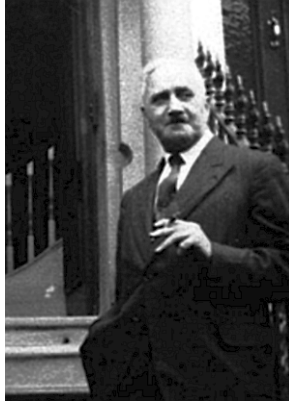


MAKER OF SHADOWS

Jack Mann
[Charles Henry Cannell (1882–1947)]

Erstausgabe Wright & Brown, London 1938

Das Titelbild zeigt das Cover der Erstausgabe bei Wright & Brown, London 1938.



Charles Henry Cannell

Jack Mann was one of the many pseudonyms of Charles Henry Cannell (1882–1947), a British editor and writer of fantasy and supernatural, detective novels and stories.

Prior to becoming a writer, Cannell was a former soldier in the Boer War and journalist for *THE DAILY TELEGRAPH*. Cannell began writing novels under his mostly used pen-name “Evelyn Charles Henry Vivian” in 1907. Cannell started writing fantastic stories for the arts magazine *COLOUR* and the aviation journal *FLYING* (which Cannell edited after leaving the *TELEGRAPH*) in 1917–18, sometimes publishing them under the pseudonym “A.K. Walton”.

Today, Vivian is best known for his Lost World fantasy novels such as “*City of Wonder*” and his series of novels featuring supernatural detective Gregory George Gordon Green or “Gees” which he wrote under his “Jack Mann” pseudonym. Vivian also wrote several science-fiction stories, including the novel “*Star Dust*” about a scientist who can create gold. Critic Jack Adrian has praised Cannell’s lost-world stories as »*bursting with ideas and colour and pace*«, and »*superb examples of a fascinating breed*«. Influences on Vivian’s work included Rider Haggard, H.G. Wells, Arthur Machen and the American novelist Arthur O. Friel. Vivian also published fiction under several other pseudonyms, including Westerns as “Barry Lynd”. J. Adrian has noted that some of the pseudonyms Cannell used »*will never now be identified*«. For younger readers, Vivian wrote “*Robin Hood and his Merry Men*”, a retelling of the Robin Hood legend.

Vivian also edited three British pulp magazines. From 1918 to 1922 Vivian edited *THE NOVEL MAGAZINE*, and later, for the publisher Walter Hutchinson (1887–1950), *HUTCHINSON’S ADVENTURE-STORY MAGAZINE* (which serialised three of Vivian’s novels) and *HUTCHINSON’S MYSTERY-STORY MAGAZINE*. In addition to UK writers, Vivian often reprinted fiction from American pulp magazines such as *ADVENTURE* and *WEIRD TALES* in the Hutchinson publications.

Outside the field of fiction, Vivian was noted for the non-fiction book “*A History of Aeronautics*”.

List of all Novels of the Gees-Series:

- Gees First Case (1936)
- Grey Shapes (1937)
- Nightmare Farm (1937)
- The Kleinert Case (1938)
- Maker of Shadows (1938)
- The Ninth Life (1939)
- The Glass Too Many (1940)
- Her Ways Are Death (1940)

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._C._Vivian

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Chapter 1

Shadows Surround Us

It was noon, but the twisting road that led beyond the Clyde was greasy with an almost impenetrable mist. The big grey Rolls-Bentley poked its way northward into the Highlands at a snail's uncertain, dragging pace. Its unwonted slowness seemed to match the instinctive reluctance of its driver to proceed.

Gees—his real name was Gregory George Gordon Green—could almost feel a danger in the gloomy air that thickened as he drove, as if wishing to bar his way. He regarded the winding, bumpy road with distaste, and struggled manfully to overcome a keen desire to turn back.

He shifted his position at the wheel, and as he did, the letter in the side-pocket of his well-cut tweeds crackled almost pleadingly.

It was written in a delicate, well-bred hand; and its tone was one of courtesy and gentleness, but it spoke in accents of carefully repressed fear. It was signed, Margaret Aylener; and contained a simple request that Gees visit her at ›The Rowans.‹ She had enclosed the two guineas that was Gees' customary charge for an initial consultation, but she had neither made any inquiry as to the fees for his services nor hinted at what she wanted him to do for her.

The whole thing was tantalizingly mysterious, more for what it hinted than for the usual details it omitted; and Gees, with the clammy moistness of the fog thick on his tongue, discovered that the curiosity he had felt on first reading of the Aylener woman's note had now returned to shove his vague uneasiness out of the driver's seat.

May was half over. Behind him in England were blossoming chestnuts and hawthorns. But here, when the fog parted for a moment, only sullen, peaty desolation met his eye. Even the breeze was harsh and unfriendly.

The confidential agency—nobody had ever defined a limit as to what that term might cover, Gees least of all—which he had set up two or three years ago had kept him reasonably busy and moderately prosperous. The haphazard way in which it was run permitted him to pick only the cases that definitely intrigued his fancy.

Just as he was considering how entertaining his life had been since he had started on this harebrained career, the figure of a shepherd loomed up before him on the road. Gees braked sharply and stuck his long, homely face out the side-window.

"I want to get to Brachmornalachan," he said.

"Aye," said the shepherd.

"Could you tell me the road?"

"Aye," said the shepherd, again.

"Well then, would you please?"

"Aye," said the shepherd. "Tak' the second on the left and you'll come to a fork o' three ways. Tak' the middle and ye'll come to Brachmornalachan. It's aboot nine mile."

Gees thanked him dazedly, and drove on. The directions were less hazy than they sounded, and Gees found the middle fork without difficulty. He paused a moment, drew a deep breath, then tramped down hard on the gas and sent the big car shooting down the road.

He found the puddled town with the unpronounceable name, got his directions for ›The Rowans,‹ and soon he saw, set some fifty yards or more back from the bumpy track, an old granite house, two-storied, and a mansion by comparison with all else in the neighborhood. A low stone wall took in an acre or so of the peaty plain about this dwelling, and some twenty yards distant from the frontage, from each side, and from the back of the house, reared up a noble mountain ash, just coming into flower.

All the deeply-sunken windows that showed were lace-curtained, and, grey and old though it was, the house looked cheerful. A gate in the stone wall stood open, and beyond it a well-kept drive of fine granite chips contrasted with the badly-kept track by which Gees had approached.

He turned in, and found width enough to draw up abreast the front door, which, he saw, was composed of two wide planks of great age, bound together by a pair of great hinges of iron scrollwork. Beside it he saw as he got out from the car, a black chain confined by two eyelets hung down, terminating in an iron handle, and a pull at this set a bell

clanging somewhere inside until the noise was abruptly stilled, as if somebody had grasped the tongue of the bell.

Then the door swung open slowly, heavily, silently, and a woman looked out.

She lacked only an inch or so of Gees' own height, and he was just over six feet. She might have been forty, or sixty. High cheekboned, freckle-faced, hard-mouthed, and with deep-blue, glassy eyes, she surveyed him with as little interest as the shepherd on the road. A big-boned, long-armed, strong woman, she waited for him to speak. "Miss Aylener?"

"Aye, she's expectin' ye," the woman said. "And the luggage?" She glanced past him at the car before the door.

"I'll get it." The woman took it from him when he had fetched it and her way of handling it suggested that the weight was nothing to her. "And is this all?" she asked.

"It is," he answered.

"Then ye'd better come in," she told him. "Ye can put the wee car away after ye've seen Miss Margaret, mayhap."

Still carrying his case, she took his hat and raincoat and opened a door on the right of the wide hallway, and, without having asked his name, announced him.

"Mr. Green, Miss Margaret."

He saw a big room, with two windows giving on to the front of the house, and another on the side. He saw a glowing peat fire on a wide hearth, and had an impression that the room was beautifully furnished. Facing him as if just risen from one of the armchairs by the fire, stood the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

She was of middle height; slenderly, regally proportioned, with dainty hands and finely-moulded feet and ankles. Her face was perfectly-modeled, her eyes of the softest, most liquid deep blue, and the slight smile that parted her lips revealed even, perfect little teeth.

