head or the massive form, the creature bore no resemblance to the man I had accompanied on the drums in Belpham chapel. Yet it was Troyle who faced me, or rather it was a sullen spirit of absolute and final failure concentrated in a mask of murder

which now pressed its features against the pane of glass between us. I felt an uncontrollable urge to smash it and to drive the splinters into the bloodshot eyes that glared at me. I picked up a heavy stone and swung my arm backwards. Then I too reeled back, dragged down by strong arms which wound themselves about my throat.

19

Again I infiltrated through the fanlight and collided with the object suspended beneath it. Again I failed to investigate, and I slid into the charred charnel, too exhausted even to notice if the black had departed. He had not. His breathing stirred in me the drumbeats, and I entered oblivion to a rhythm that was as essential a part of the universe as my whole nightmare existence.

Few people, perhaps, have paused to consider the possibilities of disengaged consciousness. There is no end of glib talk about Cosmic, or Absolute, or Infinite Consciousness, and there are, I believe, persons of high spiritual development who have merged their individual mote of consciousness with it. Their accounts are profoundly interesting and of the utmost value to those who are concerned with the range of its possibilities. But there is no record known to me of one who, having lost control of his own individual unit of consciousness, has become extended, or rather extenuated, in time and space, and exposed to awful transmutations by chance stresses in a universal *menstruum* which has been given several names, but which has never been adequately explored.

Eliphas Levi, who knew something of these matters, referred to this *menstruum* as the astral light. He claimed for

it a limitless plasticity, and an infinite capacity for reacting to the slightest stress, thereby enabling it to reflect the most tenuous of thoughts as vividly as if they were actual objects.

I had myself seen Zila manipulate the dual terminals of this astral *menstruum*, which is concentrated in the *uroborus* of the ancient magicians, as well as in the snakewand of the sinister cults of the *Zobop* and the hellish hyaena-men of Kabultiloa.

How often I had recalled the words of Lafcadio Hearn, which never failed to fascinate me, which now terrify me:

What is impossible! Not the dreams of alchemists and poets; – dross may indeed be changed to gold, the jewel to the living eye, the flower into flesh. What is impossible? If seas can pour from world to sun, from sun to world again, what of the dust of dead selves, – dust of memory and thought? Resurrection there is, – but a resurrection more stupendous than any dreamed of by Western creeds. Dead emotions will revive as surely as dead suns and moons ...

I had undergone transformations, and witnessed things outside the range of the so-called possible, and in the process I had come to the realisation of my unity with all things. But this sense of cosmic identity was of the essence and nature of nightmare, of crepuscular horrors, rather than of the Great Illumination about which sages and mystics have written in many volumes over many centuries. Modern mystics, and occultists too, have added their testimony. Aleister Crowley declared that:

each one of us has an universe of his own, but it is the same universe for each one as soon as it includes all possible experience. This implies the extension of consciousness to include all other consciousness.

But the ultimate implication, surely, is that there is and can be only One consciousness, One self; the Many are illusory. This single consciousness invariably refers to itself, when it can refer to itself, as 'I', no matter how many times 'I' appears to be

repeated in a multitude of forms. No matter how many times the reflection of the moon appears in multitudinous pools, the moon remains single; so also the Self.

The work of the wand and the work of the sword had recreated and destroyed me simultaneously. Although physically dead, the essential consciousness of my existence as an individual hovered between the dreaming and the waking states of consciousness. I vacillated between the gutted vehicle of my precosmic individuality, and its animal counterpart into which I had been lured by Zila's sorceries. Due to ignorance or folly I had permitted certain occult nerve-centres to be revitalized; zones that Nature had seen fit to abandon. The evolutionary laws decreed that these zones should atrophy, sink back into the oblivion of a consciousness that antedated humanity. But they had been reanimated and given fresh impetus by one who served their atavistic energies. And I had concurred in their awakening, however involuntarily, by surrendering to Zila's wiles, by the potency of the drums, and by my weakness of will. Gail lay in even deadlier peril than did I. She was destined to mother a monster begotten by the spirits of the Obeah and the Wanga, through the instrumentality of a corrupt and wholly evil agent, a creature literally consumed by excesses surpassing any associated with merely mortal abnormalities. This blasphemy was Lord of the *Bultu*, Lord of the *Zobop*, Lord of the *Zamradiel*, and Gail had been prepared for the consummation of a rite which had been initiated in the room above Zila's on the eve of the function at the Grotto Club. Indeed, he had come 'as a knife in the dark; his white teeth flashing in the dark; all dark was his skin. It was as if night had taken form, blackening her utterly...'

Gail was, in an occult sense, still a virgin, though the sheerest travesty of such a virginity, as may be appreciated only by those who have trafficked with *loa* of the kind evoked by the *bultus*. A whole town had been polluted through the whoredoms of a single woman – Zila; and Gail was to birth a horror

which would, in turn, breed a miasmal race spewed from primaeval layers of the racial consciousness, layers that had remained dormant for aeons of time. Indeed, not a flowering into cosmic unity, into a vast and expansive – perhaps divine – awareness, but a reversion to inverted levels of prehuman and even pre-bestial existence, when the embryonic stage of consciousness, operating at subliminal levels, generated vampiric astral growths.

There are hints of these monstrous parasites in the works of Paracelsus, and in the legends of the Jews and Chaldaeans, where they are referred to as the *qliphoth*, the world of shells. The possibility of re-energising these shells, and of imbuing them again with the tissues of larval life, was contemplated by the *Zobop* when the question arose of the cult's continued existence. The members of such cults cannot absorb the nutriment normal to human beings. Being outside the order of humanity they – like the beasts – must prey on even lower orders of existence, and drink from a source even more primal than the blood which is the life. That essence, which precedes the blood from which the mother congeals the body of her child, clothing it in flesh, is contained in the fusion of the *ob* and the *od*. It is the glittering and elusive astral light combined with the dark *menstruum* of electrosexual magnetism, symbolised by the twin serpents. The work of the wand and the work of the sword constitute *The Great Work* of the ancient alchemists, and of the deep Voodoo mysteries of the old dark race. These are no mere speculations, but certainties forced upon me by the nature of my unwilling participation in the secrets of a hideous cult.

I am not comparing this to the profound researches into the origin and nature of the soul, such as the alchemists and magicians of old essayed; nor am I identifying *The Great Work* of the genuine mystics, or even the essentially liberating and exalting processes of Obeah, with the abysmal sorcery of these supreme perverters of the Inmost Light. But I am inferring emphatically that the misapplication of such processes can unseal the tunnels of hell itself. Hell means literally the 'concealed place'; it is

the old theological designation of a region known to, and mapped out by, the ancient Egyptians, who named it *Amenta* – the 'hidden land'. Today this hidden region is identified with the subconscious mind, and the learnedly ignorant discourse upon it, endlessly. Let him who dares, go down into it! I live in it daily, nightly. Christ Himself is said to have remained there for three whole days, and his father, God, was ever mindful of him. With myself, things are somewhat different.

20

A dawning impression of cloudless sapphire skies: twin orbs of blue in which rolled two dark spheres like crazy planets; and a row of incredibly white teeth which flashed a smile of recognition charged with menace. A spasm of pain shot through my neck and shoulders. I was lying in a broken attitude, a mass of bruises, outside a high and lightless window.

Zila was pulling me over the rubble, like the lame man trailing a log in his wake. I watched the undulations of her haunches with a fascination that banished the pain she had induced in me some time earlier. To what place of death or retribution she was dragging me, I neither knew nor cared.

I found myself wondering if I were dead after all, or if I should be expected to die again. I seemed constantly to be going through some such process. I began to consider if the entire series of events – my previous 'life' included – were but a fantastic dream, engendered in molecules of lingering consciousness in the process of dissolution. Perhaps the whole world was dead, and on the pyre of a universal cremation were reflected, in the smoke of the funerary pall, the images of every thought that ever had been and ever would be. Perhaps the wreathing

smoke formulated images every second of Eternity. Perhaps I should go on being all images, becoming aware of being more and more images, until, in the vastness of my infinity and eternity, I should realise that God, even, is but one more image fashioned by the smoke. I had at least understood that in order to regain God, the First Idea and Source of All, an infinite regression is required, a regression to the primal and possibly pre-protoplasmic state which would necessarily be free of the imperfections and limitations implied by individuality.

These cogitations were interrupted, and I became limited again to individual awareness.

"You were a fool to try and trick me. De night dis all began, Gail already mine and not de Baron's any mo".

A ray of hope was struggling within me. As she humped me up the steps of the ancient building which Troyle had acquired for his occult purposes, my mind was numb and incapable of following Zila's argument. I remained silent. A succession of bumps administered to my head by the unfeeling ground prevented any response on my part. Actually, I was screaming at her to drop her burden and let me rest, but, as in nightmares, no sound came. I called her foul names and told her what a treacherous game she was playing with her lord and master, the Baron; that she was a fool to do it, and that if he did not punish her, Troyle himself would certainly do so.

"He hate de Baron", said Zila through clenched teeth.

She had heard my silent imprecations, my unuttered curses. When I screamed at her to drop me, she remarked quite casually:

"De body is de only burden; it is caused by thought. You should give up thinking that way, honey".

I was thunderstruck, yet her words came as a refreshing douse of cool and glittering water. It was dashed in my face with such sweetness that I awoke to a situation I had not previously contemplated or even considered.

I thought of my body as a sentient centre of awareness, then

as a dead and blackened corpse after an accident caused by fire, then as a hirsute and wolfish entity which sometimes was 'T. I thought of Zila's body: a desirable, supple black marvel of feline perfection, as a rank and fetid beast, as a murderous hyaena. I thought of Gail's body, spectrally pale beside Zila's, but even more desirable. I thought of Troyle's loathsome degeneration, and of the rotting, breathing carcase of the Baron. I thought of all these things and remained silent, marvelling. I was grist; but to whose mill? To none but mine own.

Zila laughed harshly and dumped me unceremoniously on a large slab of rock. My position slowly dawned upon me. There must have been terror in my eyes as I gazed into hers. She spat at me, kneading the flesh of my arms and shoulders with a soft yet firm motion of her fingers. The action soothed me.

"Who else is there left to sacrifice?"

I answered my own question with a previously formulated idea: I was grist. But to whose mill? To none but mine own. A winged creature flew down the pathway of moonlight that flooded the place; I saw its wings outstretched against the perfect circle of the moon, shining in a clear sky. Its approach began as a pinpoint of darkness with wings. These extended like a growth. They flapped and whirled. The pinpoint became a dark orb which all but eclipsed the moon. Zila faded from sight, and I could no longer feel anything. I flew down a ray of moonlight and, passing through the broken panes of the fanlight, flowed into the ancient house. *I* was the final sacrifice.

The sound of the drums had penetrated the ultimate depths of being; had loosed the original sound-wave which had initiated the process of thought in the One primaeval consciousness.

I recalled at this moment, of all moments the most momentous, the oriental doctrine of OM, the Root-Vibration of all Creation; and an account of an ineffable experience undergone by a visitor to a Mongol Lamasery. There he had heard a thousand buddhist monks intoning that primal mystic syllable, vibrating it precisely as the secret science of their ancient religion enjoined. The visitor claimed that he realised at that moment the unreality of individual existence. He had heard and understood, in a great blaze of illumination, the keynote and essential vibration of the Cosmos, as the monks resounded it rhythmically in the deep caverns of their hidden retreat.

I, too, had surprised this deep and ultimate mystery, for the beat of the *bultu* drums also rehearsed the beat of the pulse of creation. Yet how strangely, and by what devious paths, had I come to the heart of the Mystery. And Zila had been my preceptor.

The climb, the ascent that ensued, was a blend of ecstasy and pain. The steep stairway to Troyle's ultimate tower of power was as precipitous as the abrupt and vertical realisation of my true identity. The pain was the body's wrack as it bounced on each uneven stone of the staircase; the bliss was the contemplation of Zila's lithe form, always a little above me, luring me upward, ever upward, hauling me after her.

As I yearned to unite with her ever-receding, ever-ascending form, I seemed to fall deeper into black oblivious seas of Sleep, lulled by the breathings, the deep beat of the drums, as they welled from the wreck on the burnt-out bed.

I clawed at my face; not to find it intact, but to assure myself that it was half consumed. At that moment Zila lugged me up the final slope, and the vast cell, like a cradle in the sky, enclosed me. The nocturnal sounds of the swamp woke into teeming life and rose upon the night air. The croaking of bullfrogs and other amphibia, the whirring of multitudes of wings, the insane laughter of hyaena, merged and coalesced with a spiral of sound that mounted to the blood-masked moon. It fell from the sky to the accompaniment of shrill screams; it collapsed into stagnant pools whereon, of a summer evening, midges settle in glowing rings of iridescent light. It was Troyle falling headlong, lacerated by the shards of the window I had wanted to shatter. His self-immolation, my liberation.

Zila was exultant. We had attained the summit, and my debasement was complete. The only thing that worried me was my face. Surely the face, if nothing else, confirms identity? My fingers sought and found; there was very little of it left; there was a falling away in great chunks, and from the bones of my hands a liquid was dripping, slowly, unctuously, like seaweed clinging to a rock, then slipping, deliquescing, longing to become the ocean.

In the deeper cavities of consciousness I sank into rest, and a perfect peace of contentment and fulfilment pervaded the dislimning physical structure, which resolved into another sleep.

My last impression of the bars of my cell in the sky identified them as the ribs of the fanlight, on the splinters of which was impaled the bringer of the *bultu* drums.

Epilogue

Sylvestre Steem concluded the foregoing account, as follows:

It was several days before I discovered that my friend had perished in the conflagration on Frall Street. Because of its inexplicable nature, the fire in Belpham caused a major sensation. It became known as the Fireless Fire because it ran its course almost entirely without flames. Concerning this, the reader will recall the observations attributed to me. They represent precisely the impression I received. But something far more extraordinary happened to Belpham at the same period.

Whether it had any connection with the Fireless Fire, I do not know. The town became the object of molestations by marauders of an unknown kind, surmised, correctly or incorrectly, to have issued from the swamplands beyond the outskirts of Belpham. These cover a great area and extend as far north as Vermont, skirting the villages of Bromlingham and Staverson on the way.

The surmise remained unproved, but that the marauders were a very real affliction is proved by the fact that numerous unaccountable deaths occurred in Belpham and its environs, and they postdated the Fireless Fire. Furthermore, there were rumours of indescribably revolting gatherings in the swamplands and, later, of gruesome hauntings in the town itself. Many inhabitants claimed to have glimpsed hybrid wolf-like creatures which, when challenged, disappeared literally into thin air.

In the region of the cemetery, frightful upheavals occurred and graves were desecrated in the most atrocious manner.

Ghosts of the corpse-victims were seen by some of the psychically-gifted townspeople to change into hideous shapes, which resembled those of their killers; and many were the individuals driven to insanity and suicide by nocturnal hauntings they could not bear to recount.

As to the actual centre of the pestilence – for it spread a foul disease in its wake – this seemed to be the brothel on Frall Street where the Fireless Fire broke out. Flanked on either side by sculptured grotesques resembling rampant beasts, the door, now charred and blackened, appeared to me as the door to hell itself; nor can I think of the house without an image springing to mind, an image that will haunt me for the remainder of my life. After the fire, I had occasion to enter the house in the company of town clerks, for purposes of official enquiry. Our progress was impeded by an object suspended from the fanlight and hanging against the inner side of the door. It did not take me long to recognize the auburn hair and the excessively pale skin as belonging to the girl whom my friend had met at the Grotto Club. The flowered fabric of her frock had been torn into strips to form a noose for the naked body. She doubtless returned to the house after realising that my friend had perished there, and that he had been with Zila at the last. And I cannot think of the place without recalling how I myself dragged Zila down the worn white steps into the fog of smoke and confusion. The urgency of the situation forced me to bump her considerably, and I was afraid that the impact of the stones would injure her. However, I lost my footing and my hold on her, and she vanished in the general commotion.

About finding my friend's charred body, I wish to say nothing except that, clutched in what remained of one of his hands, and fused into the bone by the great heat, was a cinder bearing the single word BULTUNGIN, still perfectly legible. There is no need for me to explain its meaning to those who have read the foregoing pages, which I discovered in his apartment off Crayley Way – although how they came to be written after his death,

and in his own hand, is a mystery; one that is no less and no more fantastic than the other elements of this affair.

Doctor Melrose told me that my friend was suffering from a form of obsessional mania, the chief element of which was belief in the ability to transform the physical and astral vehicles of consciousness into any shape whatever. This, of course, explains nothing, but then, Doctor Melrose had not previously encountered such a case.

Why the girl named Gail, who came to mean so much to my friend, ended her existence in the manner described, may be rationalised by appreciating the natural aversion which a sensitive person might feel on being thrust by chance, or design, into the company of Zila and her wretched companions. Gail, it seems, had at the time no means of livelihood, and nowhere to stay, apart from the room which Zila offered her, the room above her own.

Finally, and most enigmatically, the drums. Around them revolved the series of calamities that affected the community of Belpham. And my part in introducing them to my friend – with all that followed – I hold as a valid reason for terminating an existence that has since become unendurable. I am haunted continually by matters which this document discloses no less than by other, associated matters about which I shall remain silent.

Whether or not such individuals as Troyle and the Baron existed in the way my friend represented them, I do not know. But one thing is certain. A terrible madness afflicted an entire town and its environs for a period of time that began with the advent of the drums to Belpham, and ceased when the only creature capable of drawing out the hellish spirits they contained, became extinct. Or perhaps the drums themselves were destroyed. My friend is silent on this point. But the drums were real; I heard them beating and, as the reader is aware, I myself used one of them. When I fled from that inner room at the Grotto Club, I knew in my soul that their rhythms would finally destroy me, and others too.

That moment has arrived. Before I close this account, however, let me warn any whose curiosity might lead them to investigate the spiritual home, as it were, of these abhorrent forces. The old charred shell of the house has long been boarded up. It moulders into dust; it is slipping slowly into the dank earth; it is ever transforming. Sun- and moonbeams sometimes struggle through the age-stained panes of the fanlight, its sole unshuttered eye. In such sickly twilight, spectral memories pursue their half-lives, and obsessions flourish, mingling past impressions of confused events with actions yet to be; actions born of larval congress with remoter atavisms.

Rising with the drums, the pounding drums, the white day fuses with the dark. Lurking always, the darkness blossoms in the house. It preceded day as black preceded white. Their merging is a clash, and then a mutation. The night is drawing off the light, until this ghostly glow alone remains. Within the mind, this half-light breeds a hybrid thing, a bastard form which in the past took monstrous shapes of which the *Bultu* was supreme.

The Darker Strain

for ERNA BAUR

1

Raymond North contemplated a nearly full moon. It shone above the London skyline, a disc of gold slightly corroded by cloud. North was a poet, but this was not at the moment the main reason for his interest in the moon. He had spent a pleasant afternoon in St. John's Wood discussing the 'occult' with a friend named Philip Yayler, and had since strolled southward musing on colourful personalities such as H. P. Blavatsky and Aleister Crowley. North had known Crowley, and had at one time acted as his *famulus*. Unlike Crowley, North was not a classical poet, and in this one respect he was a product of his age. In recent years his growing ability to activate subconscious imagery had been productive of unusual verses, and the moon had had much to do with it.

The talk that afternoon had drifted to the moon as an emblem of the subconscious, and as its possible stimulator; and as North gazed at it now, he felt its compelling mystery pervading his being. But not for long. A tipsy young woman approached and pressed herself against him, aggressively. A wisp of cloud, solitary in the green afterglow of sunset, at that moment trailed its gauze across the gold. Matching his skyward gaze with her own, the woman muttered threateningly

that it was about to rain; then, laughing coarsely, she belched in his face, lurched into a dark doorway and urinated noisily, repeating her weather-forecast as she did so.

North moved on, his reverie shattered. He walked in an easterly direction and began musing on the idea of rain. The recent incident had suggested to him the raising of storms by mediaeval witches who relieved themselves, while cursing, into freshly dug holes in the ground. Then, more in tune with the green-gold evening, he thought of the consecrated maidens chosen to promote the growth of maize and corn, and the act of communal urination by which the drama of fertility was symbolically adumbrated in ancient times, at dead of night, in the dark furrows drenched with moonlight.