Her snow-white hair waved softly over her head and if any art went to the making of her perfect, rose-tinged white skin, it was imperceptible. Sixty years of age, Gees would have said at that first sight of her. Later, he came to know that he had underestimated by nearly ten years, and then, knowing more of the soul of her, knew that he had underestimated her beauty fully as much as her age.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Green." She held out her hand. "But you will be very tired after the long drive. Elizabeth shall show you your room, and we can talk after you have rested awhile." She pressed a

bell push beside the fireplace. "Callum—my manservant—has gone to get the necessities that a guest involves, but Elizabeth"—she broke off as the door opened—"Elizabeth, show Mr. Green where to put his car, please."

"Aye, madam," said Elizabeth.

At the back of the house, she opened for him the double doors of an old stable from which the stalls had been removed. Obeying her gesture, he drew the car over to right of the entrance, leaving room for another beside it. Oil and petrol cans showed that the stable was already in use as a garage.

"And now, your room," said Elizabeth after they had re-entered the house. "I've taken the bag there."

After only a momentary hesitation he followed her. The stair-carpeting, old and faded though it appeared, was of heavy, costly pile, and the stone floor of the corridor to which he ascended was equally well carpeted. Elizabeth opened a door as massive as that in the front entrance, and revealed a large room, in which Gees saw a canopied double bed and heavy, old-fashioned furniture.

The woman pointed to a door in one corner. "Yon's the bath," she said, "And ye'll know the way down." And, with that, she left him to himself.

As nearly as he could tell, the house faced east, and this room was at the southeast corner, with windows on opposite sides. Through either window he could see a mountain ash, though but dimly, because of the thickened reek that drove visibly from the west.

The silence was absolute, almost malignant. And the reek outside appeared to pass in waves, as if it carried shadows in its impalpable, driving mass.

Yes, that was it. Shadows, passing with the mist that made the trees appear unreal. Shadows, following each other from the west.

E. C. V.

He went down the carpeted stairway, and back to the room in which he had left Margaret Aylener. She pointed him to an armchair beside the fire and seated herself across from him. Through the window behind her he could see another of the four rowans, but the dusk and driving mist made it little more than a ghost tree.

"You are wondering," Margaret Aylener said with a slight smile, "what an old woman like me can want of a man like you, in a place like this."

"Not quite," and he too smiled. "Questioning, say, why you live in such a place as this. Its remoteness, I mean."

"I might question why you live in London," she countered.

"That's true."

She paused. "Will you tell me—you call yourself a confidential agent. What is that exactly?"

"For a time, until my father objected too much over it, I ran an advertisement in the personal columns of newspapers," he answered. "The chief line of it was—'Consult Gees for anything from mumps to murder.' You may take that literally as answer to your question, Miss Aylener."

"That is, from medicine to crime," she suggested. "Taking in every other form of anti-social activity by the way, I suppose?"

"Pretty much," he assented. "Your letter interested me so much that I drove here without writing to ask what is your particular need. Now I am here I'm not sorry, though I nearly was, back on the road."

She gave him a look of awakened interest. "Could you tell me how long ago?" she asked. "The time at which you felt that?"

"About three o'clock," he answered. "Or just before three—a few minutes before."

"Yes." She brooded over it, grave-eyed and still.

"And now—what do you want of me?" he asked.

She smiled again. "I am—forgive me for not answering directly—I am trying to sense you," she said. "To—to value you, estimate you, say. Whether, now you are here, to ask you how much I must pay you for the mere journey from London, or—you see, Mr. Green, you are altogether different from what I imagined you. And I don't know—"

She broke off, no longer smiling, but with trouble clouding her lovely eyes.

"What I want done is so indefinite. Outside all normal beliefs. Mr. Green, my man Callum—I want you to talk to him. He and Elizabeth have been with me here a very long time, and this—my reason for writing to you, involves a far longer time. Goes almost out of Time, I might say. Callum has great knowledge, strange knowledge. Whether you are capable of believing—" Again she broke off, thoughtfully.

"Most things," he ended for her. "I have learned, especially since I established my agency, not to disbelieve—most things. I wonder—I want you to tell me something, Miss Aylener."

"And that is—?" She gazed full at him as she put the question.

"Looking past you, through the window behind you—it's nearly dark now, so the illusion I get is not so strong. But I got it from the window of my room. As if there were an intermittent darkening of the mist

outside, not so much thickening as darkening—shadows. As if, in the mist, shadows are passing, one after another. Is it an illusion?”

Yet again she smiled.

“Your question answers mine, Mr. Green,” she said. “It completes my estimate, and I know now I was right to send for you. But I think, if I could answer your question fully, you would not be here to ask it.”

Chapter 2

The Servant of Shadows

Four candle-stemmed electric bulbs on the dining table left the upper part of the room in shadow. Callum, the manservant who waited on them, was staid and middle-aged and quite noiseless, a smallish, tight-lipped man, and somehow not like a servant. “So far, Mr. Green, I have told you nothing,” Margaret Aylener said when the meal was nearing its end. “How long can you stay?”

“At the risk of being rude, I must say first that I set a value on my time,” he answered. “So far, we have ignored that side.”

“You may set what value you will, if you can do what I ask of you,” she told him. “Mr. Green, I want you to absorb, for the present—as you are absorbing. To grow into this atmosphere, as I believe more and more that you can. For tonight, say. So that you may not set too small a value on the service I shall ask of you.”

“It sounds like wisdom—from my point of view,” he said. “If I might ask about something that rather interests me—how do you get electric light in such a place as this, Miss Aylener?”

“Water power,” she answered. “My father installed it. Quite a small stream flowing down from the hills to the loch drives a wheel—I do not understand the mechanism, but Callum does.”

“There is a real loch, then?” he asked.

“Yes—didn’t you see it? But the mist—of course! You can have seen very little.”

“The four rowans,” he said. “Are they very old?”

“They were as high as the roof when I was a child,” she said. “Before them were four others, and after them, if an Aylener is left, will be four more. Always planted in a square, with the sides diagonal to the walls of the house, enclosing it in their limits.”

"And the shadows in the mist are kept outside those limits," he said.

Margaret Aylener betrayed no surprise at the remark.

"I hope you are not merely guessing."

"The rowan is the world ash," he answered. "In Cumberland I have seen how it can be a guard against—perhaps against shadows even. Those four trees mark a boundary as effective as a magician's circle, perhaps. Ygdrasil, the world ash—its powers go back through Norse mythology to the beginnings of things. But you said—if an Aylener is left."

"There is only one, a girl, to follow me," she explained.

"Then—forgive me if I trespass where I ought not—if she marries and carries on the succession, the name will pass," he suggested.

"No," she dissented. "If she marries, her husband will take her name. That is understood. You will see her tomorrow. My niece, Helen Aylener. And that is why—"

She did not end the sentence, nor did he ask what she would have said. The four trees had told him much, and he was growing into the atmosphere of this place. Almost, now, he could define her need, though what or who had caused it was beyond his knowing. Sight of the niece, perhaps, would bring enlightenment.

And there was Callum, too. One could tell he was a Scot, but an educated one, not like a gillie or a crofter. Black-haired, dark-eyed, he appeared pure Celt, a totally different type from big-boned, Gaelic Elizabeth. Gees divined that Miss Aylener trusted him completely.

"A phrase of yours—the beginning of things," she remarked after a silence. "I wonder—what, to you, that means."

"Science has carried a long way back in recent years," he said. "We know now that history is only a very small part."

"But you do not rely only on modern science?" she asked.

He shook his head. "There are other sources—as I think you know yourself," he answered. "No legend exists without foundation."

"Such as—?"

"Well, the legend of the Cro-Magnon men, for one," he said. "Their coming to western Europe was only a legend for centuries, and then their remains were discovered—enough remains to identify them as altogether different from man of today. A race that was utterly wiped off the face of the earth by the forerunners of our type of man, eighteen thousand years ago. They were—am I boring you though?"

"No—please go on."

"I was going to say they were big men, probably a fair-haired race, and with a reasonably large brain content, but not so big and brainy as to prevent the Azilian-Tardenois race, the ancestors of the dark little Picts, from overcoming and destroying them, when this island of Britain was still joined to the continent and a river ran southward through what is now the Strait of Dover, with the Thames a mere tributary to that main stream. All that was legend, till geology and ethnology proved it."

"The Azilian-Tardenois," Margaret Aylener repeated thoughtfully. She looked at the posed figure of Callum. "Your ancestors, Callum," she said. "In part, madam," he agreed, and relaxed from his pose to refill Gees' glass. "Not so completely mine as Gamel Mac-Morn's."

"An odd sounding name, that," Gees observed.

"It is curious that you should refer to the subject which is connected with my asking you to come here, Mr. Green."

"Is it so very curious?"

She shook her head slightly. "Though that, the first great change, is only a very small part of the whole," she said. "And now, before you and I talk fully about what I mean to ask of you, I wish you to talk to Callum, if you will."

"Certainly," he agreed. "Tonight, you mean?"

"If you take your coffee in here, and then join me in the other room. There is not much time, you see."

They finished their meal almost in silence, and then he held the door for her and returned to his seat at the table. As he waited, the stillness gathered round him again; the granite walls of the house were thick, he knew, but this utter, oppressive silence was unnatural.

Callum entered with coffee, his dark, still face utterly expressionless.

"We are to talk," Gees said, after a long pause.

"Why, yes," Callum said. "Since it is her wish."

"Not exactly a servant, are you, Callum?" Gees suggested abruptly.

"You see more than most people," Callum retorted.

"Enough to want to see more." Gees took a cigarette from his case and lighted it. "I suggest you sit down and talk as Miss Aylener wishes you to talk. What, exactly, are you?" Gees asked bluntly.

"My family have served Ayleners for a very long time," Callum answered. "Served and guarded them. My father intended me for the medical profession, but the year I passed my finals in Edinburgh my brother died, and so I came to my place here. Happier in it than there."

His sincerity was obvious.

"A fully qualified medical man, eh?" Gees reflected.

"It has its use," Callum pointed out. "But that is not what we were to talk about, I think. Miss Aylener wants you to understand—fully."

"Does Gamel MacMorn come into it?" Gees asked.

"He is it," Callum answered. "Spawn of the devil—he is it!"

Momentarily, he let fierce hatred gleam through his impassivity. Gees finished his coffee, and put the cup down.

"Suppose you explain?" he asked calmly.

"I—it goes so far back," Callum said. "Not quite so far as the time out of time you mentioned at dinner. When the first Aryans to overrun Europe drove the Azilian-Tardenois to out-of-the-way corners of the continent such as this, I think Britain was already an island. There were MacMorns then. They go back to the very dawn of things."

"Unpleasantly, I gather," Gees suggested.

"My feelings toward them are beside the point," Callum said. "They were chiefs—priests and kings—from the very first. And they preserved the old wisdom, know and practice it up to today."

"Ah!"

"You know, probably," Callum went on, "that this corner of the earth is still peopled by a branch of the Turanian race, to some extent. There is Gaelic admixture, but you can see Turanian in me, and it is stronger in Gamel MacMorn. Almost pure breed, there, no Gael blood showing. Ayleners are Brythonic—British, that is. They were a strong family, once, and now only two remain."

"And they have been here how long?" Gees asked.

"Since Agricola's wall was built," Callum answered. "There is Gaelic blood in the family, of course—Goidels and Brythons were one race, at first, and Brythons held as far north as the site of Agricola's wall before that wall was built. Ayleners were established here then, and how long before I do not know, and they held on here after the wall was built—held on after the Picts reoccupied Bernicia, and Hadrian's wall was built as the limit of Roman power."

"Where do your MacMorns come in?"

"MacMorns came near to establishing a Pictish kingdom," Callum answered. "If they had had better material to their hands, they might have put an end to Roman rule, even, but the very thing that gave them their power, the practice of the old wisdom, spoiled the cohesion of the Picts."

"It was too bloodthirsty—you cannot rule altogether by fear. And so the power of the MacMorns was not enough—Hadrian's wall held the Picts

in spite of MacMorns, and the invasions of the Ulster Ivernians put an end to MacMorn supremacy.

"They dwindled, and Gamel MacMorn today is no more than a small laird here in Brachmornalachan—to the outside world, that is. One thing, Mr. Green. In talking of Picts, I mean true Picts by blood, though the Romans included all the unconquered British races under that name. I do not. The Gaels are not Picts."

Callum became silent.

"And now," Gees suggested, "suppose we ascend from the general to the particular. What have I to do with Gamel MacMorn?"

"I told you," Callum said slowly, "that I am a fully qualified medical man, and for that, as you will understand, one has to be sane, materialistic. Very few illusions can survive seven years of medical training, as you can realize.

"But now, coming to the particular, I want to talk of things that would make the average man smile at my credulity, or worse than credulity. Impossible things, in my Edinburgh or your London, because they go back out of time. It was you who credited the Cro-Magnon legend, apparently saw them as a race. And they had a wisdom."

"They had a wisdom," Gees echoed. "The wisdom of Hell."

"MacMorn has it to this day," Callum said.

"Your warrant for that statement?" Gees asked sharply.

"I would say—Miss Helen Aylener," Callum answered.

"Ah! Caught in a web of MacMorn's spinning."

"Now I wonder"—Callum stared hard at him—"was that a chance simile, or did you mean it exactly as you said it?"

"So." Gees spoke again after a long pause. "As I thought when I looked out from the windows. The shadow magic, old as time itself."

"Then you know?" Callum asked. "This is not impossible, to you?"

"I did not know it survived anywhere today," Gees answered. "Nor, as far as that goes, that anyone survived with either the knowledge or the hardihood to practice it. You go so far—do you?—as to allege that MacMorn traffics with shadows?"

"I said, as far as the outside world goes, he is only a small laird here," Callum reminded him. "But among the Daoine Shih he is still a king. And—as you expressed it—he spins webs."

"Orders the spinning," Gees amended. Remembering how the shadows had driven across from west to east in the hazy reek.

"You know, then," Callum said thoughtfully.

"Very little," Gees confessed. "There is a clay tablet from the site of Nineveh, which was one of the most evil cities on earth in its time. A papyrus from the Thebaid, and that is no more than a monkish palimpsest which scores out and overlays most of what had been written about the shadow magic—it is no more than a fragment of knowledge. "A possible picturization on one of the stones near Concarneau, but without the palimpsest and the clay tablet one would attach no importance to it. A few other scraps like these, and taking them all together the average student would call it no more than pretence at a cult, not enough to justify belief in the cult as a thing of any power."

"But you believe—at least you think it may have power?"

"How much do you know?" Gees asked abruptly.

"Less than you, I think," Callum answered frankly. "But I believe."

"He—this MacMorn—he would never dare," Gees said.

"His shadows that you saw—most of them—they are not of today nor of yesterday," Callum declared. "Only, I think, two. He lives nearly halfway round the loch from here, in a bigger house than this. One not so old. But it is built in one of the circles, a very large circle, like the one at Avebury, and three of the stones are standing to this day.

"The others are sunk in the peat, but they are there, and you know how they were erected, with living men buried round them to keep them from falling. And each stone lowered on a living man's chest."

"Thirteen lives to each stone," Gees added.

"And MacMorns built that circle, before there was a Druid ritual," Callum added yet again. "This one, Gamel MacMorn, he dares."

"They call it murder these days."

"Yes," he assented, "but only when they have proof."

"How old is this MacMorn?"

"He was about forty, when I was born."

"Yes, but how old is he now?" Gees persisted.

"About forty, as you see him."

"Which is manifestly impossible," Gees pointed out.