These reflections returned his thoughts to the afternoon discussion with Yayler. A young woman, first noticed by North as he ascended the steps to Yayler's front door, had several times passed to and fro outside the open window at which the two friends had sat. Each time she glanced swiftly at North, who supposed her to be one of the host of *au pair* girls that swarmed in the neighbourhood. She was still loitering in the vicinity when he left the house, and he remembered vividly a wisp of pale golden hair raining over sad blue eyes. At his approach her expression had changed, grown hard, and she had muttered something he did not hear; it sounded like an imprecation, and it worried him. North was to recall her face a day later when the newspapers contained photographs of four savagely murdered women.

He had wandered farther east than intended, and now found himself approaching Soho. Not wishing to return home he dropped in at a small cinema. A dull film was showing; the place was almost deserted. He dozed off and was brought up with a start when his head lolled. He then became aware, suddenly, of a couple seated at the far end of the row of seats he occupied. Like himself they were paying scant attention to

the screen. The man, almost invisible in the gloom, was being fondled by his companion, who sat on his far side. All that North could see of her was a fringe of coppery hair and the glitter of a bracelet as her hand moved back and forth. The action was mechanical, devoid of affect. Shortly afterwards the couple left, and North transferred his attention to the screen. The alternative showed a doll-like creature simulating passion in the arms of a listless dummy that simpered over the rouged craters of her cheeks. The purple hollows of the woman's eyes seemed to secrete drops of glycerine and reminded him of the recent act of masturbation which had, he supposed, expressed at least a globule of genuine glue from a genuine anatomical organ. He quitted the cinema with alacrity, glad to feel the night air upon his face. But the sense of relief was short-lived. A little way down the street, outside another small cinema, a woman stood. She was alone. Although he averted his gaze she sidled up to him. North hurried on, little suspecting that he was also to remember the flour-like mask with its coppery fringe.

The impressions of the evening divided him, as with a veil, from the memory of an enjoyable afternoon. He ignored a cruising taxi, hoping that the stroll back to his lodgings in Albany Street would clear the miasma from his mind. The moon, now at its zenith, shone with a paler, less auriferous light. He gazed up at it expectantly and saw, or imagined he saw, a small dark speck which grew in size and took wings. It flew down the lunar pathway and seemed to enter his soul, bringing him peace.

Almost before he realised it he was in the neighbourhood of his rooms. Loth to go indoors, for the night was enchanting, he entered a nearby restaurant. A sepia-coloured waitress approached him, her lips a vivid cyclamen. She leaned over and wiped the table, revealing as she did so the smooth rounded softness of her breasts, which shivered slightly with the movement of her arm. He had not previously used the place and, contrary to his intentions, was not to use it again. He lingered

over a cup of coffee until a glance at the clock roused him. The waitress entered a staff-room at the back of the restaurant, and through the half-open door, he saw her ease up her skirt and fix a pair of stockings which gleamed like metal mesh on her ebony skin. As she attached them to the girdle, he saw that she was otherwise naked. North found himself again that night in a situation which innate reticence prevented his exploiting.

His sleep was punctuated by disturbing dreams, their theme the pursuit of an unknown woman along endless corridors which crisscrossed in a maddening maze of luminous lines. He was forever unable to catch up with her. Awakened by sunshine filtering through a gap in the curtains, he sat up, struggling to retrieve his mind from its dream-world. His room was crammed with books and manuscripts, for beside being a poet he was an omnivorous reader. He now gazed at the disorderly piles with a sense of relief, almost of gratitude. Lorma Steele, a close friend, had once remarked that books multiplied in his vicinity by some queer process of occult miscegenation known only to sorcerers, which reminded him that he had had from her an invitation to attend, that evening, a *juba*¹ at her place on Crawford Street.

After breakfast, North strolled in the direction of a quiet and secluded square in the midst of London's hubbub. It was deserted when he arrived and he was able to occupy his favourite bench in the shade of a giant plane tree and watch the distant crowds. The muffled roar of traffic acted as a soporific, deliciously soothing. He drifted into a waking dream which transported him to a region he had occasionally skirted in his deeper reveries. In wide-awake moments he asked himself why he lacked the initiative to penetrate this region, but he could find no answer. On relapsing into reverie and sensing the proximity of the place, he found satisfaction in the mere knowledge that it was at hand, available, accessible, should he need

¹ A dance, assembly, or gathering. (An American negro term.)

refuge. It was a quaint conceit, this wonderland which he took on trust, but which he showed little desire actually to explore. He did not even enquire why he might need refuge, supposing the urge to be a remnant of some childhood fantasy, when life's mysteries drove him to create a secret sanctuary.

The increasing heat of the day forced him out of his dreams; the shade had been banished from the bench, and the sun blazed rawly upon him. He rose with the intention of buying cigarettes. It was a little past noon, and the pavements swarmed with crowds in search of refreshment. Approaching a kiosk, a news-placard caught his eye. Atrocious crimes had come to light. He did not know why this news made so strong an impression on him; crimes were common enough, and his present mood was far removed from violence or any desire to read about it. He bought a paper and cigarettes and returned to the square. It was no longer deserted and all the shaded benches were occupied, so he sat in the full glare of the sun, lit a cigarette and unfolded the newspaper. His mood of tranquillity changed. Three vaguely familiar faces stared up at him, three of four victims of crime, the full details of which he could not bring himself to read. The atrocities had occurred in different localities, and he noticed with a curious sense of alarm that he had visited each of them the previous evening. The faces, burnt into his mind, were of the St. John's Wood *au pair* – his supposition confirmed; the whore of the cinema; and the coloured waitress. A fourth victim, of whom no picture appeared, had been a prostitute; all four violently slain. North became aware that people were eyeing him queerly.

He did not remember letting himself into his lodgings; he knew only that he was seated at his desk and that rows of eyes glared at him accusingly from leafy sunshine. Before him lay a crumpled newspaper. North read and re-read the first paragraph, then the second, then again the first, and again the second, then he forced himself to read to the end...

A wave of calm followed the inner turmoil, banishing abruptly the terror that had paralysed him. A London road-map lay on the desk and he seized it as a strange notion entered his mind. Once more North drifted into a mood of reverie, but with a difference; an urgent though elusive necessity deflected him from exploring familiar inner regions from which, usually, there emanated poems, stories, creative ideas. He was conscious now of impulses altogether alien to him; they exercised an intrusive control of his thoughts and established relations between the occurrences of the previous evening and the coincidences of which he had just read. Yesterday, he had conversed with a friend in a sunlit room; they had discussed the occultist, Aleister Crowley, and his poetical, occult and other writings, including an article on Jack the Ripper and the unsolved Whitechapel murders, which resembled in some respects those recently committed. If North's memory held, Crowley had referred to an ingenious theory that now appeared to North in a totally new light. It was suggested that when the scenes of the crimes were linked lineally on a road-map the resulting figure formed an inverted pentagram, an age-old symbol of black magic and sorcery. With a pencil, almost automatically as in a dream, North traced the route he had traversed the previous day. It began at St. John's Wood, from which he had walked in a southerly direction. Turning east he had walked about the same distance and the line proceeded to Soho, where he had visited the cinema. From this point, and veering northward, the line linked this region with that of his lodgings and, connecting this point with that of his departure, he obtained a perfect square. He was surprised by so precise a figure, although it signified to him nothing in particular.

Crowley had assumed that the Whitechapel crimes had been ritual killings, and that the averse pentagram supported the assumption. But the well defined square did not suggest so facile a solution. And then a very odd coincidence occurred to him. The square was bisected medially by Baker Street, and the

point at which its diagonals intersected was in the region, precisely, of Crawford Street slightly to the west of Baker Street, where Lorma Steele's house was situate – the place of his appointment that evening. North was cogitating the possibility that the key to his predicament lay in this crossing, or intersection of lines, when the doorbell rang. He stuffed the map into a drawer and made a supreme effort to calm his nerves before opening the door. His visitor was an acquaintance named Reynolds, who happened to be a friend of Lorma Steele. He had called to remind the absent-minded poet of his evening appointment. As Reynolds entered the room, North noticed that his visitor's gaze took in the newspaper lying on the desk. The eyes of the three women returned his gaze as if in mute appeal. It was now too late to conceal the paper. Reynolds began immediately to deplore the brutality of the crimes: "their bodies savaged as if by wild beasts", he read aloud. North stood silent for a moment, then laughed. It was a high and almost hysterical shriek and Reynolds glanced at him quizzically. North blamed his nerves and a sleepless night. His friend was familiar with these outbursts but nonetheless appeared shocked.

As Reynolds lighted a cigarette, North remarked: "I suppose it is possible for some animals to behave in such a fashion?" "Yes, indeed", the other replied. As an anthropologist Reynolds had had some unusual experiences. He described an incident in East Africa when a horde of baboons attacked a whole community. It was alleged that they did not kill their captives immediately. The men they gave to their females, and *vice versa*; and it is a fact that many native girls claimed to have been raped by baboons.

North recalled a remark by Yayler in connection with Aleister Crowley and the votaries of a monkey cult in the Terai. Its priests used to send specially selected women into the jungle for the purpose of congress with the animal embodiments of their simian deity. The offspring of those that returned were

accorded divine honours. Reynolds also expatiated upon the tailed men of Namaqua Land, the dwarfs of the Cameroons, and the offspring of Hottentot women captured and impregnated by the apes of Nigritia. Even so, North found it difficult to credit a homicidal ape with a rudimentary sense of geometry on the loose in London.

Reynolds had departed with a reminder that they were due to meet a few hours later on Crawford Street.

Although North's meditations were of the gloomiest, Reynolds' unexpected visit had done much to banish a sense of guilt that had charged them. He had suddenly become fascinated, almost obsessed, by pentagrams, squares, crosses, and other geometric figures. He recalled references by Dion Fortune to consecrated cult-centres in the British Isles: at Avebury, Tintagel, Lindisfarne, St. Albans. That author had noted that the lines connecting them represented vectors of occult forces which flowed between them. He could not recall the more complex patterns, but a simple example mentioned by her involved the sites of Glastonbury Tor, St. Michael's Mount, and Mont St. Michel in Brittany, which formed, when lineally connected, a perfect triangle. Such external zones of sacred and magical energy appear internally in certain highly sensitive nerve-centres in the occult anatomy of the human body. When these zones are stimulated in a special manner they vibrate in harmony with the energies contained in their tellurian counterparts. Some authorities have suggested that the Druids used the knowledge of these mysteries in their sacred rites which were based upon the infinitely older knowledge of ancient Egypt. North mused upon the aberrations likely to have ensued upon an improper application of such knowledge. Crowley's article mentioned a mediaeval *grimoire* in which appeared a formula for attaining "the supreme black magical power". Crowley considered that some such formula was used by the Whitechapel killer. The *grimoire* stated also that minor powers were

bestowed upon a sorcerer who sacrificed human beings: after the third murder, he gained the power of invisibility, and after the fourth, the power of transformation into any desired shape, and so on. These speculations brought to his mind a story by Algernon Blackwood which reflected similar ideas in a more abstract guise: power through mind and mathematics, as distinct from matter and magic. It may well have been 'just a story', but stories spun by writers versed in magic are often based upon foundations firmer than many so-called facts. Blackwood's tale told of a mathematician who explored too profoundly the geometries of space. He succeeded in realising Infinity through a complex of straight lines and curves which converged upon a magic mirror through which he irrevocably disappeared.

North's thoughts reverted once again to the moon, and to the incomprehensible void which stretched beyond the limits of the known universe. And in contemplating the greater, the impersonal enigma, he was automatically purged of anxiety concerning the lesser, the personal problem, which, as he had always suspected, was a mere index to indelible mysteries.

On the doorstep Reynolds had added: "I am giving Lorma something unusual this evening, and I hope she will not abuse it". The remark had been lightly made, yet North did not fail to detect in it a hint of warning, and it puzzled him.

Lorma Steel inspected her flat and surveyed herself in numerous mirrors. The walls were starred with slivers of glass set between crisscross lines which suddenly leapt from the walls at odd angles and projected themselves into the room as glistening wire threads. The patterns, based upon Voodoo vevers, were linear expressions of occult forces. Hilary Reynolds was responsible for importing the idea from Madagascar, the scene of his latest anthropological and archaeological researches. Lorma had interpreted the idea in her own way. The lighting was contrived to throw further, yet distorted, projections of force upon any parts of the ceiling and walls not obscured by one or other of the cult-objects with which the apartment abounded. The general impression was of cosmic entities having fallen into it; of fluid, indefinite shapes on the point of changing into other, no more definite, forms. The atmosphere was heavy with the promise of imminent creation, a tension relieved only by the silver tranquillity of the mirrors. Through this evocation of other worlds moved Lorma, drunk on the contemplation of her image reflected from numerous angles. Her personality, thus extra-dimensionalized, caused her sexuality to manifest almost palpably, such was the skill she had lavished on her lair.

She was awaiting the arrival of guests invited to celebrate Reynolds' homecoming. One of them, Helga Larssen, whom Lorma detested, had once remarked that Reynolds liked nothing better than to rummage among old bones and twilight manuscripts. It was, in fact, well known that he eschewed all forms of clinquency, yet Lorma had ensnared him.

She paused now before an immense mirror set obliquely in a corner of the room. Her firm breasts jutted aggressively against a vever traced on her body in lines of vermilion. It

sprang from her navel and rose in complex spirals, emanating pale virescent tentacles which writhed about her breasts, held erect by talons which seemed to proffer them. She caressed the delicate mounds with their curiously elongated nipples, as if she would milk their latent snow in strong thin jets; then she sank upon cushions. Between her breasts gleamed a small black cross suspended from a golden chain. It had been the cause of a derisive comment – overheard – from Helga. Lorma awaited the girl's arrival with calculated pleasure. Helga, of course, was an ignorant little fool to suppose the cross had exclusively Christian associations. As far as Lorma was concerned it was a symbol of the crossroads, the meeting-place of the horizontal place of Matter with the vertical axis of Spirit, and as such, a purely Voodoo device.

She lay back, musing on Helga, who was not alone in misunderstanding the symbol. Christian missionaries of the 19th century, avid for signs of conversion among the nighted blacks, to whom they had brought the incalculable treasure of their civilisation, had found the cross already *in situ* among the unclean paraphernalia of African altars. Unable to abolish it as a Pagan blasphemy, they redeemed it in the name of Jesus. Lorma's cross was one such artefact, and Hilary Reynolds had given it to her with the comment that it had been consecrated by two kinds of spirit – the black and the white. This was literally true; he had accidentally dropped the relic in a glass of whisky during his journey home. Lorma wore it as a talisman, not as an adornment. Her nature functioned at levels of high emotionalism, and she was forced at times to drain off excess vitality and store it in the fetishes with which she surrounded herself. Helga, of course, knew nothing of this; her vulgar nature effectually deadened her sensibilities to all but the here and now. Christians, even, were superstitious savages in Helga's eyes.

A sneer rippled over Lorma's features and settled on the

mobile line of her mouth. She gazed squarely into the mirror and observed how barbarically beautiful she appeared. She almost forgot Helga in the prolonged scrutiny of every plane, curve and declivity of her resplendent form. Her fingers, loaded with glittering rings, fluttered restlessly about herself, exploring the contrast between the soft resilient flesh of her thighs and the sharp mesh of stockings held in place by garters made of plaited human hair. The garters were tight, and the white flesh swelled above the bands, adding a grotesque animality to the heaviness of her haunches. She inserted a finger between garter and flesh, her thumb rearing backward along the thigh and rowelling the dark sericeous forest at her loins. Then she uncoiled like a reptile and slithered from the couch.

A moment later she was standing at the window, gazing down upon Crawford Street just before it was thrown into lurid relief by a flash of lightning. She saw Raymond North approaching the house and glancing up, somewhat apprehensively, before mounting the steps. It seemed an unconscionably long time before the bell shrilled in the hall. The sky, black with storm, was again riven by lightning, and thunder boomed as rain began falling. Within seconds, a curtain of water swept along Crawford Street. A taxi drew up and disgorged Helga Larssen in a scanty summer frock. She was immediately drenched to the skin. As she raced up the steps, North's voice sounded in the hall as the house-maid, Maffla, admitted them. Lorma appeared as North was introducing himself to the big Danish girl. Helga resembled a Norse goddess risen from shining waters; her flaxen hair, parted centrally, hung like shards over her shoulders. North viewed her curiously, and so did other guests, newly arrived. Lorma stifled her rising annoyance. The usual bustle attendant upon such arrivals was unaccountably absent. An uneasy silence settled over the hall. Helga shook her head violently, showering the blue-tiled floor. Her eyes were an even brighter blue, more intense, more vivid than any eyes North had ever seen. He turned to greet Lorma as she descended,

her face pale and – North thought – uninviting. Smiling archly, Helga kicked off a pair of sodden shoes and pirouetted playfully. He admired the sheer animality of her movements, the suppressed vitality suggested by every line of her body, and by the sinuosity of her delicate yet prominent haunches undulating in contra-motion to the swaying of her hips. Her saturated frock revealed almost more than it concealed, and there was about her, North thought, something suggestive of a mermaid.

Lorma muttered something to Maffla, who took Helga to the cloakroom. No one seemed to have got as wet as Helga; North was plunged in fantasies of mermaids. Reynolds, who had just entered the hall, sensed the tension as he handed Lorma a dull red leather case. It contained recordings made at Voodoo *corroborees*. He had used diplomacy, and more, to attend them, knowing she would not be satisfied with anything less than the real thing.

North was surprised when Reynolds ignored him. Perhaps it was due to his eagerness to present Lorma with his trophy, the "something unusual", no doubt, that he had mentioned that morning.

Guests now arrived in number, and Reynolds, essentially a contemplative individual, felt a certain oppressiveness. He wanted to see Lorma alone, but her mania for 'occasions' made this rarely possible. Having survived many uncomfortable situations he accepted the present one as just another, and cursed himself for being enthralled by a woman who combined an innate exhibitionism with empathic insight into many mysteries he himself was unable to fathom.

By the time Maffla returned, the guests were assembled, and, with help from Reynolds, she set the ball rolling as Lorma handled the introductions. The lights slowly dimmed until a barely illuminated darkness pervaded the room. Some of the more potent off-beat rhythms of the *Petro* rites, played by a highly skilled *tambour*, were among the recordings. When

Reynolds handed the case to Lorma he had indicated a ribbon which divided into two compartments the *Petro* and other rites. North had overheard Reynolds advising her against playing, that night, those other rites. Guests now swarmed into Lorma's lair to the sound of muffled drumbeats, and although North recognised several faces, many were strange to him. The constant influx suggested to him 'the massing of the shades', a phrase he had glimpsed the day before in a book at Yayler's place. The muted drums were backed by beats of blacker *timbre*, and the massing of the shades seemed an apt description of the ongoing current.

He scanned the faces that swam past him, but Helga's was not among them. The wail of a pipe wound a liana of light through the dark undergrowth of the drums. It combined with the surging chatter, reminding him of breakers flowering on desolate shores. Couples formed and danced intensely; some danced alone as the compelling rhythms swelled and sank. A shock of scented hair was flung in his face as a woman wheeled past, and at that moment Helga came towards him. She had bound her hair tightly, letting fall over her shoulder a single bright plait. Her eyes were luminous with intense vitality, like summer skies above a beach which breakers showered with foam. He closed with her, and they danced a few wild steps; the measure was strange to him but she was perfectly at ease and drew him so skilfully into its rhythms that he merged easily with familiar fantasies. The sound of the sea receded, the shore disappeared, the echoing caverns vanished, and in their stead the *décor* of Lorma's lair became a cosmic web in which Helga and he alone existed. Yet were they not alone. Helga, catching the glint in Lorma's eyes, laughingly withdrew from the dance. There was a riot of applause, but Helga alone sensed Lorma's mood.

If it was as if their dance had been a signal. The music quickened in tempo and the entire assembly responded with fervour. Above the cacophony, North heard the rain hissing against the curtained windows. The air was thick and redolent of perfume,

sweat, and alcohol. A flash of lightning penetrated the close-swathed apartment, and the music flared with a sharper, more savage cadence. Yet the dissonance was strangely organized and it resembled certain oriental orchestrations which the Western ear finds singularly disturbing.