"He went away for a time, and came back as his own son," Callum said. "That, I believe, was the second of the two shadows he added to the old ones. The first was in my father's time. They were both—disappearances, and in both cases he wove a web. There was no proof, nothing to connect him with the disappearances. And each time he went away, and came back as his own son. Which is a monstrous impossibility, as you said. It is all impossible, of course."

"Only those two?" Gees asked thoughtfully.

"I do not know. Nobody knows. Nobody here will speak of it, and away from here it would be no more than a madman's dream. Forty—eighty years ago, for the first of them.

"If there were one before that, it would be about a hundred and twenty years ago, and since they will not talk, who would know? Fear of him would have been stronger then, and their silence about it more complete.

"For all I know, or anyone else knows, this Gamel MacMorn may be the one who took back Bernicia when the Romans built Hadrian's wall. May be the one who raised the standing stones, thirteen lives to a stone, round the site of the house where he lives today. A life for a lifetime, on and on."

"Still a king among the Men of Peace, you said," Gees observed.

"When I think of Them—the general view of Them as pretty little things running about the glens with gauzy wings and all the fairy trickery, I could laugh," Callum said. "That is, if it were not for the nightmare of the reality. Yes, MacMorn is still king among Them."

"By what right—what kinship with Them has he?"

"There was a woman—she may have been of the Azilian-Tardenois people, or later, and all Turanian-Ivernian, even," Callum said slowly. "She was caught and taken among the Men of Peace, and by some one of them bore a daughter who was half of earth and half of middle earth—only half human.

"When Bron or Brun MacMorn—he would be a Brian in these days—when he wanted aid in some one of his attempts at power, that daughter gave it, but only on condition that a son of theirs should succeed him in his place.

"And that son was born and came to Bron's place, and through his mother he kept an ascendancy among the Daoine Shih. Whether he is Gamel, or an ancestor of Gamel's, nobody knows."

"This tale is very old," Gees said thoughtfully.

"Miss Aylener will tell you the rest of it," Callum observed.

"One other thing I want you to tell me," Gees said. "Gamel MacMorn, I gather, is weaving a web to add another life to his, and add one more shadow to those already driven out. Is that the case?"

"Miss Helen Aylener's life," Callum said somberly, "And Miss Helen Aylener's shadow. That is why, as a last chance, Miss Margaret sent for you."

With that he stood up, as if to indicate that he had no more to say. While Gees stared at him, unbelievably, he spoke again, and the words declared him once more the perfect serving man.

“What time do you wish to be called in the morning, sir?”

Chapter 3

Can Man Refuse?

Elizabeth finished making up the peat fire in the drawing room, and went out. As, for a second, she glanced at Gees before passing him on her way to the door, he saw or imagined a relaxation of her features from the grim immobility of his earlier encounter with her, almost as if she had made up her mind to approve of him. The door closed on her, and his hostess, facing him from the other side of the fireplace, spoke.

"Callum has told you, Mr. Green?"

"Enough," he answered. "I wonder—'Mac' means 'son of.' I wonder—who and when was Morn, the father of all the MacMorns?"

"That is beyond telling, now," she said. "Unless—but no. This must be a son. Even if Callum is right about those renewals of youth."

"What do you think of that, Miss Aylener?" he asked.

"I think—it is all so impossible. Mr. Green"—she spoke with tense earnestness—"I have read and studied—as you see, I am not young, and I have had time to study. The germ plasm in man, that tiny part transmitted from generation to generation to establish heredity. As, I think, you know it does."

"You mean, assuring that the children of man shall be men," he suggested. "Though at one stage the embryo even has gills like a fish, it develops to man before birth, inherits the likeness of its parents."

"More," she said. "In some cases—a few cases—inherits the memories of its parents, until so-called love destroys them. You remember that story of Kipling's—'The Greatest Story Ever Written,' I think he called it. And the story was never written, never told, because the man who might have told it fell in love, and that sorry little love destroyed all

his memories of earlier lives, lest greater loves should spoil the little passion that filled his shrunken soul. Love kills memory.”

“There is no evidence that the germ plasm carries memory,” he said.

She smiled. “Call me evidence,” she invited.

“I don’t get that, Miss Aylener,” he answered. “Unless—”

“What do you think of this place—The Rowans?”

“I think”—he chose his words with care—“it is a garden enclosed, containing one of the loveliest flowers that ever grew in any garden.”

She laughed, softly, musically. “An old woman thanks you, Mr. Green. I have wealth, but I sit here, nearing the allotted span of life. Why, do you think? I might have chosen any man I liked, almost.”

“Might have chosen one, and lost him.”

“No. I am one of those in whom the germ plasm carries memory. I would not spoil that memory, would not lose it, and so I barred out the little loves that might have been for this span of life. What I had was better—is better. Immaterial, yes, but nothing came to displace it.”

“Therefore, the end of the line of Ayleners.”

“No!” It was a vehement protest. “Even if it had meant that—but no. All I am telling you is that memory is transmitted, in some cases, and Gamel MacMorn may be one of them. Or it may be that—forty years, and forty years, and forty years, endlessly.”

“As I told Callum, they call that murder these days.”

“Yes? Mr. Green, you cannot look back forty years—you are not old enough to look back much more than twenty. But I can. Just think, now. Forty years ago, all that it means. What Brachmornalachan was, then.”

“Well?” he asked.

“Forty years ago,” she said. “I can remember. I was old enough, then, for clear judgement. Ancestral memories, things that had happened to Ayleners long dead—long, long dead—were recreated in me.

“But of that time, forty years ago. As far as Brachmornalachan was concerned, the motor road on which you travelled had not been made, and you would have had to use tracks like the one outside my gate for eighty miles and more before you got here. The nearest railway station was thirty miles away, as it is today. We were a village out of the world. And if a girl—such a girl as my niece Helen—suddenly disappeared, and it was put about that she had a lover somewhere farther south, and had gone to him? Well?”

“I don’t know,” he said, impressed by her earnestness.

"She was not like my niece Helen," she went on. "She was the sister of the woman who is postmistress here now—her name was Margaret, like mine. Margaret Grallach. The elder sister of Bathsheba Grallach, who keeps the post office here in Brachmornalachan now."

"Yes," he said. "Yes. I see. Now, Miss Aylener, if I am to get all this clear—what are your memories? What have you of yesterday to tell me?"

"Yesterday first?" She appeared reluctant over it, he thought.

"Decidedly," he assured her. "If I am going into this—if I am to accept the impossible as possible, I must have everything bearing on it."

"There is a doubt in that 'if' of yours," she objected.

"Naturally. In all the other cases I have undertaken, there has been something tangible, something on which I could take hold. Here, it appears, I have to deal with shadows, and no more."

"Shadows," she echoed thoughtfully.

"Forgive me for reminding you—I asked a question," he said.

"Of my yesterdays." She sat silent for a long time. "Of my—yes, my other lives. I feel that I lived them. It may be no more than the germ plasm in me, carrying memory, as it might in you, in anyone, if they had the sight to see. The Scots' second sight, going back instead of forward, and heritage of us Goidelic people who kept to the old ways instead of becoming clothed. Did you know that Briton, or Brython, merely means clothed?"

He nodded with a smile. "If you want to employ me, you must tell me all you know. In fact, all you are. I am doubtful, on what I have so far heard, of helping you at all. And so I want you to tell me—your yesterdays."

She shook her head. "If you know anything at all of these things," she said, "you must know that memories of that sort are too fluid, too uncertain, for me to recite them to you as a part of my life. Something of me—something transmitted from generation to generation—was, when the circle was raised where Gamel MacMorn's house is now, but I cannot tell you whether Mom himself or a MacMorn raised it. I know that even then I felt the horror of what was done—even in that primal, undeveloped state. Because that ritual was alien from our people—" She broke off.

The Margaret Aylener of today was withdrawn, and it seemed that some other soul looked out through her beautiful eyes and dreaded the picture they registered in her brain.