North became conscious simultaneously of several facts: Helga had vanished, and Hilary Reynolds was threading his way towards Lorma who was holding the leather case. Dancers wheeled about them, their faces twisted into masks grotesquely reminiscent of tribal totems leering and mouthing obscenities: a larval ocean of flesh animated by dark and atavistic hungers.

North was suddenly oppressed by the fetid atmosphere. He felt physically ill, mentally disorientated and unable to account for the sudden change of atmosphere. Something entirely inhuman had entered into the midst of them, or perhaps the essential irrationality of the cosmos had taken on flesh, or an alien entity had been born of the lightning.

North moved in Lorma's direction, but a body intervened and hot kisses were rained upon him. The impact was devastating, the music indescribable, and the girl in his arms created a vortex of desire which made her irresistible. The urgent hunger she aroused, combined with the fury of the drums and of the storm without, set his nerves aflame. He abandoned himself to the current and fell with the girl upon cushions scattered like glowing petals near an archway which led out of the apartment. But before he could possess her, another figure floated like a spectre between them, a phantom with eyes of blue and a sinuous coil of plaited hair. Then the spectres were wheeled away and Lorma was urging him forward, almost goading him through the archway. He found himself precipitated on to the cold mosaic, where Helga had showered down silver rain. Contrary to her expectations, Lorma failed to arouse in him anything but ire. This he managed to conceal as chaotic images swirled before his inner vision. As these faded, he noticed a tall

negro framed in the archway and standing with his back to the dancers. A cigarette dangled from his lips. Behind lazy spirals of smoke two heavily lidded eyes regarded North with gentle amusement as Lorma grabbed him by the arm and dragged him to the staircase.

Lorma's bedroom lay on the first floor. It was small, snug, and bathed in the soft glow of a single lamp. She locked the door behind them and confronted North with an ambiguous smile. Triumph or derision? He did not know which. He sank on to a divan to the left of the door. The curtains were undrawn and streaks of lightning stabbed the room. Lorma drew close to him, and, as she did so, her fantastic swathings fell apart. North glimpsed in the fleeting flashes the sheer snow of her nakedness. He looked up at her quizzically.

"We're leaving!", she said, and lit very slowly, very composedly, a cigarette which she extracted from her gaping shroud.

"But you can't walk out now", he protested.

She shoved him back, her nostrils dilating with fury.

"We're leaving", she repeated, emphatically. "We're going to see an old friend of mine".

"Which old friend?". North's tone combined sarcasm and anger.

"He is known as Spiritmaster", she replied. "I don't know his real name; and what's more, I don't care", she spat at him. Then a crazed expression rippled over her features and her eyes became glazed.

"What! That humbug! Now listen, Lorma..."

North got to his feet, but she pushed him back.

"You've never attended one of his *real* séances", she replied with asperity.

North remained silent, staring stupidly at the *vever* etched

on her flesh. This was Reynolds' business, not his; had she forgotten Reynolds? Then a vision of cornflower-blue obliterated Lorma's image.

"How about Hilary?", he asked lamely.

"How about him?"

"This is *his* evening", North reminded her. "He did not ask you to use those *other* tracks".

Lorma appeared genuinely mystified as she squirmed into a gown which distinguished her from nudity by a mere superimposition of colour. She mumbled a few inaudible words and made for the door.

The *juba* continued in full spate, with Helga feeding the machine with dubious sounds. Although Lorma had ignored Reynolds' advice, he felt acutely responsible for the results. He gazed with some admiration at the girl who had become so completely the centre of the *juba*. The contest had resulted not only in Lorma's defeat, but in victory for himself, for Helga had somehow freed him from a thralldom he secretly had deplored. He threaded his way through the concourse of dancers and reached the door in time to see Lorma leave the house with Raymond North. For a moment Reynolds panicked, but the sensation vanished as abruptly as it had arisen. He went swiftly up the stairs with the purpose of retrieving a small fetish he had given her. As he approached her bedroom door a slight sound caused him to pause. It was being slowly, cautiously, opened. He side-stepped into a curtained alcove, and held his breath as a figure floated past him and descended the stairs. Leaning over the rail he saw a tall negro disappear into the main hallway. His dignified, almost aristocratic mien identified the man almost immediately – to Reynolds – as belonging to the tribe of the Masai, a tribe of very ancient lineage. The flushing of a water-closet diverted his attention. A slant-eyed, walnut-coloured girl emerged from a lavatory and sidled up to him. She reeked of rum and patchouli, and gave him a mischievous smile.

"You queuein' for Uremi too?", she lisped, and pressed close to him. The excitement of the evening, the distant sound of drums, the tense atmosphere of storm, all combined to shatter Reynolds' habitual reserve. Opening the door of Lorma's room, utterly forgetful of its recent intruder, he swept the girl on to the divan and toppled on to her. Lithe as a lynx she wriggled free, laughed shrilly and wrenched at her skirt which fell away like a husk. Standing against Lorma's dressing-table she eyed him archly, her long shapely legs glittering with the sheen of lime-green stockings. Another quick movement and she had released her breasts from a flowered *bandanna* which fluttered to the floor.

The thought of his position brought Reynolds' suddenly to his senses. But the anxiety did not endure; Lorma's image had lost its charge. In its stead an image of Helga flashed through his mind as swiftly as the summer lightning. Peels of thunder coincided with Uremi's onslaught. With bared teeth she flung herself on to the couch and crouched there like a beast. All the fire that Lorma had dowsed, when she thwarted Uremi's seduction of North, now flared within her a million times stronger as she closed with Reynolds, and the storm's reverberations fused them into a single body of molten flesh. He was back – instantly – in Madagascar, in Haiti, or in the profounder night of Africa where he had not found, as in London this evening, so much tropical fire. All the madness latent within him sprang into life, and he slaked years of suppressed hunger in a few moments of insane passion.

3

Uremi elbowed her way through a skein of dancers. She was exultant, and her triumph was crowned by Ghéde's acquisition of the fetish that was vitally important to both of them. As she singled him out, the tall negro smiled mysteriously.

The lair was still vibrant with rhythm. The beat was *Bultu*, which differs from the *Petro*, as the off-beat *Petro* differs from the *Rada*. If *Petro* is black, and *Rada* white, then *Bultu* may be said to transcend both, being blacker than the darkest *Petro*, and more dazzling than the whitest *Rada*. The fierce *Petro*-beat stands midway between *Bultu* and *Rada*; *Bultu*, the call of a hideous cult, is the averse reflection of *Rada*.

Ghéde withdrew from his pocket a curiously shaped object. It may have been a stone, or some petrified glume flecked with irregular streaks in which the form of a cross lay embedded. He held it between forefinger and thumb and appraised it as though it were a priceless gem. He then returned it to his pocket. Uremi drew close and brushed her breasts against the back of his hand. In a mirror slanted above their heads, she saw a white and a black body locked in copulation on a bed of coloured cushions which resembled enormous roses. Other shards of glass reflected similar scenes. They hung from walls and ceilings like mobile paintings, and in the immense mirror near the archway a flaxen-haired dancer wheeled and writhed and seemed to epitomize the living frescoes around it.

The mirror, as a symbolic device, played a dominant rôle in the scheme of decoration. It symbolised the Lord of the Crossroads, the emblem of whom is the Cross, the Seal of Baron Samedi, or Carfax. Its reflection of reality makes of the mirror a magical meeting-place of spirit and matter. Each reflection represents a crossing over from earth to what is beyond, from waking life to dream. When a cross is thus established, when

an image is embraced by the mirror, there occurs the subtle union referred to in the ancient Hermetic axiom: 'As Above, so Below; as Within, so Without'.

Ghède mounted a window-ledge to obtain a better view of the dancer. A sense of imminent catastrophe pervaded the place, as if something from Outside had chosen this point in time, this point in space, and this assembly of people, to form the vortex of its influence. People here were being stripped not only of their physical veils but of psychic veils also, and these were dissolving before Ghède's gaze as the drums beat on relentlessly.

A girl named Frail whirled past them. Although a *sacatra*, she would have passed for white anywhere except at *Little Leaf's*² where Uremi had first met her. Frail's eyes were glazed; her dress – torn to shreds – hung like ropes around her angular body. She was galvanized by a frenzy that would keep her dancing until dawn. Then Uremi's gaze followed Ghède's.

As Helga danced, her flaxen plait untwined itself. The maize fanned out; the rivulets of golden strands, which the *vevers* on the walls appeared to repeat with geometric precision, poured like light above her shoulders. In the depths of the mirror, the *vevers* seemed imbued with sentience. A vast and occult network of nerve-fibres united zones of consciousness normally unconnected, electrifying them by a power so far beyond their ability of transmission that they quivered and shrieked like wires tormented in a gale. They were vehicles strained almost beyond breaking point by an energy which the *Bultu*-beat released through Helga, through every filament of her maize-yellow hair, lacing the lair in a lattice of magical power. The complex vectors rayed out and energized the *vevers* so that the latent *loa* which they concealed arose from the mirror's depth.

² The term *Little Leaf* denotes a member of a Voodoo society. In the present context it is the name of a club in West London frequented mainly by negroes. It flourished during World War II.

Uremi knew little about these forces, but enough to be apprehensive. She turned impulsively to Ghède, but his whole attention was absorbed by the reflected image which embodied in the fluidity of its dynamic dance the atavistic spirit of the *vevers*. The web of saltant forms reified the latent spirit-forms. Uremi tried to fathom the *vever* traced upon Lorma's body. She wandered how it would reify...

At this juncture, Frail mounted the ebony image of Alekba which Lorma had had installed in strict accordance with Voodoo ritual procedure. Frail's action seemed to gather up and concentrate all the crisscross currents of energy flashing through space. Uremi tugged vainly at Ghède's sleeve...

If a cosmic spider had woven a web, and if the intersection of each thread represented a nerve ganglion of exquisitely refined sensation, then such a web would typify precisely the state of the lair at that moment. Each entity, each interconnected element of the web, sensed a climax, a state of critical tension which might blossom in fulfilment, or disintegrate in explosive storm beneath the impact of Frail's symbolic immolation.

Uremi endeavoured to estimate the outcome of Frail's act that would inevitably short-circuit, in one supreme catastrophe, all the magical force that had been building up during hours of deliberate orgy. Yet again she tugged Ghède's sleeve. He smiled down at her and drew the fetish from his pocket. Like an eye lying in his hand, an eye divorced from a body, unwinking and concentrating in its depths the remarkable intensity of its inward-searching gaze, it lay and stared up at her, communicating an instant sense of absolute power, absolute authority. She shrank before its gaze, aware that the vitality expressed all about her was as Death, compared with the Life concentrated in the palm of Ghède's hand.

Uremi knew that Frail's obsession was with her own sterility; she wanted, above all, to proliferate, to bear, to put

forth tendrils. Her womb, sunk in the arid angularity of her body's cold, shivered like a star in glacial voids, in a vacuum of loneliness engendered by the exaggerated value which she placed upon her virginity. Totally overwhelmed by the fire of life, melted by contact with a source of heat and light that manifested sometimes at Lorma's – though never before as on this particular night – Frail had abandoned herself to the waves of energy radiating from the *vevers*. Now she ascended the steps of the shrine of Alekba and entered a Nilotic shadowland haunted by spectral foetuses. In an alcove opposite the immense mirror, a glittering object attracted her. There stood the image of Alekba, erect in shadows, its priapic attribute worn smooth by centuries of worship. She mounted the steps and disappeared in the obscurity of the deity's shrine.

That night, Frail re-established the ancient rite. Through swaying forms, Uremi watched her ascend the steps and abase herself before the god. Her clothes hung around her like strips of skin on a skeleton. She wound her arms around Alekba's neck and straddled the root of his power in a shuddering embrace. Uremi imagined she could hear the suspirations as Frail's body shook with the ecstasy that electrified her. Then she slipped from the pivot of her bliss, leaving it bathed in the salve of her body's homage. Anointed again after so long a sleep, the image seemed to take on life; it became the cynosure of all attraction. Mesmerised by the passion of Frail's performance, a movement rippled through the crowd as the women surged as one body in the direction of the god.

During the ensuing stampede, Ghéde came face to face with Helga as her dance drew to its climax. Their glances clashed, and a mutation occurred. The music swelled from a deeper, more interior source of rhythm, as if it no longer utilized the atmosphere as a physical medium for its vibrations. It now used an unearthly form of silence to convey impulses incommunicable by gross sound-waves. Those who had communed

with the Spirit of the *Bultu*-drums heard the voices of the *loa* crying to them of ecstasies long vanished from earth. Helga and Ghéde closed in a dance which gave mute expression to that Great Identity which, in ages past, as male-female Force, had manifested in a single nameless Image.

It is probable that the communicants were unaware of the profounder significance of the rite. Ghéde was a *bokor*, a priest in his own right; but there were mysteries beyond him. And Helga, through the spontaneity of her own nature, had intuited some of its deeper mysteries with an intensity keener even than Ghéde's.

Frail fell among the crowd, charged with the sacrament which rendered her, temporarily, the vehicle of the god she had invoked, and in that spirit she was mounted by those wishing to unite with its essence.

Uremi watched with fascination as a succession of women mounted and fell from the god. Around the black spindle had gathered a cloudy foam which dripped to the floor: a trail of slime left by an invisible serpent. She was conscious of a sense of loss. To engender a fetish such as she and Ghéde now possessed, the god's True Voice was needed to combine with the mystical afflux. She had not noticed Ghéde's absence, and she turned towards him as a sudden brilliance blinded her. It was not of the storm; it was the Oracle of the God as it flashed upon its votaries its spasms of sperm, and Uremi wondered fearfully what thunder would follow such lightning. She fled in search of Ghéde. As if in answer, the elements within achieved an abrupt climax, and a bolt rocked the building as torrents of water swept through the lair.

North arrived at Spiritmaster's place in a morose mood. The storm had not improved matters, and Lorma had driven with abandon. He realised that she had suffered a humiliating defeat, although he did not believe it was the result of a pre-meditated attack. He admired Helga's turning an initial disadvantage to her credit with so much consummate self-confidence. He resolved to make no allusion to the matter. He had often weathered Lorma's displeasure, but tonight he felt vaguely uneasy, and as if some more than bearable climax were pending. He had no quarrel with Reynolds. On the contrary, he valued his friendship and frequently derived inspiration from the way in which he described his travels. North realized that he was now as little interested in Lorma and her affairs as he was in anything else that distracted him from the reverie which had, that morning, possessed him in the sunlit square. Intervening events had disrupted that dream, but now – in the stresses of the storm without, and of that other storm brewing beside him – he vacillated, unable either to recoagulate his dream, or to disperse the whirlwind of forces that had driven him back into Lorma's web.

The car halted with a jerk in a squalid street littered with equally expensive cars which seemed oddly out of place. The storm had not abated, and it was sheer good luck that enabled them to reach the house without repeating Helga's act. North had not met Spiritmaster, but all accounts of him which he had read or heard, did not dispose him favourably towards him. He was surprised that Lorma could be so impressed.

A slatternly girl admitted them to the house. She gave North a searching, though not, he thought, an unsympathetic scrutiny. They followed her down uncarpeted stairs. A murmur of voices floated through a curtained gap in a wall, drab with

peeling paint. The girl lifted the curtain and disappeared, returning a moment later with two pairs of ornate but shabby slippers, one pair for Lorma, the other for him. After they had put them on, the girl again raised the curtain and ushered them into the room beyond. It was hung with lanterns, through the shattered panes of which naked bulbs shed a garish light. North decided that the room, which was vast, owed its size to an amalgamation of basements comprising the entire block in which the house was situated. In lieu of intervening walls were thick pillars decorated with curious diagrams, amongst which he recognized ancient and occult symbols. Shambling towards them through knots of chattering women, North discerned an uncouth creature resembling a kyphotic ape dressed in a greasy chasuble, rent in several places. Slavering over Lorma's proffered hand, the creature lisped: "Spiritmaster most pleased tonight, most pleased". The words came in an unctuous falsetto. Then North was addressed – to his astonishment – in a clear and resonant voice which demanded to know the purpose of his visit that evening. Stunned by the rudeness of this approach, he turned to Lorma. To his amazement he saw her take Spiritmaster's hand and place it, first on her head, then on her breasts; and, finally, with a peculiar milking motion which seemed to elongate delusively the arm she was holding, she drew it down, and thrust her thighs against the medial and index fingers which were projecting for that purpose. The verbal obscenity with which she accompanied her gesture astonished North no less than the brusque enquiry. Lorma continued the performance with a snigger, which reminded him of the girl with the coppery fringe whose body had appeared to those who found it "savaged as if by wild beasts".

Spiritmaster leered at him quizzically.

"This is our special mode of salutation", he explained as he exchanged intimate glances with Lorma.

North seized Lorma's shoulders and whirled her round;

their faces almost touched.

"What's the game, Lorma? Why bring me along to watch you and your swinish friends at play?"

Spiritmaster scowled and shuffled over to a group of fawning women. North looked around him. Apart from himself and his host there was not a man in the place.

"They're in an adjoining room", murmured Lorma in answer to his unspoken observation. "We mix only during the actual séance; Spiritmaster has strong views on polarity, and the active and passive currents of magnetism, which would be nullified by premature mingling".

North looked at her intently.

"You mean..."

"Nothing of the sort. You are jumping to conclusions", she said mockingly, but there was a note of gravity in her voice.

"I'm quitting", he said, and made for the curtained gap in the wall. But Lorma caught his arm. Her gaze seemed to contain an urgent appeal: "Stay with me!", she pleaded. North's anger subsided, and he sensed danger in the place. It was remote from their usual haunts, and situated in a notoriously disreputable locality. Disturbing images assailed his mind, memories of recent events coupled with elusive impressions he could not place. He was aware that they welled from a region that was the diametrical averse of the tranquil island of his reveries.

Behind the murmuring voices he recognized the unctuous accents of Spiritmaster: "And now, dear Sisters – the robing. As this may disconcert our new friend we shall ask him to leave us for a little while".

A muffled giggling ensued and North was the centre of attention. The assembled votaries began worming out of their clothes as he disappeared behind the curtain which the slattern pulled aside for him. She hustled him into a small alcove and

handed him a white robe which was far from spotless. When he began putting it on, she made emphatic indications that he was expected to remove his clothes before assuming it. Her gestures became blatantly suggestive, and it was then that he realised that the girl was dumb. White-robed figures were now passing in single file through the aperture. The girl had sunk upon her haunches and was flexing a leg against the wall of the alcove, thus impeding his exit. Her frock, drawn taut by the movement, revealed the double mesh of her stocking-tops, and vague memories assailed him again. A gong sounded imperiously as he stepped over her to take his place among the celebrants of a rite unknown to him.

5

Reynolds' failure to find the fetish in Lorma's room made him the more anxious to retrieve it. Some impulse resulting from his visit to Raymond North that afternoon urged him to renew his attempts.

Reynolds' discovery of the fetish had occurred under extraordinary circumstances during field work in the African region of Kabultiloa. There he had exposed the site of a subterranean maze which, according to native tradition, had been guarded since primordial times by qliphotic *loa* in the form of spectral hyaena known as the *Bultu*. His party of four had sunk a shaft and, choosing a night on which the moon was full, had set out to explore the underground passages.

The descent had scarcely begun when an unmistakable sound warned them of the presence of hyaena.

Being armed, they did not fear these beasts in natural form; and in their supernatural form they did not believe. Yet the noise that seemed to rise from beneath them curdled the blood. The weird ululations of the hyaena is not a pleasant sound heard even from the safety of a compound, but at dead of night in a region remote and shunned it can paralyse with fear.

The man who had preceded the party down the shaft was powerfully built, and at the end of a fruitless search of the labyrinthine tunnels he had hauled up Reynolds to ground level with a single movement. He had then lost his balance and plunged headlong into the cavity beneath. The man's fall dislodged the props supporting the shaft and the ground caved inwards, engulfing him and the three others who had not yet ascended. The ululations rose to a crescendo, then faded to utter silence. It was the most dreadful absence of sound that Reynolds had ever known.

Later attempts at locating the precise site of the disaster had failed, and Reynolds could not for the promise of any reward prevail upon the natives for assistance. Not long afterwards Reynolds returned to Europe. But somewhere in the vicinity of that excavation he had picked up an odd-looking stone which he had slipped into his pocket and forgotten in the stress and confusion surrounding the incident. Until one day – in Madagascar – he was conversing with an old *obeah*-man to whom he mentioned, but guardedly, both the incident and the legend of Kabultiloa. The man seemed little interested until Reynolds described the stone, at which the old *bokor* became wildly agitated. He advised Reynolds first to bury the stone in a certain manner which he would prescribe, and then to forget about the affair. It was, he explained, a 'spirit-stone' of the *Bultu*, the eye of a hyaena embalmed in magical oils, a condenser of immense occult power, and that whoever had the mis-

fortune to find one would be haunted by hideous nightmares and suffer endless calamities. A sly expression then creased the old sorcerer's features. He claimed to be able to render the charm innocuous if Reynolds would bring it to him for treatment. Drawing him close, the *bokor* whispered in his ear. Reynolds recoiled, convinced that the old man was crazed. In order to be rid of his presence he agreed to bring along the stone for the sorcerer's ministrations.

Outside the *bokor*'s hut, life proceeded as usual and Reynolds felt justified in regarding as mad the words he had heard. Even so, he was uncertain; perhaps they contained a connection, a remotely possible though monstrously improbable connection, with his experiences in Kabultiloa. Now, in the house on Crawford Street, he felt it imperative to recover the stone which, in ignorance of its true nature, he had given to Lorma.

The fact that an intruder, a negro unknown to him, had decided upon a similar course of action, held a sinister significance for him. Perhaps Uremi had stirred a dormant memory. Vague apprehensions assailed him.

On re-entering the lair, he was appalled by the effects of the music. He had attended several of Lorma's *jubas*, but none had reminded him so forcibly of certain *corroborrees* witnessed by him in little known regions of Africa. Lorma had totally disregarded his advice; and now she had absconded with North.

Reviewing the events of the afternoon, particularly his meeting with North, who had acted irrationally, Reynolds began to suspect him of duplicity. It was well known that Lorma had been North's mistress, and that he still attracted her. Reynolds speculated as to where they might have gone. He felt no animosity towards either of them, but he was angered by the disappearance of the fetish and by the tall Masai who had evidently stolen it.

Uremi emerged from the *mêlée*, strangely calm in contrast; too calm! She was staring fixedly at a mirror ensconced in the ceiling; she resembled a *zombie*, but a *zombie* with feelings. Reynolds could sense her suppressed emotion. As he drew alongside of her, the stampede for Alekba began. Uremi became aware of Reynolds' approach, and – like a wild beast – she snarled. Jealousy inspired the onslaught. Ghéde had betrayed her; she urged Reynolds to intercede – or lose the stone. Amazed to hear his own anxieties voiced by Uremi, Reynolds hesitated. She urged him to stop the dance, but he remained undecided.

Ghéde, enmeshed in the glamour of Helga's web, was prepared to abandon himself and his magical attainments to a mere girl who, by the sheer potency of her natural magic, had enthralled him utterly. He gyrated with incredible rapidity, like a glistening spindle. A space had formed about himself and Helga; the other dancers fell back, and when the speed of his revolutions diminished, Reynolds realised that Ghéde was naked. A network of vevers glowed and glistened like blood upon his ebony flesh; and on each of his legs, painted in green, a serpent. Helga ceased her whirlings and sank to the floor. She approached Ghéde reptantly, slithering on her belly. His vision was inward-turned to some profound region of being, where he communed no doubt with the gods of his ancient faith. Helga suddenly raised her head; her tongue flickered and licked the twin serpents. She then reared up, and, encircling his waist with her arms, took the phallus in her mouth. All the magical power within Ghéde had become concentrated at that point. It leapt along the tube which had become the Wand of Alekba, the flowering Rod of the Dark God. Then the dancer sank to his knees as if slain, and Helga arose, charged with flame.

Reynolds had witnessed a similar rite in the Congo, but he never expected to see it performed, precise in every detail, in the heart of London. He turned to Uremi, but she had vanished. As he looked about him, a savage flash of lightning stabbed, and the place was ablaze within minutes; it was literally raining fire.

Raymond North seated himself at a large oval table surrounded by figures robed like himself. A great calm had settled over the place. He was sitting between two women and he noticed that the sexes were disposed alternately about the table. Opposite to him was Spiritmaster, who glanced at him insolently. Lorma, who was seated next to him, was gazing at the creature with an expression of rapt attention which irritated North. He did not know why he cared about her actions and reactions, but the events of the past twenty-four hours had once more related her to him in a way he could not understand. Even more enigmatic was the fact that her house on Crawford Street formed the centre of the figure he had traced on the road-map.

A gong boomed behind him, and Spiritmaster rose to his feet with a leer on his face that put North in mind of Fagin rallying his confederates for some special devilry. But the uncouth appearance of this Master of Ceremonies, his unshaved face and his filthy fingernails, was not alone responsible for the repulsive atmosphere which his presence generated. From thoughts about the peccadillos of a Fagin, North began to consider the more dangerous rascalities of a Rasputin. The image of the *moujik* of Tobolsk rose before his mental vision; it bore a strong resemblance to Spiritmaster who, like his notorious Russian counterpart, attracted by the sheer magnetism of his presence some of the most beautiful women of his day.

Spiritmaster grasped first Lorma's hand, and then the hand of the woman seated on his other side. This seemed to signal a general linking of hands, and North's were clasped promptly by his immediate neighbours. The human chain formed, Spiritmaster bowed his head as if in prayer. North, watching him closely, knew that the attitude was a pose; the dark glit-

tering eyes were ranging restlessly round the circle of bowed heads that had followed his lead.

The electric lights had been switched off, and a massive candle provided the sole source of illumination. Its giant flame rose in a calm white almond of fire. Despite the distance, North could feel its heat. Apart from the muffled rumble of the storm, not a sound disturbed the vast room which now lay in deep shadow. North could barely discern the figures painted on the pilasters; only that they appeared to move when the flame flared up or dipped fitfully. Then a lugubrious moaning sound began to vibrate, swelling from a scarcely audible hum to a reverberant boom, like breakers thundering in the hollows of caves on distant shores. North tried to remember where he had heard the sound before, but an overpowering drowsiness engulfed him. He struggled against it until it required all the force of his will to remain awake.

It was some time before he realised that the droning had ceased and that Spiritmaster was addressing one of the women. The hands which held his own tightened their grip. Surfacing from the lethargy into which he had sunk, he heard Spiritmaster declaring his intention of contacting the woman's spirit-guide. A wave of anger surged over North, and he cursed himself for letting himself become involved in this kind of idiocy. He could not help recalling Crowley's description of those given to such pursuits:

They make themselves perfectly passive, and, so far from employing any methods of protection, deliberately invite all and sundry spirits, demons, shells of the dead, all the excrement and filth of earth and hell, to squirt their slime over them. This invitation is readily accepted, unless a clean man be present with an aura good enough to frighten these foul denizens of the pit.

But North was, perhaps, more angered at being hauled up from the well of fathomless contentment into which the

sonorous vibrations had plunged him. This happened several times, and each time he became a little more deeply immersed, so that he was no longer irritated, even, when Lorma persuaded Spiritmaster to call up her own guide in order to question it about "a certain young woman". North knew that she referred to Helga Larssen.

Spiritmaster resumed his mysterious invocations in deference to Lorma's request, and it did not take North long to realise that this spirit-circle differed in several respects from those about which he had read; for, taking Crowley at his word, he had made a point of avoiding séances. The chanting was one such difference; it induced in him such profound quietude that he was acutely discomforted by the slightest extraneous sounds. He wanted to slip unreservedly into the sea of sleep, out of which the sounds constantly withdrew him. Although Spiritmaster presumably established *rapport* with the required guides, North was unable to recall the actual communications. Perhaps the replies were transmitted inaudibly and without any medium of sensible speech. He did not know if the querents were satisfied; whether Lorma received her advice. To North none of these things now mattered. He had entered into the real spirit of the proceedings, and the interruptions that punctuated them merely obscured, for the time being, their ultimate aim.

Although he could not have put it in words, poet though he was, North had fathomed, in a flash, the mystery behind all such attempts at penetrating the veil that separates the world of effects from the darkly moving causes beyond it. He felt, at one and the same time, close to the island of calm which he sometimes skirted in his reveries, and also to the gulf of horror which had yawned suddenly at his feet in a sunlit square. Thoughts such as these hovered about him as if independently of his mind, until a tightening of the grip on his hands brought him sharply back to his immediate surroundings. Opening his

eyes, he was surprised to find that he had been witnessing various stages of the séance whilst his physical eyes were closed. The realisation was so uncanny that he felt strangely disorientated. At that moment, Spiritmaster rose to his feet and dashed the cowl from his head. Never before had North seen abject terror contort a human face as he saw it then, and he had somehow been the cause of it. A chasm, brilliant, profound, seemed to open before him, and he heard wild ululations, like the screams of women echoing from a cavern, or a shaft sunk deep in the earth. The noise gradually faded until it resembled a high-pitched whine, like a rushing wind shrieking through wires. Then it diminished in volume and vanished to a point so intense that it shrilled in his ears, like the tumultuous reverberations that shudder on the air long after a gong has ceased its sounding.

A vast mirror closed over him; or was it the shiny lid of a sarcophagus, or an elliptical lake of frozen black water, or merely the table-top before him? He was conscious of hovering over the oval expanse, then of sinking beneath it, bearing with him a vague impression of waving forms or breeze-bowed reeds fringing the banks of a river. Two static points of fire pierced the coiling vapours of the twilight in which he was plunged. Eyes watched him; but whose eyes, and where had he previously seen them?

He swam in a shadowy labyrinth of columns which rotated about him. One of them ejected a woman's form. Around her navel there twined thin spirals like the tendrils of a plant; they forced their way up until her body was bisected by the surface of the table. North was reminded of those curious paintings by Paul Delvaux, wherein dream-engendered women emerge from the boles of majestic trees, or peel fastidiously the bark from their arboreal anatomies to reveal a startling nudity.

As he watched, the figure slipped deeper beneath the shining surface. The tendrils luxuriated and climbed upwards until

they encircled the firm breasts. A shadow of remembrance drifted over his mind as he strayed in a web of crisscross corridors. Superimposed upon these impressions were vaguely familiar yet maddeningly elusive dreams wherein he vainly pursued a fleeting form...

A shrill cacophony rent the veils which divided him from the form that was manifesting. It was harsh and metallic and resembled the chitterings of the mad, or the chilling chuckles of the hyaena. He searched about vainly for its source, because the ferocious reverberations issued from his own throat. As they did so, a hirsute growth appeared upon the woman's body. It proliferated so swiftly that the texture of her skin erupted in tomentous patches which coalesced and formed a bestial pelt.

North revelled in the sense of sheer exhilaration that possessed him. The preceding hours, with their tensions of storm and frustration, the equivocal beat of the *bultu*-drums in Lorma's lair, and, more recently, Spiritmaster's chanting, had unsealed within him cells of energy which exploded with the dammed-up force of centuries. And at the climax of the storm, he sprang. A searing flame shot up as their two bodies impacted. Lorma's breath fanned him, blasted open a vault of memory, fathoms deep. As the pungent odours of blood and burning intoxicated him, the storm drove its incandescent bolt into the basement of the house.

In the ensuing chaos, North partially surfaced. He was conscious of an acute pain in his legs. The slattern, clutching the curtain that was now a curling tongue of fire, fell before the onslaught of fleeing forms. But the terror in her eyes was not born of fire alone. North's spirit exulted within him. All around him: carnage, chaos. Then a burning pain stabbed him. Unable to move, pinned beneath a pillar on which the figures of ancient gods were licked by flame to fitful life, he saw the earth gape beneath him. He pitched headlong.

There came an unfamiliar sensation of sudden weightlessness which was accepted without question. It was not until he threshed in a dizzy spiral of smoke above the flames that panic seized him, for he then discovered that he had no arms. In their stead, vaporous tentacles emanated from an equally nebulous column of shadowy tissue. He was dead. A cold terror gripped him until it became clear that he could not be both dead *and* terrified. With a supreme effort of will he struggled against the vortex of annihilation. His identity, his essential *seity*, was ebbing away in black waves of receding consciousness. Perhaps he had, at the séance, confused his own identity with that of an entity invoked by Spiritmaster's infernal art. Yet North knew, without doubt, that he was Raymond North, although he sensed within him the presence of an overshadowing entity that was, paradoxically, also himself, and yet not Raymond North. He then noticed that his spatial position had changed. The smouldering rubble of a fire-gutted building had vanished and he was careering at great speed along unfamiliar streets. The velocity of his flight, accomplished with perfect ease, filled him with a sense of elation. Whether he were somnambulist or wraith, substance or shadow, seemed to matter not at all.

He then began to recognize familiar landmarks as he approached Oxford Street from a westerly point. The unexpected juxtaposition of a familiar visual object with the psychosonic images accompanying his fugal ecstasy, faded as he realized he was alone in a world subject to laws entirely alien to those with which he had been familiar. He had accomplished his flight, so far, by an unnatural mode of locomotion several feet above ground level. When he became aware of this abnormality he faltered for the first time since his journey began, and his speed slackened instantly. Some sense of inner compulsion again suggested that an alien entity had control of a vital part of what he regarded as himself. The sense of freedom, of exhilaration, diminished.

Swerving out of Oxford Street he veered sharply right, recognized Baker Street, and remembered facets of an existence from which he now felt irrevocably estranged. He did not wish to continue; something held him back, but an infinitely stronger power impelled him forward. Before his inner vision flashed a vivid image of his body pinioned by a pillar carved with ancient deities. The gods were alive with flame, and a stench of burning flesh assailed his nostrils. If he turned back, would it be to find a burnt-out shell, a skeleton, nigrescent, fused with the flaming pillar? He had to go forward. As the vision faded, he felt a searing pain, as if an iron claw dragged him from beneath a ponderous weight. By contrast, his present weightlessness was sheer bliss. He revelled in the sense of freedom which it gave him, and he noticed that the speed of his progress had increased. But as it did so, his attention was once more exteriorised and he became conscious of familiar landmarks until a startling phenomenon, totally unfamiliar, caused him fresh alarm. A vast rose of flame was spreading over the sky. It blossomed from the lower end of Baker Street. Unable to credit its actuality, North saw it as a reified mental image of the conflagration which had caused the death of his body in the fire-ravaged basement of Spiritmaster's house. As he shot along Baker Street and debouched into Regents Park, his thoughts, not unnaturally, assumed the shapes of rare and exotic animals. These impressions coagulated into the contorted face of the dumb slattern as she had fallen beneath the impact of his vicious assault. At the same moment, the echinated torso of a tree dissolved into flesh and extruded a mauve and voluptuous flower. Its crenellated petals resembled the frilled orifices of certain deep-sea organisms which gape monstrously. The dead pallor of Lorma's anatomy could not have been less inviting.

The bed upon which he lay was in partial darkness; the only sounds were the creak of starched linen caused by a nurse's movements, and the occasional coughing of other patients.

North watched the nurse from where he lay. It seemed to him that she had always been there, seated at a table on which stood a green-shaded lamp and a heap of papers. Above her head, barely visible in the background, the dial of a clock loomed over glass swing-doors.

Every time he tried to move, a pain shot through his legs, and the severe-looking woman in white glanced in his direction. He wondered where he was, and why he was there. A persistent but nebulous memory hung like a cloud about him, defying all his attempts at recall.

A bell shrilled somewhere, and another woman appeared. She replaced the one at the table and assumed a similar attitude of absorption in the pile of papers spread before her. She was younger, softer, less rigid. Her pale face was the last thing he remembered before sleep engulfed him. But the first image of which he was aware upon waking was a vaguely familiar face which he was, however, incapable of identifying. Something within him refused to respond to Reynolds' greeting. The nurse receded into the background after introducing 'Mr. Reynolds'. Reynolds repeated his name, and North was surprised by the concern the man showed about his identity. He made every effort to acknowledge it, but being vague as to his own identity he failed to appreciate the urgency of Reynolds' predicament, nor could he understand the man's eagerness to be recognized; surely the man knew who he was!

The nurse reappeared and raised North to a sitting position. He noticed that the room had brightened, that a clear blue sky

was visible through the window opposite his bed. A smooth hand brushed against his cheek as the nurse arranged his pillows. His gaze lingered on the graceful line of her haunches as she retreated. He then scrutinized his visitor intently.

Reynolds' situation was embarrassing, and the sunlit ward with its orderly rows of white metal bedsteads, each with an inquisitive burden, was not calculated to ease it. He was the only visitor, and North showed no sign of recognizing him. He had been advised that the patient was suffering from a leg injury aggravated by severe shock and burns. Reynolds found himself quite unable to tell him that Lorma had died in the fire at Spiritmaster's house. All that survived, where she had been concerned, was the black metal cross she had worn as a charm about her throat. Nor would he be able to tell him that he, Reynolds, had narrowly escaped a similar fate in the house on Crawford Street, at approximately the same time and under similar circumstances. Among other survivors had been Ghéde and Helga Larssen, who had given to Reynolds a letter addressed to North. He fingered the envelope in his pocket as he stood, wretchedly, beside the bed. North was staring straight through him and his face had a curiously vulpine cast about it which Reynolds had never previously noticed. It may have been due to a play of light and shadow, for the illusion swiftly vanished. However, the impression remained, and Reynolds groped after fugitive memories vaguely charged with dread.

"You have something for me; where is it?"

Reynolds emerged with a start from his cogitations. North also seemed startled by the words he had uttered. The nurse hovered nearby, arranging flowers in a bowl. North, struggling to a sitting posture, emitted a groan, and Reynolds appealed to her mutely. She leaned over the bed to ease the patient into a more comfortable position, and slipped on the highly polished floor. As Reynolds steadied her, North's arm shot out and seized her round the waist. Was it again a play of sunlight and shadow,

or had his arm been blackened in the fire? The hand, too, seemed disproportionately long, and the fingers curved, like claws, as North drove them deeply into the nurse's side. There came a stifled gasp and the woman fell forward. In the confusion that followed, Reynolds saw between North's teeth a small black object from which dangled a fine gold chain. As it disappeared within his mouth the chain trickled down his chin like a thin rivulet of blood.

A nearby patient yelled hysterically and rose from his bed. His head was swathed in bandages; the eyes glared out as he advanced belligerently upon Reynolds. Another patient crawled from his bed and trailed a heavily plastered limb across the floor. He ranged himself beside the swathed one, and confronted Reynolds menacingly. Before Reynolds could react, all the beds in the ward were disgorging their occupants in a mortal travesty of Spencer's 'Resurrection', an image which struck Reynolds as ludicrously apt. The place seethed suddenly with ominous, mummified forms. They advanced upon him *en masse*, brandishing defective limbs, or exhibiting anatomical deficiencies that lent them a terrifying aspect which reminded him of the wrathful deities depicted in Tibetan temples.

North lay back on his pillows and repeated monotonously that Reynolds had something for him. In desperation, Reynolds drew the envelope from his pocket as the patients encircled him. The nurse, huddled on the floor, stirred and moaned. Unpleasant situations were no novelty to Reynolds, but none quite compared with the present one.

A bell rang; someone had sounded the alarm. A couple of white-coated attendants appeared, quelled the rebellious ward, drove the restive patients back to their beds, and conducted Reynolds to an adjoining room where more attendants were gathered. The inert body of the nurse was carried past him into the corridor. His immediate urge was to examine the wound inflicted by that clawlike embrace, but a ring of eyes rooted him

to the floor. He began to doubt the evidence of his senses and to wonder how he had received such a delusive visual impression, as when North's features had assumed a vulpine cast.

Then the light dawned. Reynolds' mind shot like an arrow to the hut of the agéd *bokor* who had muttered crazy things; to the crumpled newspaper lying on North's desk; to the savaged bodies of Lorma Steele, *and of others unknown to him*. He made some remark to an attendant, a remark he was later unable to recall, and the ring of eyes faded like slowly extinguished lights. As he left the hospital he shot a backward glance through the glass swing-doors, and saw Raymond North contemplating inanely a small black object attached to a golden chain. The neat rows of beds, orderly and white, were tenanted as if nothing at all had happened. North let the object fall to the floor and then picked up the envelope which Reynolds had left on the bedside table.