Gees asked, "What people?" and with the question broke the spell. She looked at him normally, herself again.

"How can I tell? Except—they came in ships. A dark people, not like us. They brought evil, and fear."

"Masters of the shadow ritual," he suggested.

"Yes. Makers of shadows. A hundred and sixty-nine stones, and thirteen shadows to each stone. Earth-bound, while the stones endure."

"Thirteen times thirteen times thirteen," he reflected. "That number as only a beginning. Then Gamuel MacMorn must be very strong."

"Or what he serves is strong," she amended. "Except that they—the thirteen sacrificed to each stones—were our people, not his."

"It makes no difference—he can control them."

"It makes a great difference. They are forced to submit to the control, different altogether from willing servants. Later ones, like Margaret Grallach, may be willing, devoted—I do not know if they are. But they may be.

"And what he serves—his people created it, just as Kore-worship created Kore, who became Persephone of the Greeks, wife of the Unseen One, and survives to this day through the evil of such men as Gamel MacMorn.

"Mass thought created her, just as it created Odin and Thor and Tyr and Freya, and all the gods of the Norse mythology who seemed to die when Christianity destroyed that older worship. It is part of the hidden purpose of God that He permits men to create their own devils by mass thought, mass belief in the power of evil. They make it powerful."

"To what end?"

"The devil took Him into a high place and showed Him all the kingdoms of the earth: Fall down and worship me, and they are yours," she said slowly. "MacMorn chose as his kingdom length of days, renewal of vitality again and again and yet again, paying a life for each renewal."

"Or did he?" Gees asked. "All this is the wildest fantasy. What proof have you of anything you have said about him?"

"None," she confessed. "I may be a mind-sick old woman, hating a quite normal man who lives on the other side of the loch. Do you think that of me?"

"I don't know what to think," he answered frankly. "I have been here just a few hours, and all I have seen has been mist driving in waves. There is a perfectly commonplace explanation for that, and I may have imagined that I saw shadows.

"Then you—your man Callum first, and then you—try to make me believe that a man lives today with not only the knowledge that was cursed before history began, but the Seventh-Hell evil and cruelty to practice what that knowledge makes possible—"

"You have the knowledge."

"No," he denied. "All I know—all I believed that any man knows—is that it existed. Gilles de Rais tried to re-discover it, voodoo-worshippers and modern followers of black magic try to unearth the ritual, just as the Druids soaked altars in blood in the attempt."

"Thousands on thousands of lives have been taken, and now you say a man lives in this out-of-the-way spot who knows enough to summon Kore—or even Typhon himself, perhaps. A maker of shadows, today?"

"But not of today," she said. "Either in himself, or by transmitted memory, old and old and old. Of the beginning of things."

"And you want—?"

"Your help to save my niece from Gamel MacMorn," she answered.

"And how do you know she needs saving? She is not even here."

"I will tell you. Her mother—my sister—was named Helen too. She came here for this Helen to be born, and died at the child's birth. Died gladly, I think. We—I never learned who was this Helen's father. That too you must know. It has a bearing on the girl's danger."

"A very definite bearing, if all the rest you have told me should happen to be true," he agreed. "Sorry—I'm listening."

"And convincing me that you know more of the shadow magic than you will admit," she said with a smile. "But—Helen. I had no other interest. My sister and I had been very near each other, until she went away and—and that happened."

"All that I had I gave and still give to this daughter of the sister I loved. She does not value it, but lives in a different world from mine. We pre-war survivals do not know their world."

"Perhaps I ought to have been stricter with her, but it seems to me now that nothing would have made any difference. Just two years ago, staying with friends in Edinburgh, she met a clever young engineer, Ian Kyrle, of Kyrle and Farquhar, the bridge builders. Eighteen months ago, they became engaged, and I invited him to stay here. I have no doubt that those two love each other, but then, while he was staying here, they met Gamel MacMorn—"

"You don't mean she had not met MacMorn before then?" he interposed.

"Certainly not. She knew him, slightly—we have very little to do with him, as you may guess, since I know what I do know. But they—she and Ian—became almost intimate with MacMorn. For one thing, Ian was interested in the three stones that still stand, all that are left upright of the ring round MacMorn's house.

"You know, probably, that modern man cannot tell how those stones were poised, sometimes actually on their pointed ends, but so accurately that they remained upright for thousands of years. That for one thing, and then MacMorn can be fascinating when he likes.

"He did like. Invited those two into his house—I have never stepped over the threshold, and never will. I tried to warn them both, but all you and I have talked of tonight is mere childish folly to them. She laughs at it, and Ian laughs with her."

"Why not, if they are really in love with each other?" he asked.

"Because Gamel MacMorn has cast the thread," she answered. "I think you know what that means, without my telling."

"Yes, but how do you know he has?" he demanded sceptically.

"At times, I have the sight, Mr. Green," she said gravely, "And once I saw it. A faint, thin, wavering line, going out from her breast—and MacMorn holds the other end of that thread. Because life is what it is today—because there would be inquiry, trouble for him if he were not very careful, he waits his time to draw in the thread. You may be the only man who might be able to cut that thread without injury to her reason."

"If—if this is true, I never yet heard of more than one way of cutting that thread, and that way involves the destruction of the one who holds the thread and leaving it intact, to wither of itself. One other thing. What is MacMorn like?"

"Physically, not unlike Callum, but darker. One of those who came to this country in the ships, with very white skin and very dark hair and eyes. Like a man who lives in the dark. There is no subject on which he cannot talk with knowledge, I think, and if you met him you would find him perfectly charming. I think you will meet him."

He shook his head, and said, "Impossible."

"You must! You cannot refuse."

"I cannot do otherwise," he insisted in turn. "Think over what you have told me—what you know Callum has told me—and what is the sum of it? Two thousand, one hundred and ninety-seven shadows! Nothings.

"Lives that went to the raising of a circle of monoliths so long ago as to be almost out of time. A girl or woman who chose to run away

somewhere, forty years ago. A man with a rather odd sort of name who lives not far from here, and who was rather interested in an engaged couple. That couple, rather wrapped up in each other, modern enough in their outlook to regard old legend as no more than legend.

"Then think what you have asked me, and what is the sum of that? Simply that I should kill or in some way bring about the death of a man named Gamel MacMorn. For there is no other way of doing what you ask, if I credit the fantasy you have built up for me and call it truth.

"I repeat—there is no other way, if the thread that is the beginning of shadow magic stretches between MacMorn and your niece. While they both live, it cannot be broken."

"It is no fantasy, but truth," she averred.

"Then, short of murder, what could I or anyone do?" he asked. "However much I might wish to kill this Gamel MacMorn, I should hang if I did it. Get your niece to marry this Ian Kyrle at once, and keep them away from here. Keep her away from here, beyond his reach—MacMorn's."

"You know, as I know, that he could draw her back by that thread from any place on earth," she said, and for the first time he heard a harsh note in her voice. "Yet"—she softened again—"I see I cannot quarrel with your decision. I was foolish to hope—that there might have been some way—"

"I'm desperately sorry to be so futile," he told her.

"It is very late." She stood up. "In spite of what you say, you must be tired, and I have kept you talking a very long time. I accept your decision, Mr. Green, and you must tell me tomorrow what I owe you for this wasted time of yours."

"Nothing—it has been a pleasure to meet you," he declared.

"I should like you to meet my niece too. Can you stay till tomorrow afternoon—or till the next day, if you wish?"

"Yes, thank you—till the day after tomorrow. I've not even seen this place yet, thanks to the mist."

"I'll wish you a clear day tomorrow. Good-night, Mr. Green."

When he switched off the light in his room and looked out from the window before turning in, he saw stars in a clear, moonless sky. No mist remained, nor, to his sight, did any shadows drive on the whispering night wind.

Chapter 4

Within the Haunted Circle

A third servant waited on him when Gees breakfasted alone the next morning, a girl in her twenties whom Elizabeth called Ettie. She told him that Miss Aylener would not be down.