8

Time doubling back, folding in upon itself, confused the sequence of events, reanimating past emotions and attaching them to episodes spatially and temporarily at variance with each other. And so it was that the lid of the sarcophagus, the surface of an oval table, or a pool of darkly glittering water, closed over North, submerging him utterly.

In a subfuscous foliage occasionally illumined by flashes of lightning, the trunks of trees in orderly rows reared columnically

beneath the akashic night. They appeared truncated, sawn off by the elliptical ceiling of his cell. Perhaps they towered above the oval expanse and bore leaves and fruit in loftier regions.

A creature which he had initially confused with one of these arboreal phantoms now menaced him. From its navel twined ascending tendrils which encircled the pallid breasts, descending as the body vanished into the egg of darkness. The nipples glistened like porphyry and jutted from courts so pale they seemed to melt imperceptibly into their supporting mounds. Wedged saltire-wise between them lay a small black cross. North's gaze was rivetted to the chain which held it; the face of its owner had not descended into his field of vision.

The creature before him broke from its human form as from a chrysalis, as the human shell had broken out of tree-form. An explosion occurred, seen rather than heard, and a doglike shape rushed upon him, fanning his cheeks with its breath. The unexpected impact made him aware that he also had undergone a transformation, and the fact stunned him more than the impact which sent him spinning against one of the trees. He recoiled and sprang as the creature reared for a second onslaught. No assault followed, but from the shaggy pelt of his assailant there protruded the spectral yet precise form of a woman, vaguely familiar, who then appeared and disappeared behind mysteriously changing identities. She took her place in a procession of witches parading before him. Their features were concealed by totemic masks of hideous aspect. Repetitive shrieks rose and fell with piercing ululations as the pageant fluttered past him in a fluid atmosphere, like figures painted on a tremulous veil. Stripes of light flickered and pulsed as drumbeats mounted to a crescendo, sparking North's consciousness to billow in space and time. The lines of light wove delusive patterns about him. Interminable corridors crisscrossed every way, each gaping entrance an orifice enticing him. The doglike abnormality slunk off to the bordering trees. North followed

her; he no longer walked upright, but loped on all fours. His quarry flung him a backward glance and snarled as he hurled himself upon her. He felt the inward womanly form yield outwardly the monstrous shape that reared to receive him after the fashion of dogs. The fierce impact of their copulation struck lines of flame from the *vevers* that glowed on her flesh. As his fangs sank deeply into her neck, the cross broke loose and dangled from his maw by a blood-flecked chain.

Some obscure movement of interior awareness had united two temporally disparate entities, combining them consciously as one identity. North knew that the cross on the road-map was the primal *vever*, the source of the intricate diaper evolved by Time from the sleep of centuries. In those remote aeons, in the avatar of a *bultu bokor*, he had guarded the *loa-stone* that Hilary Reynolds had presented recently to Lorma Steele.

A saltant and upsurging wave bore him suddenly to an immense height. He hovered now *above* the oval surface of the table reflecting the crowns of columns which, from below, appeared as trees. A ring of eyes gazed down upon its polished surface, the vectors of each glance converging at a point in depth that reflected his position in altitude. He formed thus the vertical axis of a cross, of which the oval surface of Spiritmaster's table formed the horizontal arms.

The robed figures rose as one individual, unclasping as they did so the hands of their immediate neighbours. Some mysterious *perichoresis* enabled North to watch them rise and struggle with the flames that played lambently upon the surface of the table, that coiled upon the floor and ascended the pillars where the painted gods writhed into black oblivion.

Accusing eyes regarded him: pinpoints of fire. The table reared, twisted in convulsive death; a woman's scream resembled laughter, an unnatural ululation, metallic, inhuman. A cowed figure, which North had mistaken for a tree, flailed its branches

and lumbered to a curtained aperture, trampling to death any living object in its path.

North seemed no longer to float above the table. He lay supine, overwhelmed by an olid stench and a head-throb like the beat of drums. A sudden cerebral convulsion transported him back to a scene of sunshine and bandaged anomalies resembling the mummified dead ludicrously animated.

The tracery of the window frame, dark against the sunlight, formed upright and saltire crosses. These appeared to multiply until a maze of lines became night-dark corridors which opened like mouths their obscure interiors. As tentacles they writhed, beckoning, enticing, with gestures inexpressibly lewd. A shrill equivocal laughter invited him within, and he was unable to resist. At the unexpected caress of living flesh and hair, he rose to seize his prey. Encircling her waist he drew her to him and bit madly until cold metal met his tongue. As the chain snapped, hung from his jaws, he watched and exulted over the horror that spread like a viscous cloud over Reynolds' face. Then the sequence of his mentation was ruptured. Gesticulating figures appeared, disappeared. He tore the metal from his mouth, spat blood, dropped it on the floor.

Conscious of eyes peering at him through glass, he picked up a white envelope and tore it open.

Ghède turned off the main thoroughfare into a network of streets on the Avely Square side of Notting Hill. Compelled by the vibrant beat of a drum, he found unerringly the house he sought. It stood, apparently derelict but gaudily curtained, behind rusted iron railings. Weeds and rank vegetation flourished outside the door, and clusters of noxious plants sprouted from cracks in the stone steps leading up to it. The door stood ajar and Ghède entered a dismal hall, fetid with must. Ribbons of peeling paint hung from the woodwork of the staircase which was, in places, furred with fungus. As he ascended, the desiccated punk fell about him as a fine rain. He mounted to the second floor and paused in the gloom of a passage. Before opening a yellow painted door, his glance strayed to a fanlight at the far end. A full moon had just risen above the house-tops on the other side of the street, and he recalled the last time he had seen it. A faint yet cloying aroma was noticeable above the rank odours of the house. He opened the door, and as he did so the drumming ceased, and Uremi greeted him with astonishment. Then she began cursing him for leaving her to the flames, and rushing off with the Danish "whore".

"She has the stone!", he snarled above her yells.

All pretence at self-possession vanished. His features twitched convulsively as he tried to make her understand.

"For a month she eludes me, though I hunt everywhere. Now I come to Spiritmaster; he must trace her".

The full significance of his words did not register immediately. Uremi knew that Ghède's infatuation with Helga Larssen had cost them the fetish, but she had not doubted that he would return. But that he would return without the stone she had not even considered. Her gaze rested on the band of

mystic characters which circled the drum-head. They repeated a phrase she understood, but which she had never dared to utter. Ghéde's gaze followed hers. He was shaking violently as she picked up the drum; he tried to speak, but was unable to utter a sound.

"De car's outside", she said, "come to *L'il Leaf's*. Uremi too can call up *loa*; Uremi make *loa* come 'long. Let's go now, we have plen'y time". Then she added, guardedly: "Spiritmaster due here by dusk".

Ghéde demurred, glanced behind him, fearfully.

"You! a *bokor!*", she jeered. "Danish bitch kill your magic likea this!". Uremi clicked together a thumb and forefinger and spat contemptuously. Then she seized a bottle of clairin and tossed it in his direction. He pulled out the cork and all but drained it at a gulp. Uremi finished it off, and lit a cigarette. She lay back on a low couch, watching him through wreaths of smoke. The alcohol imbued him with fire and he shook his head violently, to and fro, as if dispelling the effects of a baleful dream; then he, too, lit a cigarette.

Uremi's mood changed suddenly to one of playfulness. She ran her fingers languidly over her thighs and, falling backwards on the couch, drew up her knees. Her abrupt change of mood induced in Ghéde an overwhelming desire. They rolled over, grappling with each other until she let out a cry of pain when the cigarette, knocked from her mouth, singed her flesh, leaving an ugly cruciform burn in the valley of her breasts. She looked up at him questioningly:

"What mean de cross? You nebber told me dat".

Ghéde sat dejectedly beside her, staring at the window. His reply was mechanical, as if he were repeating a lesson:

"The cross is the crossroads; the Place of Union where Spirit meets Matter. Vertical arm means spirit-world, dream-world;

horizontal arm means mundane world, wake-world. Their junction is *Now*, the place of manifestation, Past and Future meeting in the Present. When we make burnt offerings, we first trace the *vever* of the *loa*, and the basis of the *vever* is the cross; sometime upright, sometime like an ex. Upright cross is for *Rada* rites; good magic, good spirits called. Slanting cross (saltire they calls it) is like off-beat rhythms; *Petro* rites use 'em. They invoke the *loa* between the Cardinal Points; them no direct an' white spirits, them oblique an' evil *loa*. *Petro* uses spirits from Outside-spaces. Spiritmaster use 'em. We may have to use 'em if we wanna get back *loa-stone*. The offering is placed where the two arms of the cross intersect. The Spirit manifests there, takes the offering, eats it. We make the sign of the cross to bring *loa* to a point. We *point* with the cross; means make big magic. We go Outside through dat point; and mebbe we don't come back 'less we know how."

His voice trailed off, and he seemed strangely unreal in his nakedness, like a shadow exhausted by the passion that had recently exhausted him. Uremi drew close, her hot breath fanning him back to life as she slipped beneath him, an even darker shadow. They lay entwined, oblivious, until a scrabbling-sound outside the door jerked them back to wakefulness.

One month after the fire on Crawford Street, Reynolds found the matter still topical in the locality. He had turned into a bar he occasionally used, and was hailed by an acquaintance known as 'Roman Ring', a friend of Raymond North, who had introduced him to Reynolds several months previously. They took their drinks to a quiet corner where they chatted aimlessly. Ring insisted on returning the drink and, while waiting, Reynolds picked up a newspaper lying on a table nearby. The headlines concerned a coloured woman who had, the previous evening, been "savaged to death". As Ring set down two beers, Reynolds pushed the paper aside, but an undercurrent of thought persisted during the remainder of their conversation, and it concerned the full moon. He was reminded that precisely a month ago a series of murders had been reported in the press, all of them described as 'savage'. The account he had heard of Lorma's remains at Spiritmaster's house, though not included in the newspapers, fitted a similar description. Another crime had come to light, and it seemed to fall into the same category. Before his inner vision flashed two vivid images: a sunlit hospital ward, and a hirsute arm terminating in claws. These ideas were set to obsess him when Roman Ring, by a casual remark, forced his attention to the surface.

"It is rather odd", he said, looking queerly at Reynolds and pointing at the newspaper, "how frequently things of this sort occur when the moon is full. North would have had a theory, no doubt." He added these words rather slyly, thought Reynolds, but the words that followed pulled him up with a start.

"I've heard, though it hasn't been publicized, that the blaze – which occurred at the time of the full moon – was a cover-up for murder. Do you remember, the day before the fire..."

Ring rambled on, but Reynolds had had a sudden hunch. He wondered how much Ring knew, how much was intuition. Picking up the newspaper, he pretended to remember an appointment and abruptly excused himself.

At Gloucester Place he boarded a northbound 'bus and immersed himself in the newspaper. The body of a coloured woman had been found in Notting Hill. The mode of death suggested a ferocious attack by a wild beast. But the body had been branded with the sign of the cross, which led to speculations about ritual murder.

As he read the lines, and between the lines, Reynolds recalled his conversation with Raymond North on the eve of the Crawford Street disaster. They had discussed ritual murder and the possibility of mutation with the higher simia, and other non-human creatures. Had he seen the road-map which North had hidden from him, much would have become clear. Reynolds turned again to the paper. It stated that a man had been seen with the woman shortly before the crime had been committed, and that he had escaped through a window, leaving his clothes behind: a smoke-coloured suit of thin worsted, cut after a style common in the West Indies.

Reynolds alighted and walked in a daze, oblivious of the heat and of his surroundings. He was walking, years ago, in a crowded San Domingo street, when a tall negro jostled him. He saw again the high domed forehead, the features refined almost to spectrality so that the face resembled a dusky mask in alabaster. Reynolds recalled the courteous smile of apology that held in it a suggestion of mysterious power. It was the man that had descended the stairs at Lorma's place, after the theft of the stone; it was the fantastic dancer who had performed saltant magic with Helga Larssen!

When Philip Yayler opened his front door, he was confronted by a short burly man who gave his name as Hilary Reynolds and asked if he might come in. Yayler knew the name, but had not previously met the man.

"We are both acquaintances of Raymond North", explained Reynolds. "I believe he came to see you about a month ago."

Yayler led the way to a book-lined study overlooking the street. It was a sultry afternoon; one of the windows was raised to the limit, as it had been when Yayler and North had had their chat.

"Anthropology is, I believe, your main interest", began Yayler.

"And Occultism, I believe, is yours"; Reynolds could not quite disguise the distaste with which he regarded the subject, which was no doubt why North had not introduced them.

"It is as a practitioner of occultism", he continued, "that I hope you may be able to help me. As you no doubt know, our friend is now in hospital ..."

"Yes! I've visited him. I think they were wise to move him, he seems a lot more cheerful in his new surroundings".

Reynolds had to admit ignorance of the fact. Yayler was looking at him a little queerly as he sat in a chair facing the open window, glad to feel a refreshing breeze.

"Do you know anything about Voodoo?", Reynolds asked, abruptly. It was all he could do to mention the subject. Yayler nodded and began lighting a pipe after offering his guest a cigarette.

"Not much, but enough to know that it is based on precise and surprisingly abstruse principles".

"You mean it's not all primitive superstition?"

"On the contrary, it is as highly complex as, say, the Tantrik sciences of the Far East. I am referring, of course, to the metaphysics upon which Voodoo is based. The actual cults often express them in primitive ways, but underlying them is an undoubtedly mystical hierarchy, a secret tradition known only to its high adepts, who are comparatively few."

"Is it a religion?"

"Yes, and no!" replied Yayler, "I would describe it rather as the chemistry of religion. By an apparently odd coincidence, the religion of Voodoo is based upon the cross, which has been confused by the ignorant with the symbol of the Christians who appropriated it, among many other ancient symbols. But this is not generally understood. It is as if one were to regard Hitler, say, as the originator of the svastika; and, believe it or not, I have spoken to people who assume this to be so. Simple shapes such as the triangle, the cross, the square, the circle, are basic to the more complex symbols used in the magical and religious rites of all ancient peoples – and modern ones. Indian *yantras*, Tibetan *khorlos*, Chinese *mandalas*, Voodoo *vevers* are essential to most magical rites. They are linear expressions of energy evolved for the purpose of controlling specific subconscious regions of the *psyche*. The Africans, who were first in the field, also had their vectors of hidden energy, composed of lines and angles, all based – ultimately – upon a form of the cross. Voodooism stems from this African rootage".

Yayler's observations made sense to Reynolds, and it confirmed his worst suspicions.

"I have worked in places", replied Reynolds, "where Voodooism is supposed to be rampant, but I personally have seen nothing supernatural there, or anywhere else. It seems to me to be a matter of illusion or hallucination."

"It is", agreed Yayler. "Magic, or voodoo, implies the power to

engender illusion, and to project it into the human mind; into the mind of others, that is."

"Then those others become subject to *delusion*!"

"They do indeed. The power of illusion is represented by the Hindus as a goddess named Maya. She gives her name to our word *magic*. By her glamour she enmeshes man in the web of phenomenal existence. It is only by piercing her veils of illusion that man may come to the truth of his own reality. This is rarely accomplished even by initiates, and hardly ever by the common man".

"When you went to see Raymond North", said Reynolds, changing the subject, "did you observe anything... anything odd, about him personally?"

"I did not", replied Yayler, guardedly.

He found Reynolds rather hard going, and he had not warmed to his subject as he would have done had he been discussing these matters with North. He realized why North had not introduced them.

"But", continued Yayler, snatching an opportunity to check Reynolds in his pursuit of the subject: "Raymond seemed delighted with a letter he had received; from a lady friend, I think".

"Why do you think it was a letter, and that it was from a lady friend?" asked Reynolds testily.

"Pure deduction, I suppose", replied the other with a trace of sarcasm; "I saw on his bedside table an envelope – a bulky one to be sure – and in it, I presume, was a letter".

"Why do you suppose it came from a lady friend?" persisted Reynolds?

"The appearance of the envelope suggested it. It was tinted, slightly scented, and, furthermore, Raymond concealed it hastily

from the nurse when she hove in sight".

"That envelope did not contain a letter", said Reynolds evenly, "but a sheet of paper folded about wisps of flaxen hair intertwined with strands of coarser, darker hair. The paper was inscribed with arcane characters and with what you have called a *vever*".

"Did he show it to you?", asked Yayler?

"He did not. I took the liberty of finding out for myself. You see, I personally delivered it to North; it was given to me under unusual circumstances. I was with him the night the fire broke out on Crawford Street".

"But I understood that he was not there!", exclaimed Yayler.

Reynolds corrected him: "He *had* been there; he left earlier that evening – with Lorma Steele".

"I've heard her name, of course", said Yayler, mystified: "They had been more than friends – or so I understand."

"They had", replied Reynolds. There was in his voice no trace of emotion. He felt that it would be futile to continue the conversation. An infinite weariness was dulling his senses, and the heat of the day was stifling in the book-crammed room. Then Yayler made a remark that roused him sharply:

"Raymond showed me one or two poems he wrote soon after they allowed him to sit up in bed. Weird stuff; like nothing even he has written before. One of them quite haunted me; I still can't get the 'flavour' of it out of my head. It was something about a *hyaena*".

Reynolds stared at Yayler and said, very slowly:

"The coarse strands of hair were those of a *hyaena*".

Yayler's lips turned white:

"Are you sure of that?"

"Absolutely. Whilst in Africa I was shown a so-called *wanga*, or magic charm, a curiously shaped stone bound round with hairs soaked in rum and viscous substances. It was believed to have the power of transforming its owner into the likeness of a hyaena. I was there to record some of the ritual dances of the *Bultu Cult*; I therefore simulated a great interest in this stone and happened to scrutinize it somewhat closely."

"The *Bultu Cult*!", echoed Yayler: "Do you know what that is?"

The man was staring straight before him at a row of books, but Reynolds knew that he saw nothing – in the room. Perhaps he was recalling the conversation he had had with North a month previously, in that same room. Then Yayler spoke again:

"It is the Cult of the Spectral Hyaena. Its votaries practice the most hideous perversions of Voodoo and Obeah".

Reynolds had reached a point where he did not know whether to scream or to rush out of the room; he merely said:

"My recordings were lost in the fire. Several lives, too, were lost that night, as you know. The other day an acquaintance of mine, and of North's, hinted that certain aspects of the disaster had been suppressed. I now suspect them to have a connection with various crimes perpetrated the day before, and..."

Reynolds paused; he could not bring himself to describe the remains salvaged from the gutted basement of Spiritmaster's house – Lorma's, and those of an unidentified negress found near a staircase. Instead, he went on to relate the old *bokor*'s crazed whisperings in Madagascar, and the legend of a labyrinth deep underground.

A sound of laughter in the street distracted their attention. A party of coloured folk passed the window: college ties, happy faces, mobile eyes and lips.

"It is somewhat frightening", mused Reynolds aloud, "when one considers certain possibilities. The influx into this country

within the past twelve months of coloured people has risen by 25% as against figures for the previous year, and the stream is swelling."

Yayler rose from his chair and took down a slim paperback:

"This was written by a Louisianian about his native place, but what he says applies, I think, with equal truth to England now." He pointed to a paragraph on the final page, and handed the book to Reynolds, who read:

My grandpa used to say something I never did forget it. 'America', he used to say, 'is just like a turkey. It's got white meat and it's got dark meat. They is different, but they is both important to the turkey'. I figure the turkey has more white meat than dark meat, but that don't make any difference. Both have nerves running through 'em. I guess Voodoo is a sort of nerve that runs mostly in the dark meat, but sometimes gets into the white meat, too.

And it ain't only in New Orleans. I've been all over the country and I've seen signs of Voodoo almost everywhere, anywhere people of my race live. You can always find it. Of course lots of white people don't know anything about it, but we always know. Anywhere they go my people know the signs.³

"It is highly probable, then", observed Reynolds, "that an influx on so large a scale might include initiates of cults darker than any suspected by people here, or even in Louisiana. One such, as we know, is in possession of a small stone which, if the *bokor*'s words are true, and if my experiences during the past few weeks have not been totally delusive, concentrates a power as deadly as a nuclear weapon".

"Deadlier", corrected Yayler. "The one affects Matter; the other disintegrates Spirit."

³ From *Voodoo in New Orleans*, by Robert Tallant (New York, 1962).

In a sparsely populated region within forty miles of London, an old house of once stately aspect languishes on the outskirts of a forest. Although outwardly manifesting every sign of age and decay, all trace of corruption has been banished within. The leprous stains on the dilapidated external walls project a phosphorescence within, as if the sap of rotten trees had been distilled to sheer radiance. And within those ancient walls, the sole indication of the passage of time is a gradual lessening of illumination at periodic intervals. The light wanes slowly as if fusing with the glistening walls, and a weird virescent dusk replaces the brightness.

A small circular flap rises like an eyelid in the wall at the foot of North's bed, and behind a mesh of fine steel he sometimes sees a face, almost as pale as the walls of his room. Its features have a disturbingly sterilized appearance, but the dark eyes are sympathetic and North smiles as they gaze upon him.

Several times had he been aware of the light fading gradually to green – after the metal lid had been raised to disclose the human eyes without – and then a section of the wall had moved just enough to admit a white figure. Then the wall slid back into place. The figure usually carried food, and soon disappeared the way it had come. After North had eaten, various muffled buzzes and rapid flashings of light would announce a series of rituals involving washing, walking, treatment for his leg, and for other wounds in his body in which he had begun to sense diminishing pain as the rituals progressed.

Now and again, familiar images appeared after the sterilized face had peered through the circular eye. One of them had been Hilary Reynolds, another Philip Yaylor; and there had been others North could not identify. The 'others' took a more unpleasant interest in him, raising and lowering his legs, flexing his arms,

and looking into his eyes through thick elliptical lenses which transformed his uninvited visitants into Cyclopean monsters. North could not restrain a laugh when he saw a vast and solemn eye gazing unwinkingly at him.

There were long periods during which no images appeared. He would then take pencil and paper, and write. On one occasion he had given a few sheets to Philip Yaylor, who had read them and had looked first at him and then at the metal eye in the wall; so North decided not to repeat the performance.

It was after the fading of the green light that he felt most free and happy. At such times the walls appeared to dissolve, and on certain rare occasions he seemed to slip with ease through the metal eye. Neither its lid nor the mesh surrounding it offered any resistance, and he was free to roam at will. He would then float to an island of calm serenity which appeared strangely familiar to him. Perhaps he could have visited it always, yet – in earlier days – he had been content merely to hover on the outskirts, relishing the prospect of deeper explorations – if need arose.

On his return to the white walls and the lights, he recalled having savoured a deliciously exhilarating experience. All that he was able precisely to remember about these journeys was a certain dimness or twilight. After he had circled the house a few times, a full moon appeared through which he flew as through a porthole. He entered a land bathed in lunar radiance, and the island lay but a moment away. But he was unable to remember any more except that the forgotten experience was charged with indescribable pleasure. The energy he derived from these excursions resulted in a spate of writing which he concealed in a small bedside cupboard. When he re-read the pages the words seemed chaotic, as if a stealthy intruder had confused them, and this enraged him. He therefore deliberately divided them into batches, and this succeeded in foiling the visitant. He achieved this simply by tearing into

narrow strips the sheets which covered his bed, and tying up with them each separate batch. A white figure regularly replaced the sheets, and with champing jaws arranged them on the bed, for North to use as necessity arose – which it frequently did after his island excursions.

On one particularly terrifying occasion he quitted the white-walled room through the shuttered eye, and realised that he was lost. A moon appeared, certainly, but not the one to which he was accustomed. It was larger and completely round, whereas before it had been not so large and not completely round. Also, it glowed with a rutilant light that reminded him of blood, and an unwholesome odour assailed his nostrils. He then became aware of a curious sound, and he realised, for the first time since his journeyings had begun, that he had not previously heard any sound at this stage of his forays; that came later, and then it was soft and alluring, an exquisitely ethereal music. He was delighted to find that on his return he could revive these subtle harmonies, and he tried to translate them into equally wonderful verses. He filled many pages with the raptures inspired by these harmonies.

Before he passed through the moon-disc, to which he now felt strangely averse, he sensed, rather than actually heard, a subtle vibration, a rhythmic pulsing of the atmosphere which simultaneously lulled him to a lethargy and impelled him forward. It seeped into him, coursing along his veins until his whole being throbbed with sound. Unable to rise vertically, as he usually did before passing through the lunar port-hole, his manoeuvres now seemed determined by a power which confined him to the horizontal plane. He gathered speed and was whirled over dark patches of land through which rivers wound and disappeared into profound caverns. From these they eventually emerged and meandered over an arid, desolate terrain. In the treeless wastes he glimpsed weird and spectral creatures that fled at his approach. He experienced a sensation of

extraordinary power which nonetheless comported a singular doubt, for he did not know how he appeared to others. He had, on these occasions, always felt bodiless, weightless, unaware of possessing density or of occupying space. But it was evident now that his appearance was abhorrent. His mode of locomotion, too, had undergone a change. Whereas, previously, he had been airborne, he now proceeded by a series of leaps and bounds over the grey uliginous terrain. He now advanced, not through pale lunar gold, but through a murky, uncertain twilight. Yet the rhythmic vibration acted as a lode and filled him with a wild exultancy. Whooping ululations pervaded the night. Glancing up at the rutilant moon, suspended lantern-like above sinister swamps, he was conscious of the proximity of shadowy forms similar to his own. They responded to his call with a cacophonous and repetitive baying. An all-pervading warmth possessed him as he quitted the arid zone and entered a denser layer of atmosphere in which he gradually recognized the features of a familiar city.

As he careered along a narrow street, he felt the shock of an interior explosion, as two distinct cells of memory fused with each other. Like an electric current streaking through long disused neural networks, a sudden spasm convulsed him. From his peculiarly ambivalent position, he was able to observe entities of hideous aspect which nonetheless recoiled from his approach. The fright induced by his appearance caused them to lose control of their bodies. They fell prostrate, fled into doorways, or disappeared in the maze of alleys with which the district was laced. He was gripped by an exhilaration that swept over him as the pulsing rhythms swelled louder and became more imperious. Then they ceased abruptly and he became aware of the intrusion of several new elements. A monstrous form emerged from a car parked on a nearby street, and shambling into one of the houses. Almost simultaneously, a naked negro appeared at a window on the second floor. He clutched a large object which he balanced on the sill, and then dropped

into the area beneath. North passed through the gaudy curtain which the negro had swept aside. Hanging over the sill it gave to the house the appearance of a scarecrow with its handkerchief stuffed into its breast-pocket.

In the semi-darkness of the room there flickered a dull green luminosity. It floated over a dishevelled divan where a young negress wrestled with a quasi-human form. The woman lashed out furiously and the creature rolled to one side and crashed to the floor. The greenish veil of light enveloped the scene like a spreading phosphorescent fungus which flowered from the ebony flesh of the woman who writhed and cursed. Her words pounded like a drumbeat and merged with some invisible presence that lurked in the atmosphere. Her eyes bulged, her body arched itself like a bow, and bristled at the neck with a forest of quills that ran down the spine. Shrill laughter accompanied the mutation; it began as a chuckle and mounted to a scream. It was answered by the thing that lurked in shadow by the window.

The kyphotic creature on the floor tried to raise itself. North recognized Spiritmaster, who was threshing in the dust and tracing in it mysterious signs, which he also traced in the air above his head. As he finally heaved himself from the floor, and charged, North saw in the creature's eyes the light of hell.

Whether Uremi had failed to effect a total transformation, or whether Spiritmaster's runes were acting against her, North did not know, but as he sprang forward, the figure before him seemed to melt and dislimn and assume again a human form. A piercing scream burst from Uremi's lips. Half woman, half beast, she writhed in a twilight world of transformations. A thin green snake of vapour exuded like ectoplasm from her mouth as North heard the door open and slam shut. Uremi dissolved in a foam of blood beneath him as he swiftly withdrew and floated down the stairs in the wake of Spiritmaster.

A shrill scream awoke him; a flashing of coloured lights, and the glistening wall slid open, revealing white figures which surrounded him as he sat up, dazed by the brilliance that flooded the room. A sensation of detachment and serenity gradually followed the initial wave of terror. He felt as if he were drawing on gloves which did not end at the wrists but continued along his arms, covering his shoulders and finally engulfing his body in a warm shower of sleep. Before he sank into oblivion, the faces of those about him hung in sharp relief: expressions of bewilderment, incredulity, uncertainty and, upon one face, even of prayerfulness. They were staring at his hands and feet, damp and stained with a greenish slime that coated his body. It seemed to breathe, for a barely discernible pullulation agitated it. But it was not breathing: it was slowly sucking him into himself. His body resembled a palpitant tentacle pocked with innumerable orifices, or a swampland boiling unctuously.

He awoke feeling refreshed and perfectly normal. He was, in fact, fully aware of his identity for the first time since the catastrophe at Spiritmaster's house. He slept more regularly after this, and experienced no exceptional phenomena. It was as if he had been purged of an incubus that lurked in his consciousness to seize him whilst he slept.

He could not explain the cause of his rehabilitation. Something outside himself, perhaps, had exorcized the demon that possessed him. Yet if the banishing had been so effectual, why did he continue as a prisoner in this sterilized sepulchre of flashing lights and metal walls? It is true that the ritual procedures had undergone a change. He had even walked, occasionally, and in his physical body, outside the building in a thick wood where birds sang and the sound of running streams brought him a sense of freedom. But he was accompanied

always by the silent white people with chiselled faces. They were like monks of an Order unknown, and they were disinclined either to stray, or to let him stray, into the world beyond the ivy-hidden wall that girdled the place with its green magic circle. He did not know that electrified wires were concealed among the leaves. At the limits of the circle the white figures habitually halted. Breaking their silence, they would smile and talk persuasively about the aviary which lay the other side of the garden, or of the conservatory on this. He felt no desire to visit either, so they returned to the house and to the library. Here he spent many hours browsing, musing, writing verses which he took to his room for revision, as he used to do in a past which now seemed infinitely remote, and different.

He grew to like the daily regimen, especially his conversations with an attendant whose golden ringlets continually strayed from the crisply starched turret of her lined cap. They often laughed about this, and even the other figures joined sometimes in their conversation.

Sometimes he roamed in the grounds for long periods, seldom wondering why he encountered no one apart from the white figures, who were occasionally accompanied by queer charges whose wild antics irritated him, especially as they appeared as a reaction to his presence. At other times he would read letters from friends such as Hilary Reynolds, Philip Yaylor, and others whose names he could no longer attach to remembered faces. They all expressed a desire to see him again, but one and all referred obliquely to certain obstacles to the fulfilment of that desire. He did not mind whether they came or not; he had grown accustomed to his new way of life and did not wish particularly to recall old times, because any attempt at remembering them threw him into confusion.

One morning, while smoking idly in a favourite haunt where the house was not in view, and where the woodland offered shade from the sun, he experienced a sudden sense of alarm.

He was sitting on a stone jutting out of the earth at an odd angle, half in sunshine, half in shadow. Gazing into the deeper reaches of woodland beyond, he thought he detected a movement. He stood up and watched intently. Partially concealed by the bole of a tree stood a greenish brown object hardly distinguishable from its leafy background. As he watched, it appeared alternately to solidify and to dissolve, first appearing in one place and then in another; and then the vivid blue of twin skies peered at him archly through a tangled veil of flaxen hair. He was looking into the eyes of Helga Larssen.

Her lips parted in a soft, ambiguous smile, while the fingers of her left hand traced in the air an obscene gesture that dumbfounded him. A slight breeze had risen and stirred the leaves. He did not know whether this was the sound he heard or whether she whispered to him. Whatever the sound, she beckoned him into the wood. Her mottled dress might have been painted on her body, so tightly did it mould her contours. As he plunged forward he noticed that her lips were puckered in a lewd grimace. Then it seemed as if nightmare engulfed him while he remained fully awake. He was unable to reach her, unable to find her. The trees massed together, barring his passage; his feet were caught in hidden declivities, in tangled bindweed and the twisted roots of leprous bistort. Scratched and bruised, he threshed about, falling, as her golden laughter rang sonorously in the deeper shadows of the wood.

A wind had risen, and the darkening of the sky presaged storm. He was struggling to extricate himself from coiling lianas when he noticed a white figure, then another, and another. They resembled seagulls wheeling in a sky that boiled with larval clouds. Large drops of rain splashed his burning forehead. They took him to his room and gave him an effervescent pink powder. He slept.

For several days he kept to his room, sleeping fitfully or working on the verses which he composed when the change in

his routine imbued him with renewed energy. His sleep was charged with ill dreams which stirred nebulous memories of previous nightmares long forgotten, wherein he pursued vainly, through a maze of corridors, a fleeting figure. The theme had received a fresh impetus from his recent woodland adventure. He now knew the identity of his quarry, of the prey that forever eluded him, to taunt and goad him to further futile effort. He knew now why he was here; why there was no chance, ever, of his release. He understood Yayler's reaction to the verses he had shown him. The bedside cupboard contained similar compositions. But there was also the island, and the songs he had sung to the hollow echo of resounding waves...

He opened the cupboard and viewed the little bundles of paper, some of them mere scraps torn from the edges of newspapers or magazines, anything that had come to hand. He swept up an armful, untied them, and tore each scrap to shreds.

14

The car swerved violently to avoid colliding with a larger vehicle from which an oath – flung at the car's inhuman-looking driver – dissolved in a wake of rushing air. Traffic streamed past, piercing the night with blinding knives of light. Their rays wove a luminous web through which the car sped as each separate beam exploded in a blaze at its passing. So far, it had not been enmeshed in the web but snaked its way forward like forked lightning.

With the uncertainty of indirect vision born of a moment's

fleeting glance at his reflector, Spiritmaster saw *the thing* gaining on him, trailing a greenish vapour in its wake. As it drew abreast he hurriedly traced above his head the Sign of Protection, but before his hand returned to the wheel a patch of green had clamped itself to the frame of the open window. It hung like a dark fungus on an ancient wall, and a suffocating, obnoxious odour pervaded the air. Spiritmaster braked, and the shriek of skidding tyres merged with a scream that vibrated in a place far removed from the road where the accident occurred. It awakened North to the brightly glistening walls of his cell.

The car bumped and lurched over stony ground, and the screeching of brakes merged with another sound, equally shrill, which stabbed the driver's head with slivers of shattered glass.

Within the abruptly altered atmosphere of the psychic vortex, vectors of light were forming a *vever* which Spiritmaster remembered having traced. It quivered in the ether, tinged with hues which had the appearance of a stained glass window. It had hindered his pursuer effectively but he knew that its power to do so was limited. He peered through the bars of light as through the window of a cell. Outside, all was void and the contemplation of it overwhelmed him. Through a slowly congealing mist he perceived a tangled mass of metal and glass-scattered remnants of a misshapen form, blood weeping from a mangled head spiked grotesquely on a spindle of reflected light. A pungent stench of burning flesh and heated metal rose in waves of smoke that obscured partially a gathering crowd. People were gesticulating wildly, their mouths opening and closing like fish from which no sound came. Spiritmaster heard only the screech of brakes merging with a scrannel of sound that glued his attention to a buckled window-frame. An irregular patch of lichen was stretched across it like the moth-eaten pelt of a beast. It tressilated with an almost imperceptible movement suggesting the rise and fall of a sleeper's breathing. He felt himself sinking into oblivion, but the sensation trans-

formed itself into sound and the breathing became vibrant, like the beat of a drum.

Spiritmaster moved in a vaguely familiar labyrinth, yet he was unable to navigate the cells and passages that formed it. As he floundered uncertainly, the drumming grew more insistent. The rhythm was not unfamiliar, and as he advanced he was joined by nebulous forms, and he seemed to slip deeper into the earth.

He discovered a broken shaft and a mound of *débris*. Someone, or some thing, in its haste to ascend it, had dislodged quantities of beaked earth and rubble. Looking upwards he saw nothing but darkness. Then, a high pitched shriek followed by strident ululations unsealed latent memories of an African past. By some occult process of *perichoresis*, certain cells of memory stirred by physical shock had revealed to Spiritmaster the source of his power as a Master of Spirits. Much of that power had remained unrealised during his recent embodiment, although his persistent attempts to reify it had gone far to awaken within him dormant knowledge and ability. But it had given him power as a master of spirits, rather than as a Master of Spirit.

The *loa-stone* was capable of exerting now as much influence as in the days of its generation, and he recalled scattered fragments of the Great Ritual that he had once performed as the Chief *Bokor* of the *Bultu*. At this moment, even, the drums were throbbing and the phantomic beasts emitted shrill cries as they massed in conclave. They had called down a Power, not from known spaces but from the hidden spaces between them, as symbolized by the off-beat rhythms of the space-stations between the Cardinal Points. An entity had answered the Call in the spectral body of a hyaena, the totem of the *Bultu* Cult. It had presided at a Sabbath within the tunnels of the earth, and then it had vanished. Nor did it appear again, even during the darkest dynasties of Khem, when traffic with non-human enti-

ties was secretly undertaken in the Cults of Taurt and Set.

Having concentrated the essence of the *Bultu* within its *eidolon*, it secreted a subtle sperm that combined with the life-blood of its human consort to produce a magnetic salve, thus sealing the fire of the woman with that of its own.

The "times being right", and the "space marks" being established, a violent magical storm raged in the region of *Kabultiloa* where this monstrous rite was enacted. Ceaseless rains are said to have fallen in places that were rarely rained upon, and violent electrical disturbances in the atmosphere obliterated all traces of the event. During the deluge constant lightnings flashed and, penetrating to the caverns beneath the earth, struck the bride of the Beast as she writhed in its embrace. Her body was instantly burnt to a cinder and a small black stone slipped from her thighs. The two vital oils, fused at incredible heat, produced a talisman of incalculable power. The fire that blent the twin serpents of life, the bestial and the divine, set its seal upon the stone in the shape of a curious device not unlike the sigil of Zamradial⁴ and a certain secret symbol known to have been used in the times of Atlantis in connection with the worship of Chozzar.

This mystical keraunograph thereafter became the sigil of the *Bultu*, the seal adopted by the Cult through succeeding aeons...⁵

Travelling along the inverse parallelogram of consciousness, Spiritmaster descended the shaft which, on earth, sloped down at the point where Hilary Reynolds had sunk it to explore the maze. Spiritmaster now sounded the deeper reaches, penetrating stygian abysses. With his descent, the memories of recent

⁴ The student of occultism may be interested to learn that the Cult of the *Bultu* is related to the Tunnel of Zamradial, in the series of tunnels investigated by the author in his *Nightside of Eden*, Part II.

⁵ *Nightside of Eden* (Grant), page 194.

events gradually faded. The dive was not exclusively vertical. At a certain undefined point his consciousness fanned out horizontally, and the twisting tunnels appeared as grooves cut through the living rock. He knew instinctively that no human entity had wrought them, and that no natural agent could have conceived the elaborate design which, from his present altitude, he was able to view almost in its wholeness. As an immense *vever* it lay out-spread beneath him; and the pounding of distant drumbeats pervaded the tunnels.

He experienced fragments of personal history that were not his own, such as North's terror on awaking in his white-walled cell, his limbs coated with a glaucous slime, the *menstruum* of a horrendous magical transformation.