Miss Aylener's staff was oddly competent for a place like this. Thirty miles from a railway station, and well off the tourist beat, Brachmornalachan was an archaism.

After breakfast, with his hostess still invisible, Gees went out to survey his surroundings. All the mist of the day before had vanished. There was sunlight, but so pale and heatless that it was more like early February than May. The air had that intense clarity that comes after rain, and hill crests in the remotest distances cut the skyline with etched distinctness.

Standing under the rowan in front of the house, Gees saw the track, by which he had come, winding away to eastward, descending gently to the level of a small lake. On its edge were seven cottages, and a stone-built post office. Three more cottages dotted the expanse near the loch, and, quite by itself, almost directly across it, a squat, solid stone house backed against the hillside. Equidistant from the house stood three monoliths, all that were left of the prehistoric circle of stones that had once stood to mark a place of assembly or of worship.

Gamel MacMorn's house.

With the stones, and a few protuberances from the peaty soil to mark where others had stood, it was evident that it stood in the centre of the ancient circle, and had been built over the altar that had once occupied its site. The house itself looked more like a prison than an ordinary house.

At its eastern end there was a tree which, viewed from this distance, looked like nothing so much as a red umbrella, and Gees knew he was looking at a scarlet-blossoming thorn tree in full flower. In its way, it was as emblematic as were the four rowans guarding this house of Margaret Aylener's. Except for those five, there were no trees anywhere in the lower levels of this saucer-like valley.

Nowhere outside the garden of ›The Rowans‹ was there any cultivation, and what the occupants of the scattered cottages did for a living was something that Gees never learned.

The door of ›The Rowans‹ opened and Margaret Aylener came out to smile at Gees and to hope he had slept well. "Never better. You too, I hope."

"No," she said. "I had dreams. Perhaps we wakened too many things, last night. It is not good even to talk of them."

"Incredible, in daylight," he remarked. "Just as this is an incredible place. Do you know, Miss Aylener, I can't see why either you or that man over there"—he pointed at the house beyond the loch—"go on living here."

"Neither of us lives here all the time," she said, and again smiled. "He is often away for long periods, I know, and I—you would be surprised if I told you how many places I have visited in the last ten years. But Brachmornalachan calls one back—that is, if one has been born here as I was. To me, ›The Rowans‹ is like—like the thread that is the beginning of shadow magic, with someone at the far end to wind it in."

"I think we'll forget about that shadow magic, for today," he suggested. "It doesn't fit with the sunshine. I think I've seldom seen air so marvelously clear as this. That tree over there, like a red mushroom—it might be near enough for me to touch it."

"You see it—like that?"

"All the distances appear lessened," he answered evasively. "No, it isn't the sight you mean. I'm not fey to any devil who might force that sight on me. Just that the day is almost abnormally clear, and that is a remarkably fine thorn tree."

"It should be," she said, with bitter emphasis. "The ground in which it is rooted has been redder than those blossoms."

"You are harking back. I told you last night—" He broke off, unwilling to repeat his refusal of what she had asked.

"Is that to be wondered at? With the very last of us Ayleners, threatened—But you said—what you have said. I am not trying to persuade you. Mr. Green, I want some stamps—will you walk with me as far as the post office?"

They set off, and she walked beside him as if she had been a girl of twenty, not a woman nearly twice his age.

They entered the post office and general store, and Gees ducked to avoid striking his head against a brown-paper-wrapped ham pendent from the ceiling. Bathsheba Grallach faced them across the counter. The postmistress exuded cordiality as she leaned across her counter toward them. Margaret Aylener was his passport, he divined.

"A braw day, Miss Margaret," said she cheerfully.

"A change from yesterday," said Margaret. "I want twenty-four three-halfpenny stamps, please, and twelve pennies."

"And I want that ham," Gees added.

"Twenty-five shillin'," said the postmistress, unmovedly, "but I'll sairve the leddy first." She counted off the stamps.

Margaret Aylener turned to Gees. "What do you want with a ham?" she demanded, amusement dancing in her eyes. "You're not hungry, surely?"

"I'm going to take it back," he said, "And cook it on a gas ring in my flat. Then, when I get back late o' nights, I'm going to carve slices off it, and eat, and say 'Brachmornalachan' to myself and pretend I get the real native accent on the word. The ham may help with it."

He put down on the counter a pound note and two half-crowns. Margaret Aylener paid for her stamps, and the postmistress came out from behind her counter and took down the ham, which she handed to Gees as if it were a priceless treasure. He took it with equal reverence.

"Danish," she said. "I'd hated to cut it, but it's gey unlikely I'd've sold it whole. Unless—" she glanced at Margaret Aylener, and went silent, and Gees felt he knew the end of that sentence.

"I suppose not many of your customers want a whole ham," he said.

"Aye, ye're right," she answered. "Ye'll find it a good ham."

"I'm sure I shall." He gazed full into her dark-brown, almost black eyes, and did not like her. "If there is one thing in the state of Denmark that is not rotten, it is ham."

When they left the store, Gees fell silent, until, "If I were you, I wouldn't trust that woman, Miss Aylener," he said, after they had got halfway to the gate of ›The Rowans.‹

"I have known her most of my life," she retorted stiffly. "And her sister—why should I not trust her?"

"Maybe it was impertinent of me," he admitted. "It was that her aura and mine clash, probably. Do you keep a car?"

"I do," she answered. "Why—what made you ask?"

"One other set of wheel marks, in addition to mine."

"There should be another, soon," she said. "Helen is arriving in time for lunch, and Ian is driving her."

"Long engagement, isn't it?" he said suddenly.

"They are being married the first week in June," she told him. "He wanted to wait until he became a partner in his firm."

He reflected that it was eighteen months since the girl had become friendly with MacMorn. And, now just as she was about to marry, Margaret Aylener had yielded to her fear for the girl so far as to send for him. Why had she waited so long?

It was not his affair, though: none of it was, he told himself.

At the entrance to the house, he drew back after opening the door, "If you don't mind, I'll go and put my ham in the car, and then walk down to the water."

When he entered the stable he saw a sturdy old car beside his, a twenty horsepower coupe on a short chassis which, he knew, had a high power ratio. He noted that his own car had been thoroughly cleaned and polished.

With the ham—an absurd purchase, as he realized now—safely locked away, he returned down the granite drive and turned left at the gate.

Less than ten minutes' walk brought him to the spongy, sodden edge of the loch, and, keeping away to the left, he circled it toward the big, rambling house of Gamel MacMorn. Although he had refused to aid Margaret Aylener, he was curious about MacMorn. He wanted, too, to make certain whether MacMorn's house stood quite in the centre of the ancient circle, over whatever altar had once existed there, as the circle declared it had.

It was no affair of his, of course. Mere curiosity ...

One of the three stones yet standing, a mighty pillar of grey, weathered rock fully twenty feet in height, was set about fifty yards from the loch, and Gees turned toward it.

A protuberance at its top showed that it had been tenoned to bind in the mortise of a crosspiece, and, since there was but the one tenon in the middle of the stone, it had probably been one side of a gate.

Turning to get the angle of the sun, Gees saw that, as nearly as he could tell, this stone was at the extreme southern limit of the circle. Facing about again, he looked at his watch and saw that by solar time it was now just eleven.

At noon, his shadow would point from this spot directly toward the doorway in the middle of MacMoran's grounds. Therefore the house was on the line which would lie across the ancient altar.

Then the stone itself.

High up, within two or three feet of the top, were faint lines which centuries of weathering had not quite erased. Enough was left to convince Gees that they were not runic characters, which he could read with a fair amount of ease. Nor did they correspond to lettering of any alphabet he knew or had ever seen.

Studying them till his neck ached, he realized that a group of the lines toward the right edge of the pillar made a symbol, so crudely executed that he had not at first recognized it. He had met it only once before, far more precise on a pre-Roman piece of sculpture in North Africa; and it had been pointed out as the sign of Kore, forerunner of Persephone, queen of Hades.