The rhythm was taken up by other drums, and the maze beneath him became animated by spectral shapes which poured along the furrows as if in pursuit of an invisible prey. Where the lines converged, at the maze's centre, a circular cloud revolved ceaselessly. It was now concealed by clouds of vapour which drifted in from the outer corridors. These thinned and dispersed, and Spiritmaster fell weightlessly into the Emptiness at the heart of the *vever*. The void became a revolving sphere pregnant with stars, and, from the spaces between them, shadowy entities converged on the sphere in which he rotated. The phantoms dashed against it with ferocious force, glanced off and dropped away, unable to reach him. Reflected on solid-seeming segments of the atmosphere he perceived other shapes forming a ring about the sphere. They leapt grotesquely and their dance compelled him also to leap within the globe, as if to scale the smooth sides of his transparent cell. The drums beat crazily as he flailed against the unyielding walls. From without, behind the clamour of the shadows, again there rose shrill ululations, fused with an unmistakable whirring of wings; and he saw fantastic creatures, winged and veiled, treading the air. Their hair rained down a leprous powder

and the sphere was frosted with particles of interstellar dust. Before vision was obscured, he recognized one of the saltant forms. A thin chain encircled its neck and a small black cross nestled between its breasts. The eyes were dead voids, yet beneath their unwinking lids stared something he had known as Lorma Steele.

By an ineluctable regression of consciousness, compelled by the rhythm of the *bultu* drums, Spiritmaster was absorbed back into a rite so ancient that it predated the cosmos and the measurement of time. It was, in truth, of Chaos. He slipped into aeonic gulfs as into rifts of space which dislocated continuity, so that he encountered personalities that he might one day become, or that he had known in the past. Among them was Uremi. She emerged from a corridor touching the perimeter of the sphere. Disguised in the totemic form of the Cult, her identity was nonetheless recognizable to him. Ghéde, too, was not far behind.

Before the storm had blasted all, before the stone had slipped to earth, before the monstrous Shadow had returned to inner space, Spiritmaster had communed with it. The Sabbats of Typhon and Set, enacted in the vaults of Khem were, in ancient days, celebrated to commemorate this Mystery. Since then, the stone had lain buried and forgotten by all but a few. Unable to withstand that Presence, Spiritmaster had fled the place after the lightning struck, annulling by his act of dereliction his office of *bokor*. The stone remained undiscovered, though sought by those who remembered the thing brought down from the stars by the *bultu* rhythms, and by the secret alignments of forbidden *vevers*.

Spiritmaster had turned on Uremi, imbued with the will to destroy her; but an unexpected intrusion had foiled his intent. A greenish vapour hung in a distant part of the sphere which was now assuming the form of a small bare room. Ghéde had fled precipitately. The Mark of the Cross appeared as a black

brand between Uremi's breasts. Spiritmaster knew that the *vevers* and the rhythms were but a single device for facilitating traffic with the spectral worlds, and that the cross was the Mark of the Beast. At the centre of the maze, as at the junction of the cross, the gateway of the *loa* existed, ringed about with fire and lightning. He knew also what the agéd *bokor* had revealed to Hilary Reynolds, who had discovered the Place of the Stone in Kabultiloa. The stone could be resolved into its primal elements only by the magic fires of the *Ob* and the *Od*, the twin snakes which manifest their power in the darkest mysteries of Obeah. These serpents were depicted on the limbs of Ghéde, whose dance had awakened the Ophidian Current of Magical Energy which they represented.

Believing Uremi to have secreted within her body the prized talisman, Spiritmaster's intention had been to procure it according to the instructions which Reynolds had received from the *bokor*; hence the assault upon Uremi in the derelict house. But the thing that had come in at the window had been bent on destruction and it had come at the call of the drum which Uremi had sounded before the arrival of Ghéde. Spiritmaster's attempts had been aborted by Uremi's blow, and by the appearance of Raymond North. It had been at Spiritmaster's instigation that Lorma Steele had inveigled North to the séance. The counter-current provided by the storm had failed to disintegrate Spiritmaster, and a semi-conscious manifestation of the *Bultu* had blindly sensed his presence. All his banishings and tracings in the dust had been of no avail.

Little Leaf's was in full swing when Ghéde arrived: a full-moon *juba*⁶ attended by Zangbeto, Zobop, and Zamradial cult-members.

Frail alone noticed the entry of the naked negro with the drum; she saw him sweep aside the bead curtains and leap up the stairs to his booth off the first-floor landing.

Locking the drum in a cupboard, he opened a bottle of clairin and accounted for half of it at a single pull. Frail hung around outside the door, then tapped gently. Ghéde heard nothing above the clamour of jazz welling up from the hall. Frail then peered round the door and saw his prostrate body on the couch, staring unseeingly upward. She closed the door and stole towards him. Unconscious of her presence, he was muttering unintelligible phrases.

"You look like you seen de Baron,⁷ honey", she whispered, and crouched low upon the floor at his feet. His body was bathed in sweat, and violent spasms convulsed it. Frail began humming; the sound merged with the muffled rhythms from below, then she changed the key of her crooning, rose to her feet, and flung over him a thin coverlet. Sitting on the couch, she gazed intently into his eyes, but he remained oblivious of her presence and continued to stare at the ceiling. She repeated her words loudly, and added:

"Don' worry no more, you back safe now; Frail got Papa Alekba safe inside her; he lookin' after us".

She placed a hand on the dome of her belly and drew it slowly backwards and forwards, as if she would magnify the small

⁶ A Voodoo term denoting both a *dance* and a *ghost*.

⁷ The Voodoo equivalent of the devil. *Baron Samedhi*, *Baron de la Croix*, is the Lord of Carfax (the Crossroads). The term is also applied, loosely, to a person who acts, or looks, as if he has seen the devil.

firm mound. Her eyes widened incredibly, they almost eclipsed the remainder of her face. Her eyes belied her white skin, her eyes and her lips, which writhed back savagely from a row of sharp white teeth.

She clenched her hand, knotted it into a fist and brought it down sharply upon the recumbent figure. Still Ghéde remained inert. A persistent rhythm permeated the room, and the thin whine of a clarinet rode over it, weaving a slow blues on a background of bass and drums. It sounded sinister in the bare uncarpeted booth where Ghéde lay like a corpse beneath the thin grey cover. Frail bent her head to his chest, while her fingers strayed along his body and lingered at his loins. Sliding on to the couch she stretched herself upon him, adroitly accommodating him. An inarticulate cry was wrung from him at the moment of orgasm, and grasping her shoulders he swung her beneath him in a swift reversal.

From somewhere near at hand came the unmistakeable sound of a drumbeat, a triple beat repeated several times, and they both knew it was not part of the *juba* on the floor below. Frail's eyelids fluttered open, and the enormous liquid eyes, bloodshot now, clouded over with alarm. Ghéde remained motionless, paralysed, above her. He made to withdraw, but she drew him closer, biting his lips, his ears, taking his face between her hands and scarifying his flesh with sharp lacquered nails:

"Guess dat was a real *juba*, honey; I'm dat scared, but jes keep goin' like you was workin' a pump".

She squirmed beneath him, crooning dreamily, her supple body acting as a hand, caressing him at all points. Indistinct sounds of jazz and voices seeped through the floorboards. Frail, too scared to look left or right, was humming softly, sensuously; a slippery drool frothed from her lips.

They lay in a heavy sleep for the remainder of the night; and

the next day, smoking perpetually, Ghéde sat on the couch in alternate fits of dejection and elation.

"T'ink de Baron's got you marked", Frail taunted him. Throwing aside his cigarette, Ghéde unlocked the cupboard and, not daring to look at the drum, reached up to the top shelf where he kept a large crystal ball.

"We skry now; we gotta work now!"

Frail passed her hand over her belly with a suggestive movement, and Ghéde smiled down at her:

"You got Papa Alekba; I know! It take time now; don' you worry no mo'; you gettum big belly soon".

He stroked her head reassuringly: "We skry now", he repeated.

Frail's eyes grew enormous. Placing the ball upon its black stand, she drew the curtains until a mere ray of light glanced in from the street.

In the shining globe Ghéde had already seen the wreckage of buckled metal and splintered glass. He had seen Spiritmaster's head wrenched from its trunk, impaled on a spindle of light, or was it a spear of metal that reflected the blaze of headlamps? Dimly at first, and then with increasing clarity, he had seen the form which the *juba* assumed as it re-collected itself from the shock of dismemberment. A grey and monstrous shape had dived into the earth. He had seen Uremi, too, as she appeared in the forbidden place in Kabultiloa. She had stared ahead of her in a frozen inanity, reminding him of zombies he had seen in Santa Domingo.

Frail wondered why Ghéde smiled triumphantly when he watched Spiritmaster's endeavours to grasp the winnowing shapes and to climb out of his transparent cell. By a stroke of incredible good fortune, or perhaps skill, as Ghéde thought, he had caught Spiritmaster at the precise moment of his transition from one dimension to another; and, being in possession of

'the Word of Power' for 'Binding Spirits in Whatever Way it is Desired', Ghéde had imprisoned him in an astral sphere, an exhalation as it were of the consecrated crystal which he used for skrying. Having fixed the *bokor*, Ghéde thought himself free to pursue the *loa-stone*. But he omitted one important factor from his calculations – Raymond North.

The thing which Ghéde had seen in the street, after leaving Uremi, having incomplete command of its movements, was impelled solely by instinct. That it was of the *bultu*, Ghéde had instantly divined; and that its affinities were with the *loa-stone*, he also divined. Overwhelmed by the glamour of Helga Larssen, Ghéde had spoken to her of the Cult, had touched upon forbidden things. Enthralled by her, he had actually entrusted her with the stone in order to decoy Spiritmaster, whom he had double-crossed. Ghéde scowled when he recalled these acts of inconceivable folly.

The shifting scenes of the ancient Rite appeared in the crystal, but distortedly, like a confused rehearsal of some grotesque drama, because Ghéde's power of vision was imperfect. The scenes faded and the globe darkened. He muttered powerful spells, and stabbed the air with qabalistic signs, but all to no avail. Returning the crystal to the cupboard, he instructed Frail to prepare the coloured powders for tracing *vevers* on the floor. When the sigils had been drawn, he divided the room into four parts by tracing in soot an equal-armed cross, so that the *vevers* were disposed in their appropriate zones. At the centre of the cross he sat cross-legged with eyes closed, moaning plan-gently. His voice rose occasionally to a high-pitched wail, then fell to an almost inaudible sussuration, followed by a hollow stridor like the hooting of an owl. At a certain stage in the rite, Frail took the crystal from the cupboard and placed it before her slightly swaying body.

In the uncertain glimmer of candlelight their shadows danced on the walls, sometimes merging in a mass of darkness

that swarmed over the room. Ghéde rocked to and fro, glistening like an idol drunk on the worship of its votaries. Frail slipped out of her dress and wound her legs round his waist. A fierce gust swept through her as she clung to the swaying figure; and as his fire pervaded her, she flung her arms around his neck. The mingled fluids fell like dew upon the crystal, flowing down its sides and veiling its lustre; then she fell to the floor and lay inert. Ghéde extinguished the candles and they rested in silence and darkness.

With the extinction of the flames, the magical chanting and the music on the floor below also ceased. The silence was uncanny, pregnant with promised omens which never quite achieved birth. Then, as from a vast distance, came the beat of a drum; dully at first, muffled, but gradually gaining in resonance until its reverberations filled the universe. A pale ring of light gleamed at the Place of Conjunction, where the arms of the cross intersected. The ring brightened and expanded until a glowing disc shone in the abyss of darkness. Fitful shadows flitted over it, as over a screen. Its light wavered uncertainly, diminished in brilliance; then brightened again, dazzling with rayed splendour; then subsided. It was as if some invisible operator sought to control its luminosity, and, after several attempts, found and maintained the appropriate degree of intensity. After stabilising the fleeting shadows and bringing them into focus, precise geometric shapes began to appear in the globe. These faded, giving way to anthropomorphic forms which passed in dumb show within the depths of the globe, now fully charged with the magical salve with which it had been consecrated.

A filmy green light tinged the luminiferous ether which the crystal enclosed. It hung about it like a caul, obscuring the shapes in its depths. It then disintegrated into a series of striations resembling seaweed waving in water. Its surface assumed a mottled appearance suggestive of *verd-antique*. A

small dot materialized at the centre of the globe and expanded rapidly to a disc. It began to absorb all the colour, draining the shadowy images of substance. There came a silent implosion, a puff of vapour, and the black dot reappeared through the drift in the form of a small window, through the wire-meshed screen of which gazed a pair of eyes. The entire image suddenly slewed itself round and swiftly revolved, after which the motion ceased abruptly and Ghéde saw Raymond North sitting at a small table beside a bed. He was alone, and writing. Now and again he glanced at the metal eyelid, relieved that it had closed again. Ghéde noticed an almost imperceptible wisp of greenish vapour hanging over the bed. North continued writing for a long time, covering many pages and stacking them from time to time in a neat pile, or stowing them in a cupboard, glancing as he did so at the metal eye.

Ghéde waited with growing impatience, and Frail too watched the scene intently, occasionally glancing at Ghéde whose narrow face glowed in the radiance emitted by the crystal. A clock struck the hour; it was well past dawn and sunlight filtered through the tightly drawn curtains. Suddenly, Ghéde drew in his breath, and Frail peered more intently into the ball. A section of the wall of the room in which North sat was sliding open, revealing a figure in white. North, rising to his feet, was aware of two things simultaneously: the imminence of an important event, and a presence within the room other than his own and that of the person who had just entered it. The effect of these impressions was diverted by the next occurrence. A sound of subdued voices, rather excited, drifted through the aperture, and Helga Larssen appeared. North neither noticed the vanishing white figure nor the silent closing of the wall. He was aware only of two blue eyes in an oval face framed in waves of pale gold, as if fragments of a summer sky were concentrated in the gaze which held his own.

Ghéde's hiss of astonishment must have been all but audible to the two who now faced each other, for they both looked about

them, quizzically. Then Helga threw off her coloured coat, and, laughing, sat upon the bed. As she did so, Ghéde noticed that the vapour darkened perceptibly; it became denser in places so that the vague contours of a phantom anatomy seemed on the verge of emerging from it. Helga was wearing the mottled frock familiar to North from his woodland adventure. It put him in mind of a snake-skin, and he could see, now that she was close to him, that its texture was curiously squamous. It looked as if she had emerged from a swamp, or as if she had been caught in a rain storm, and he recalled the deluge that had drenched her on Crawford Street. That was where they had first met, although of this he was strangely doubtful, for even then she had seemed familiar.

"You don't belong here", she said simply.

He smiled a little wanly.

"The Essex Psychoneurological Clinic", she laughed sarcastically. How beautifully she pronounced the ugly words. "Whoever lived in a house of that name?"

He shrugged.

"My only interest is in poetry", he replied. "I can write here with perfect ease".

She handed him a cigarette. As he bent towards the light she proffered, a strand of hair brushed his hand. Her dress had ridden up with the stress of her movement; and, as she crossed her legs, leaned back and exhaled the smoke of her cigarette, he noticed that her thighs were profusely sericate and gleamed like gold in the brilliant light.

He watched her through wreathing clouds of smoke.

"And so we just walk out together, eh?". His mordant tone left her unperturbed.

"Not *walk*", she replied. "We go as you often go".

He smiled condescendingly; he thought she was indubitably

the madder of the two of them.

"It is not always as easy as that!", he said. "One of the problems happens to be *this*". He tapped his body and smiled disarmingly.

"I have the stone", she whispered, "and I am ready".

The full significance of her reply did not register immediately. He had no precise knowledge of such matters, although he knew, from certain things he had learnt from Yayler that rare talismans did exist, and that all manner of transformations might be effected by their use. His own experiences however led him to believe that these were not physical, but astral transformations; he scouted the idea that a physical body might be transmuted by sorcery.

The metal eye was open again. North had long since ceased to betray any indication that he found the fact disturbing. But he now sensed acutely the feeling of being watched, which he had sensed on Helga's arrival, and it was a totally different kind of watchfulness from that to which he had grown accustomed in connection with the metal eye. He tried to shake off the sensation, but it grew sharper.

Helga rose and walked slowly about the cell. North was fascinated by the almost reptilian undulance of her movements. He felt an overwhelming urge to be free, and she responded instantly. Pausing before the metal eye, now shuttered again, she thought how closely it resembled a human eye over which the white cataract of blindness had spread suddenly its caul. She knew that behind it someone listened, waiting to watch.

They became aware simultaneously of a throbbing vibration which evoked in both of them memories of the music that Hilary Reynolds had brought from Africa. North shook his head violently. He was drifting into one of the autistic flights which he usually welcomed, but on this occasion he struggled against it, and turned towards Helga. She was pressing her face to the

metal eye and a low moaning sound came from her lips, like a weird incantation. In a flash he knew where he had heard it before. It was the chant used by Spiritmaster when entering trance, or inducing it in others. North strove against the oncoming waves of lethargy which he knew would ensue. Then he realised, dimly, uncertainly, that Helga's chant was not directed at himself but at those without, those that listened and watched and waited, those who kept him shut away in the metal cell with its harsh lights and white walls. He transferred his attention to Helga, who stood as if clamped to the wall, and he was suddenly thrilled through with gusts of wild exhilaration. The dark dream of a vain chase through endless corridors in pursuit of a flying figure, radiant as gold, now seemed about to be reified. Now that he actually was within reach of the figure, he better understood the nature of his Summerland of ecstasy and refuge, to the borders of which he so often had strayed. As Helga chanted, a low pitched drumming pervaded the place. It combined with her sonorous incantation, and with the subtlety of her perfume, to bring him to a state of violent excitement. She possessed the *loa-stone*, and she was ready! His hands rolled back the snake-skin. He knew instinctively that she was retromingent as she opened to his dorsal onslaught, guiding him deftly. Her mad moaning evoked moonlight tinged with blood: a baleful moon spinning in a black sky.

The lights in the room gradually dimmed as North felt his being slip, dissolve, vanish. He opened his eyes; the drumbeats crashed about the place like thunder. There was no Helga, merely the whiteness of the wall and the shuttered eye staring back at him vacuously. But upon the floor lay a mottled coil, a snake-skin sloughed. Beside it lay a black stone, partially dissolved. He heard a voice calling him, inviting him, mouthing unutterable obscenities that charmed him as they had done in the woodland. But then he had been able to respond. The voice came again, and in its sweetness there was something deliciously abominable. He glanced down at himself in his misery of captivity, only to find he

was no longer there. To his horror he was no longer anywhere; he was bodiless, nothing of him at all remained.

The moon called and he swept through the circular eye, the metal membrane, and the thin steel mesh. On he careered, outward and upward. A fuscous shape bounded ahead of him emitting shrill tintinnabulant laughter. A single power of the stone had dematerialised their human bodies, transforming their subtle particles into individualized projections of a common totemic form characteristic of the stone's original guardians.

Ghéde, straining to pierce the gloom that suddenly clouded the crystal, observed two shadowy shapes sucked into a vortex of mist, though the grounds of the clinic lay bathed in bright sunshine. Grasping Frail by the shoulders, he broke the trance into which she had been hurled by Helga's incantation and, shaking her like a rag doll, he said "Quick, there is no time to lose".

Hilary Reynolds, on the eve of an expedition to South America, heard of North's disappearance. A few hours after the alarm had sounded at the clinic, Reynolds was driving towards Essex. He had been in touch with North, and had once visited him there. The patient had seemed to be making satisfactory progress, although Reynolds had been advised of the improbability of an early discharge. Ugly rumours in connection with the deaths of several persons had caused North to remain under close surveillance. Although he could not be charged with anything definite, the incident involving the nurse had decided

the authorities to 'delay' his recovery until the outcome of special enquiries. The news did not, therefore, come to Reynolds as a great surprise. His own part in this nightmarish business was – to himself at least – only too evident, and the music he had brought from barbaric places into the heart of London haunted him night and day. It was no mere sense of duty to an acquaintance that prompted his journey to Essex.

Ghéde and Frail, too, had motored down at top speed, and they arrived at the clinic long before Reynolds. Leaving Frail in the car, concealed in the adjoining wood, Ghéde approached the clinic's main entrance. The staff were in a state of agitation, and the official whom Ghéde approached, with a view to gaining access to North's room, explained that no one could be admitted outside visiting hours, and these had been temporarily suspended. When Ghéde insisted, the door was closed on him. The Masai retained his composure and returned to the car. He muttered something to Frail and disappeared into the woods behind the clinic.

Unclothing himself, Ghéde sprang on to the bough of a large tree and climbed swiftly until he was lost from sight in dense foliage. Swinging from bough to bough he soon found himself above the grounds at the rear of the establishment. He emitted a low whistle, which he repeated several times. From somewhere not far distant the dull muttering of a drum responded. A white-frocked attendant, a few stray strands of hair curling from beneath her starched cap, paused and gazed up with astonishment. A moment later she screamed at the sight of a naked negro grinning at her through the leaves. Thumbing his nose and laughing insanely, he sprang from the tree and charged her. Within seconds, cries filled the air and the place was teeming with attendants. They sprang up on all sides and converged upon the massive negro, but they had to employ all the tricks of their profession before he was overpowered. His eyes rolled wildly, froth oozed from his jaws, then he lay motionless.

The clinic resounded with alarms, and before long the wail of a siren added to the clamour. An ambulance drove on to the terrace at the rear of the clinic, followed closely by another. Ghéde, realising that his strategy had failed, kicked and threshed, demanding to be taken into the clinic. His sojourn in England had not been sufficiently protracted to deprive his mind of a certain logic, but they proceeded to take him to another asylum!

In the meantime, Reynolds had arrived and recognized the tall Masai who had jostled him in San Domingo, and who had danced so consummately on the night of Lorma's *juba*. The narrow, refined features were now Buddha-like in a mask of calm composure which concealed his fury and frustration. The doors closed upon him and the ambulance drove away.

Reynolds was about to enter the clinic when he was stopped in his tracks by the sound of a rending crash. He turned back and saw beyond the gates a black limousine that had collided head-on with one of the towering trees flanking the runway. It had hurtled straight at it, and it was only too apparent that there could be little hope for the driver.

The ambulance halted half way along the drive, and officials from the clinic were running to the scene of the accident. Reynolds drew close and saw a woman's body impaled upon the steering axle. Shards of glass had torn the driver's face to ribbons. She was the sole occupant of the vehicle. He saw them extricate the body, and then he began to understand. The rear door of the car had been torn from its hinges and the battered fragments of a Voodoo drum lay on the gravel driveway. The various fragments of the whole ghastly puzzle were assembled in his mind in a flash, and they fitted perfectly. Taking advantage of the general confusion, Reynolds hastened up the steps of the clinic, pushing past a bewildered attendant on his way out to the scene of the crash.

Reynolds knew that North's room lay beyond the library on the first floor. He raced along the corridor, flew up the stairs and through the library, meeting with no obstruction until he reached the room which North had occupied. The section of wall containing the metal eye was wide open; a faint perfume enveloped him, and another odour which he could not place. Two officials confronted him, both in a state of agitation, though they seemed relieved to see him. He heard with one ear only their confused account of North's escape. Upon the bed lay a woman's garment, a crumpled speckled frock. A whirlwind of words raced through his mind as the officials described a flaxen-haired woman and a "funny sound, like native drums". Reynolds' thoughts reverted to the *juba* on Crawford Street. He recalled Uremi, Ghéde, and the latter's astonishing dancing-partner. Then his eyes were drawn to what appeared to be a small black stain on the floor. An alarm buzzed suddenly overhead and the attendants left him. He stooped and picked up the small fetish which he had once presented to Lorma Steele! It glistened strangely and was coated with a muculent substance which made it stick to his fingers. This was not due to its viscosity alone but to a peculiar quality possessed by the fetish itself, which communicated to his touch a mild electric current. He wrapped it in a handkerchief and slipped it into his pocket. The faint scent seemed stronger, more cloying, and it recalled to him the reek of the greater cats combined with the unmistakable fetor of methane.

Reynolds opened the cupboard in which North had kept his papers. The small bundles of verses were not there; in their stead he found a carefully documented record of the events from which the present account has been reconstructed. Later that day he read the record and was appalled by its contents. After extracting certain verses he gave them to Philip Yayer, whom he called upon that evening. Reynolds did not allude to the main document, but, handing Yayer the poems, he remarked: "Keep

them if you will. Publish them if you dare. They are undoubtedly the only poems in existence written by a hyaena”.

It was a long time before Yayler could bring himself to read even a few lines. He knew that Reynolds' remark had been no mere lapse of good taste, but a plain statement of fact. North himself had shown Yayler a sample, at the clinic, weeks previously. After a nearly complete reading, Yayler tore the papers to shreds and burnt them.

17

The following morning, as Reynolds completed his preparations for the South American Expedition, he could not banish the image of a crumpled newspaper which had lain on the desk in North's flat. The faces of three women continued to stare up at him. According to North's document they had, like Uremi, undergone a theriomorphic mutation at the moment of sexual congress; and, again like Uremi, being unable to achieve permanent transformation, had died horribly. That which they had begun to consummate spectrally had terminated in the mutilation and death of their physical bodies. It had been so with Lorma Steele, and with Spiritmaster's slatternly janitrix. They were of the *bultu*, yet the conscious knowledge of magical mutation had not persisted with them. And at the heart of these atrocities sounded the black rhythms which Reynolds had brought to London. He was inextricably involved, and perhaps for this reason he now understood why man has no real

ability to judge his fellows on the evidence of mere circumstances, however conclusive this evidence might appear. The devious lines along which material causes travel are as intricate and as unfathomable as the *vevers* that adorned the walls of Lorma's lair; and from what depths of Time such remote atavisms might resurge as causes of these causes, the *human* mind can know nothing.

Next morning, Reynolds did not set out as planned, and the Expedition had to find another anthropologist to take his place. None was eager to do this since its object lay in remote and suffocating swamplands of the Upper Amazon. Nonetheless, he was adamant in his decision to withdraw. Some instinct which he had striven vainly to stifle was directing him once more to Africa; ultimately to Kabultiloa.

A life-long aversion to all forms of superstition was insufficient to overcome the sense of urgency which prompted his change of plans. He knew that unless the *devil-stone* was returned to its place of origin he would never again know peace of mind; if then.

He began his journey with a small suitcase of personal belongings, and the fetish still wrapped in the handkerchief.

Absorbed in a web of lugubrious thoughts, he barely noticed the journey. He was living in the document North had left, wondering with horror at the caverns of darkness that a casual séance had accidentally unsealed. Powerful emotional tensions, combined with unusual atmospheric conditions, had contributed to the degeneration of a human being and the production of a monster; a reversion to an earlier form of existence and the upsurge of dormant atavisms which had manifested eldritch entities from regions outside space and time. To a description of these entities, which North had included in the document, had been added a cryptic comment, evidently transcribed from some recondite and occult source:

...if ye confound the space-marks, saying: They are one or saying They are many: if the ritual be not ever unto me: then expect the direful judgment of...⁸

This obscure and incomplete reference to a ritual, mentioned several times during the course of North's record, was drawn from a tradition unknown to Reynolds. By ways and means not clear to him the *loa-stone* had created a channel for the ingress into the human life-wave of non-human sources. According to another passage in the document, the Cult of the *Bultu* may have been active in Britain as early as palaeolithic times, as suggested by excavations in the Welsh Tir Tarll where mass burials of hyaena have been unearthed long since. In recent times no known traces of the cult have been discovered with the single exception of the village of Belpham, a remote region of the New World where it erupted with hideous violence.⁹ In this case the *bultu* drums had also featured. North did not reveal who so recently had unsealed the caverns of hell, although he hinted at an obscure *grimoire* which he claimed to be still extant.

There remained little doubt in Reynolds' mind that the music which he had brought to London, together with his discovery of the stone, had triggered the latest upsurge of the *Bultu*. To the deaths of the men who had accompanied him on that fateful night of the full moon had been added the disasters resulting from subhuman attacks which he shrank from contemplating.

It was with little surprise that he found his return to Kabultiloa coincident with a full lunation. He put up at a hut on the outskirts of the village not far distant from the swamps bounded on one side by impenetrable jungle.

During daytime he examined the terrain under which the

⁸ The *Book of the Law*, ascribed to a praeterhuman Intelligence and transmitted to Aleister Crowley.

⁹ An account of the resurgence may be found in the present author's tale, *Snakewand*.

tunnels were located. It was comparatively easy to do this without arousing local suspicions because the natives held the place in such dread that no one of them could have been induced to venture beyond the village compound.

Reynolds waited for nightfall before attempting to penetrate the thickly wooded region flanking the swamps. The tropical moon cast a brilliant light and progress suffered almost as little as it would have done during daytime. From the moment of dusk the thudding of drums had sounded from the village; that, and the shrieking ululations of hyaena.

A grey veil shimmered over the swampland and as he skirted it the fetid odour of methane rose like a wall around him. He knew that once he had passed through the vapour he would be on safer ground that extended eastwards. The greatest danger lay in isolated pockets of morass which he had noted in daytime. With his proximity to the swamps, and his entry into the wall of mist, the distant drums were muffled and new noises disturbed the night. Susurrant quakings of the larval terrain bubbled like sinister breathings. They combined with the stridulations of terrestrial amphibia, seething in the jungle beyond, as if invisible hordes were massing at some ghostly sabbath.

Having no moonlight to guide him now, Reynolds was surprised to find that he had no need of his pocket lamp. A tremulous film of phosphorescence floated all about him. It followed the shapes of grotesque vegetation, outlining their contours in an unctuous and radiant slime. Gigantic fungoids towered above him; they drew nourishment through fleshy tubers which crawled along the marsh like monstrous serpents. Reynolds watched their reptatory undulations with fascination, refusing to accept the phenomena as optical illusions, supposing their cause to be an obscure quality of the rank decay that everywhere abounded. He had read about certain cryptograms reacting similarly, especially at times of a full lunation. Shifting his attention, he became aware of an uncanny

stillness. The almost palpable silence oppressed him. Even the sound of the drums no longer penetrated the curtain of silence that enfolded him.

An acute sense of alarm stirred within him. It was as if a subboreal tentacle held him in its clammy grip. He fought against the sensation and pressed forward, only to find that another change had occurred. He was unable to walk as before, but was forced to make deliberate effort against unseen resistances in the atmosphere. It was like wading through invisible treacle, or some cloying substance imbued with intent to hinder his advance. The feeling irritated him, the more so as a barely mastered fear was beginning to claim him. He half thought he knew the nature of the impediment, but the idea was so absurd that he grew doubly irritated with himself for entertaining it: *he thought the swamp was aware of the manner in which he had circumvented it*, and that it had sent a ghostly but sensible counterpart, an astral replica of itself, to drag him down, to suck him in, to absorb him slowly, silently. He listened for the regurgitations of the baleful terrain he had left behind him. He could visualise the heaving surface of the swamp, writhing with suppurating mouths that puckered themselves, and then exhaled slowly, like the larval orifices he had once seen boiling in the sides of a volcano. But all he could hear was the blood pounding in his body; muffled internal drumbeats. He remembered a Tibetan monk who had compared the subtle vibrations within the human body to an ordered harmony which, to an initiated listener, appears as an architectonic and complex orchestration of sublime beauty. Perhaps he now heard the averse manifestations of this harmony; his hearing was not sufficiently sensitive to detect the more profound nuances, mercifully so, for it was an uncanny dissonance that filled him with dread.

He struggled forward, conscious that his eyes also were deluding him. Clusters of vegetation uncoiled slowly their tentacles in a misty and leprous radiance. It was an interior light

which he himself seemed to project and yet which seemed to be directed by something *outside*, reflecting the subtle suggestions of a morbid and obscene will. He thought he heard a semblance of human laughter slip like oil down the writhing tubers, which twisted back upon themselves and absorbed the drops through porous membranes; a grotesque chuckling coupled with distorted and equivocal speech, the lilting ambiguities of which filled him with loathing.

The drag on his legs grew heavier, and rank fungi emanated fumes which all but overpowered him. Then a ray of moonlight penetrated the fog of nightmarish shapes and diverted his attention. Its effect upon the vaporous clouds of swamp-mist caused an immediate darkening of his surroundings. Only the phosphorescent contours of the monstrous plants seemed brighter by contrast, with an halation illumined by the foul life which animated them. Their movement convulsed the entire landscape, and Reynolds saw that the plants had bestial counterparts which they cradled in a shadowy embrace. These abnormalities were replenishing their own organisms by draining the vitality of the plants. Some inner monitor warned him that each counterpart could, and might, detach itself from its 'lover' and fix its vampire mouth upon himself. Already, swaying tentacles were groping blindly in his direction.

It was at this point that fact and fantasy became so inextricably blended that he feared for his sanity and fought to control his bodily movements. The parasites that were satiate with poisonous fluids dropped off, or were disgorged by the plants with a revolting display of mass eructation. They fell to the ground, reared on their hind legs and displayed gaping rimas in the nether regions of their trunks. Then they gathered round him like a pack of jackals, pawing the air as drops of the virescent fluid with which they had been impregnated trickled down their flanks. But they were not jackals nor any known beasts. Beneath their pelts he glimpsed the unmistakeable contours of

humanity condensed from an ectoplasmic substance that was capable of mutating. He thought he saw human eyes regarding him, and then a face, an almost familiar face – the face of Lorma Steele. He knew that his reason had deserted him, yet he felt a sudden pang of intense pity. He had once been very fond of Lorma, and he could not believe, even now, that she had revelled in nameless filth and exulted in foulness.

A loud and humming sound moaned in the gigantic trees. It gathered momentum, and down the pathway of the moon he saw black specks flying towards him. He raised his hands defensively, but the ground about him was crawling with hostile entities. As they encircled him he thought he saw again the ambiguous outlines of anthropomorphic shapes. They formed a ring with himself as its centre, and they gained in solidity and in clarity as the moaning wind increased. Yet he sensed no movement in the atmosphere; the feter of the swamp and the cloying mist remained as before. The figures only seemed to wheel and fly about him, mocking and taunting him. Not all of them were lemures; some he knew to be still living, others he had seen on the evening of the fire on Crawford Street.

He floundered like an idiot trying to recover his wits. He was here, at the centre; here, where the infernal music had its source; here in Kabultiloa, home of a secret cult more hideous than any conceivable in the abysses of nightmare. Deep within the earth, these forces dwelt and radiated evil... And they were hailing him! Of all the shocks he had sustained, this was the most appalling. They, of the *Bultu*, were welcoming him home!

He scanned the ring of faces, searching for two that he knew would not be present; two from whom would spring a race born of the seed of lightning and the flesh of dark atavisms. He had reopened ancient corridors established before Time was measured; he had made possible again unnatural traffic with the denizens of alien worlds. He had, in his folly and infatuation for an harlot, forged the necessary links, established the forbidden

contacts, learned the secret of the hidden alignments; and upon his person at that moment was concealed the focus through which these forces poured. *That* was the true centre of the Ring of Power, and the saltant shapes that formed it. As to an irresistible magnet they swarmed to adore the Thing which it had called down. There they teemed, meeping and mowing, ring upon ring of hybrid things, formed partly in the semblance of their essential totem and partly in the human shapes by which Reynolds recognised them. And their language was a loathsome laughter and a hissing guttural sussuration as of serpents of the slime.

He was borne down by an oppressive weight, a cloud, a writhing mass of twisting vapours.

How long Reynolds lay unconscious of his surroundings, he could not determine; he knew only that on waking he perceived a faint grey light filtering through dense foliage. It may have been the light of dawn; it may have been the onset of further horrors, but as he raised himself painfully he was almost glad to find that, however lost he might be, his immediate surroundings betrayed no elusive signs. The forest of fungi still waved restless feelers in the air, and the miasmic feter of the swamps hung heavily in the atmosphere. He counted himself fortunate that he had not strayed into the morass itself.

A sense of lassitude, of sheer physical exhaustion, remained

with him, but he had sustained no bodily injury. His greatest fear was that he might find evidence of the physical presence of the teratomas disgorged by the plants, which now stood swathed in coiling mist, pulsing in a ghastly sleep of repletion. On the other hand, he could not believe that his mind had been invaded by sinister radiations capable of assuming any shapes they chose. He preferred to suppose that the effects of heat, fumes, and his own state of cerebral excitation had combined to produce hallucinations.

As he lay in a furnace of sunshine, and worried his brain for a rational explanation, he heard something which, despite the sweltering heat, chilled his blood. Someone had called his name. It was absurd, and he panicked; more because of the state of mind which it betrayed than because he believed he had actually heard anything. When the sound came, he had been painfully flexing his right arm. It remained in mid-air, petrified. Again he heard the call. It was undoubtedly his name that he heard, and although he could not identify the voice, there was something familiar about the intonation. Numbed by the impact of events which it could not accept, his mind remained unresponsive. He was in a state of acute misery; yet there existed within him such a fierce aversion to any idea of the supernatural, that he compelled his memory to function although dreading the result. He was certain that no living being knew of his presence in Kabultiloa. Even supposing that some of the natives had seen him leave the compound, his name would not have been known to them.

The voice called again; this time close by. A harshness had entered into it, and a peculiarity of *timbre* that imbued it with an unnatural, metallic ring. Despite the unfamiliar elements, he knew it was Lorma's voice. And because he had been excessively fond of her, he wanted to go to her now. But more than that, he wanted to be assured beyond all possible doubt that her appearance in the nightmare he had recently experienced

had been due to the toxic effects of swamp-gas. If she were dead, as he believed, and if he were now being compelled to believe in some sort of survival of spirit, he was determined to know the truth at whatever the cost.

He moved with determination now that his inner resolve was firm. The voice seemed to have issued from dense growths of liana looped about the contiguous vegetation which impeded his progress. He used a hunting-knife to slash his way through. The grey light glittered on isolated pockets of swampland, and several times he narrowly escaped being sucked down.

Behind curtains of putrid heat which the foliage had prevented from escaping, burst jets of steam which induced in him a sickening vertigo. His exertions, forcing him to inhale deeply, augmented the nausea. He steadied himself against the bole of a tree but instantly withdrew his hand; the squamous bark conveyed an electric charge. It was of low voltage but the unexpectedness of it shocked him more than the electricity. He was about to prise from the trunk one of its scales when, from the corner of his eye, he noticed an indefinite shadow flit silently through the undergrowth bordering the morass. Simultaneously he heard his name repeated; this time the call was very close. It rang imperiously now, shrill in its urgency.

Gasping for air, Reynolds hacked his way blindly in its direction. This time the voice did not fade but continued vibrating, moaning, sighing, almost inviting. He floundered forward, slashing at interlaced tendrils and knife-sharp branches, and once, he lopped off a fleshy tentacle which squirted into his face a frothy slime. The severed member writhed at his feet, coiling round his legs in an effort to drag him down. Shuddering with revulsion, he plunged on. Yet again the voice called; now at his side. It spoke of impending storm, and the harsh metallic tones changed to liquescent and ambiguous sighings, followed by a flood of prurience which bewildered him. From the oncoming storm it promised refuge in lascivious embraces and forgetful-

ness. Lightning streaked, thunder rumbled, followed by the sound of plashing rain. Panic seized him. He halted as the ground yielded beneath him and closed over his feet. He wrenched them free and retreated, laughing hysterically. Pulling out a handkerchief to mop away the blinding sweat, he failed to notice the fetish, flung over his shoulder by the sudden movement. The sound of his laughter echoed round the steaming swamp and reverberated uncannily behind him. He turned in terror. Not more than twenty feet distant crouched the shadow he had recklessly pursued. And the thing that had simulated Lorma's voice emitted piercing shrieks of laughter – just like his own. Two eyes, glowing with a baleful orange light, burned out of the shadow; and confronting him was a mottled hyaena. His heart jumped, his mind flashed backwards to a hospital ward. He thought a trick of light and shade had lent a vulpine cast to the face that had looked up at him from the bed. He had, even then, all but guessed the truth. Of all animals, the hyaena alone is able to mimic the human voice... Reynolds' limbs shook again with the fever of insane laughter. Their duet tore apart the drifts of heat which quivered beneath torrents of rain already penetrating the leafage overhead. Twisting his foot on a coil of liana, he tripped, fell backwards and threshed in the uliginous slime which slowly stifled his cries. The surface of the swamp was curiously agitated, bubbling with boiling larva from the mouths which avidly sucked him down. Then the heaving mass closed over him.

A small black stone was all that remained, and as the devouring morass shuddered beneath it, lightning flashed through the trees, and struck.

Before the thunder a vast and umbrageous form rose from the place where the stone had lain. In its billowing spectral mass a glow, as of rutilant eyes, glanced down upon the mottled beast which slunk into the swamp as the Shadow ascended to gulfs beyond the stars.

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