If that symbol had been put there to testify to the belief held by the worshippers of the shrine, then the Druids and their ritual were mere modernities by comparison. Then he was standing at the edge of a circle in which had been practised one of the vilest and most bestial, as well as one of the oldest, cults of this earth. He drew back from the ground of which this pillar marked a limit, and, as he did so, realized anew that MacMorn did not fear to live in a house within the circle.

Chapter 5

The Noonday Shadow

Except for that symbol, Gees could make nothing of the inscription. Careful to keep outside the circle, he went on.

He counted a dozen or so low mounds marking where fallen pillars lay buried in the soil, and followed their curving line until he was in sight of the eastern end of MacMorn's house.

He saw that its windows were even smaller than they had appeared at a distance. Those six in the frontage, on the ground floor, were hardly big enough for a man like himself to crawl through, and in the eastern end of the structure were no windows at all, though it extended back a good thirty feet. The six first-floor windows were rather larger; in the rooms of the ground floor, though, must be a stifling gloom.

Another monolith topped by a single tenon reared up to mark another gateway, that of the north-eastern extremity of the circle, through which the first ray of the rising sun would strike at midsummer, just as at Stonehenge.

Here, though, was no sign that a stone had ever been raised outside the circle to cast the shadow of the rising sun toward the central altar. The devotees of Kore had fashioned their shadows in other ways, Gees knew. Nor, when he stood beside the stone and looked up at its outer surface—for he would not enter the circle—could he see any trace of such an inscription as its southern fellow bore.

Either it had not been carved at all, or else the weathering of thousands of years had erased all marks. The single tenon indicated that it was a gateway pillar, as did its position in relation to the centre of the circle.

"You are interested in archaeology?"

A second before the words were spoken, Gees would have sworn that he had been alone. His spine crinkled with a sense of the uncanny rather

than with fear as he gazed at the man who had stepped out from beyond the stone to face him.

A man about six inches short of his own height, with black hair and—yes, fully black eyes, those abnormalities in which the iris is so dark as to be indistinguishable from the pupil, and with bloodless, almost chalky white skin.

As Margaret Aylener had said, one who looked as if he lived always in the dark. He appeared to be about Gees' own age, or at most only a few years older, and his voice was cultured and friendly.

"Very," Gees answered, as soon as he could trust his own voice. "Especially in a circle as old as this. I hope I am not trespassing in walking round it. You are Mr. MacMorn?"

"I am. That is so. And you are not trespassing, Mr.—?"

Gees supplied: "Green."

"Mr. Green—yes," said MacMorn, courteously. "I am happy to welcome a fellow enthusiast. Though I am but an amateur dabbler, myself, and very little remains above ground here for study. Practically nothing, in fact. What lies underground, of course, I do not know."

"Under the roots of that thorn tree, for instance."

"Why?" MacMorn asked, with a sort of innocent interest. "What difference would there be between that spot and any other?"

"For one thing, abnormal fertility of soil, compared with that about it," Gees pointed out. "Quite abnormal fertility."

"I suppose it is, though I should never have thought of that if you had not noticed it." MacMorn met his gaze steadily. "You are staying here?"

"With Miss Aylener." Gees saw a change in the expression of those intense, strangely black eyes. For a moment they appeared to be speckled with dots of fire, and then as MacMorn spoke they softened again.

"Ah! My charming neighbour," he said. "Not that we see much of each other. I am so often away, and so is she. Why—"

He broke off. A coal black goat had come galloping from the back of the house toward the edge of the circle of fallen stones, and, following it, ran a kilted, wild-looking being with long, shaggy black hair flying back about his ears. A murderous knife was clutched in his hand.

The goat was giving little bleats of terror—and was increasing its lead when it came to the edge of the circle.

There, although it faced open plain, it recoiled abruptly as if it had butted into a solid stone wall, and staggered back as if dazed. The kilted

man hurled himself on the animal, knocking it off its feet, and Gees' breath hissed out as he saw the shining blade lifted to kill.

But MacMorn interposed with a shout which to Gees was utterly unintelligible, except for the first two syllables, "Partha!"

The kilted man got on his feet, and lifted the goat by its horns so that it stood passive and trembling in his hold, and began its bleating again. Then the would-be slayer turned back toward the house, dragging the animal along beside him by its horns.

"We kill our own meat," MacMorn said in explanation.

"And fence it in till killing time," Gees observed.

Again for a moment there were fiery dots in MacMorn's eyes. "Fence it in?" he echoed, with all the appearance of innocence. "There is no fence."

"The goat imagined one," Gees remarked gravely.

"Stumbled, and gave Partha time to reach him," MacMorn said. "And I told him in Gaelic to take the goat back, not slaughter it there."

"Yes," Gees said, "the blood would have been wasted—there."

It was MacMorn's turn to draw his breath hissing between his teeth.

"We have no use for it," he said, "but—this soil breeds flies."

"Of course you have no use for it."

"I am sorry," MacMorn said gravely. "The sight of slaughter, or of attempted slaughter is always unpleasant."

"A sort of instinct that the victim hasn't a fair chance," Gees remarked.

"I once saw a black goat like that sacrificed to the Daughter."

"I don't know what you are talking about," MacMorn said coldly. "There is no analogy between killing for food and sacrifice."

"No, of course not. The influence of this circle and the hidden altar in its centre set me thinking about it, I expect. I'm rather sensitive to influences, and this place to me reeks of—dark people."

He made a little pause before uttering the last two words. MacMorn, quite unmoved, smiled slightly and shook his head.

"You appear conversant with many old superstitions, Mr. Green," he said, "And I am inclined to envy you your knowledge. Yet, if I were you, I would not stay long in Brachmornalachan. It might be dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Gees echoed the word with an affectation of incredulity, even of lack of comprehension. "How could that be?"

"If one is—not exactly credulous, but inclined to believe old fables as you seem to be, one sometimes gets—well, carried away by them. Especially in places like this."

"Held, one might say, by a thread," Gees suggested.

"Held by a thread, as you say," MacMorn agreed calmly. And for a third time his eyes held sparks of flame.

"Yes ... Hullo! There are Miss Aylener's visitors." He pointed across the loch at a low-slung, small sports car headed toward ›The Rowans.‹

"Glad to have had a chance to talk with you, Mr. MacMorn, but I mustn't be late for lunch. Excuse me, won't you?"

"Only too pleased," MacMorn assured him smoothly—and ambiguously.

"But don't forget my warning—you are much too sensitive to influences to remain in a place like this. Goodbye, Mr. Green."

Gees went thoughtfully back by the brink of the loch. MacMorn's eyes, the rarity of a coal-black goat, the language—not Gaelic, whatever it might be—in which MacMorn had shouted the command to his man Partha, the way in which he had circled to keep himself concealed behind the monolith while Gees approached it, and the sincerity and obvious threat of his warning—plenty to think about.

Partha, evidently, had let his thirst for blood master him, and MacMorn had stopped him, just in time, from robbing the Daughter of the sacrifice which must be offered on her altar—Offered simultaneously with the arrival of Helen Aylener? Or was it all fantasy?

MacMorn had been courteous, almost friendly. The goat might have stumbled, as he had said. Partha, the shaggy herdsman, might have been only slaughtering a beast for meat. And those mere scratches on the pillar of the southern gateway might mean nothing at all. The circle might be only slightly pre-Druidic ...

Why should he puzzle over it? He had declined to do anything at all, and tomorrow he'd be on his way back to London.

Chapter 6

Blood in the Mist

At the sound of Gees' approach, the two young occupants of the car looked up to greet him. One was a tall man with brown eyes and dark hair and a finely-cut, aristocratic-looking face; the girl was like enough to Margaret Aylener to show the relationship, but she lacked the rare beauty of the older woman.

"You are Mr. Green," she said. "I'm Helen Aylener. I've heard about you already. Do you know anything about carburetors?"

"Twins," the young man beside her put in. "My name's Kyrle, and I expect you've heard about me."

Gees smiled. "Indeed I have."

"I've always believed the other one ought to be drowned, when there are twins," the girl said.

"Give him a chance to answer what you asked," Kyrle urged. "Besides, you don't know which is the other one, in this case."

"Then they ought both to be drowned," she declared. "But do you, Mr. Green? Because this pair has stumped us. Stumped him."

"I believe the connecting rod has shrunk," Kyrle asserted.

"Now who won't give him a chance to answer?"

Gees went round by the radiator. Kyrle rubbed his nose thoughtfully, and left a black smudge on it, while the girl took a cigarette case out of his pocket, snapped it open, and offered it to Gees, who shook his head.

"Not just now, thank you," he said. "The trouble, I take it, is uneven firing. It'll be inside one or other of the carburetors, or both. You can see for yourself there's no adjustment on that rod."

"We've had both carburetors down to their inmost innards, Mr. Green. She began traveling like an inebriated cow almost as soon as we left

Joppa this morning, and we've stopped three times and tried to get the—what he called them—right. I won't tell you what he called them, but it's what they are."

"Ignition?" Gees asked.

"Like a song of angels, to mortals given," Kyrle half-chanted. "That is, perfectly sweet and no fault whatever there."

"I'll start her up." The girl swung up a long leg and stepped behind the wheel. "Then you can hear for yourself. He thinks he's an engineer, too!"

"Structural, nothing to do with—" Kyrle began a protest, but the whirl of the starter and then a roar as the engine picked up drowned the rest of it. The girl took her foot off the accelerator, and a sort of cockety-cock noise indicated trouble of some sort. Gees held up his hand, and she switched off and got out again.

"I knew he was a good scout, Twister," she said. "You're a dud. Now tell us what's wrong, Mr. Green, and how to put it right."

Without speaking, Gees turned to the tool roll laid out on the running board. Presently he was tinkering happily with as haphazard a collection of innards he had ever seen on any machine.

He turned to Kyrle.

"Have you had it decarbonized lately?"

"Took it back yesterday," Kyrle answered, and wiped another black smudge on to his nose.

"We'd better tighten these bolts then," Gees said.

With smoke pouring from his nostrils, Kyrle obeyed.

"What did you say your car was?" Helen asked.

"I didn't, but it's a Rolls-Bentley," Gees answered her.

"Then there is that amount of money in the world." Kyrle grunted again.

"This is a scrap-heap composite, my own design."

"You needn't shout the obvious," Helen said. She turned to Gees with a smile that made her brilliantly attractive. "You know, we're both quite mad," she told him. "If you think it's drink, you're wrong."

"If I were you," Gees said, "I'd pull down one or two of the front nuts and then come back to the middle. You'll tighten it more evenly. And then a final pull-down all round before trying it."

"I might have thought of that for myself." Kyrle attacked one of the pair of nuts at the front end as he spoke.

"He's structural, not mechanical," Helen remarked gravely. "The structure's got a slant in it this morning—commonly called a hangover. That's why he doesn't think for himself."

Straightening up for a rest, Kyrle passed the back of his hand over his brow and left a black and oily streak there. "My child, you wait till we're married," he said softly. "Wife-beating runs in my family."

"Will you never stop boasting about your ancestors?" she asked. "I hate snobbery."

"Suppose you get inside instead of being rude, and fiddle with the starter?"

She got in and seated herself at the wheel again. Kyrle stood back. She pressed in the starter. The engine sputtered as it picked up, then steadied to a purr, and Kyrle grinned at Gees.

Helen switched off the engine and got out of the car. "We're really grateful to you. Come inside and have a quick one before lunch?"

"If I make a third on that, there ought to be time for a wash and then another nip," Kyrle said, "And I'll drink your health both times, Mr. Green."

"Make it Gees."

"Well, Gees, I'm Twister—caught it off my real name at prep school, and it's stuck ever since. Helen is just Helen unless I get really irritated with her, and then I call her Blazes."

"How did you know those nuts needed tightening?" Helen asked.

"I didn't," Gees answered, "but I could see along the edge of the gasket that whatever composition had been put on to make a joint had not quite dried, and guessed it had been off recently for decarbonizing. And it seemed worth while to try whether the nuts had been pulled down."

"Sherlock Gees," she observed. "And he's Structural Watson."

Kyrle opened the door and stood back for her to enter first.

She led the way to the dining room sideboard, and there drew forward a decanter and syphon and two glasses.

Helen poured liberally. "Here's to Gees, gasket-gluer," she toasted.

Kyrle gulped his liquor down. "Helen, do you remember that drink that old MacMorn mixed us?"

"Could I ever forget it?" she answered. "He took two bottles and each had something in it as clear as colourless as water, and mixed us drinks, fifty-fifty out of each bottle. And as soon as he poured out of the second bottle, the mixture fizzed like champagne and then turned brilliant

crimson. But it tasted like—like heaven in bottles. Old vintage heaven, too.”

“I know a little about chemical compounds, but I don’t know any mixture of two water-white fluids that turns red,” Kyrle put in. “It did, though, just as Helen says. Have you any idea what it was?”

Gees shook his head. “It’s a new one on me,” he said. “What was the flavor?”

“Undiluted joy—wasn’t it, Helen? Indescribable.”

“Quite,” she agreed. “Like nothing else. I’ve never felt quite the same since I had that drink, and often and often I find myself wanting another one like it. I wonder how he—Twister, if you don’t go and scrub yourself, I’ll squirt soda water over you.”

“P’raps you’re right.” He drained his glass and went out.

“Sometimes I think he’s too good for me,” she said.

“Then he must be very good.”

“When we first met,” she pursued, “I knew I was much too good for him, but now I love him terribly. Aunt Marge told me about you before we went out to doctor the engine. Told me she actually got you to come here because of her bee. It is a bee, you know—nothing else.”

“I don’t know anything,” he said.

“It takes a wise man to say that. She told me you’re going back tomorrow, too. I don’t see what else you could do. I know Gamel’s got a face like death warmed up, but he’s a kind soul when you get to know him, and he is terribly—well, exciting. Twister likes him, too. But Aunt Marge has had that bee ever since I was old enough to remember.”

“What did she tell you about my coming here?” Gees asked.

“That she wanted you to investigate Gamel and see if there was anything in what she thinks about him. I’ve tried time and again to persuade her it’s a racial feud, born in the blood of both of them.”

“Did you mean what you said about wanting another of his drinks, and remembering it and not feeling the same after it?” he asked.

“Well—yes, I did.” She gazed at him dubiously. “Why—have you been stung by Aunt Marge’s bee?”

“I told you, I don’t know anything,” he answered, “And you know already that I’m going back to London tomorrow. Therefore.”

“Buzz-z-z!” she mocked. “And here’s my little playmate all unsmirched again! Twister, you shall mix your own as a reward.”

Kyrle said: “I was wondering whether we could go over and see Mac-Morn this afternoon,” he remarked.

"I'll tell her you feel like stretching your legs while she rests," Helen suggested. "Otherwise—well, I could hardly go and call on a single gentleman of uncertain age after you've gone, could I? It will be my only chance while I'm here, and even if you don't start back before six, you can make Edinburgh in time to get up tomorrow morning."

"Care to come over with us, Gees, while Helen's Aunt Margaret has her siesta? MacMorn's very interesting."

"I'd be delighted," Gees said. He wanted to see no more of MacMorn, but if these two meant to visit the man, an uninfluenced third party with them would be all to the good.

Gees didn't tell them he had already met MacMorn. He had an impression that the girl's apparent frankness and disregard of her aunt's belief covered away something altogether different. Fear, perhaps ...

"This place acts on you, Helen," Kyrle said abruptly. She grinned at him impishly. "It does," he insisted. "As soon as we get here—I noticed it last time—you bottle up some sort of excitement inside you. You're different, whether you realize it—"

"Don't be a fool, my fool," she said, and, blowing a kiss at Kyrle, went out. Gees put down his empty glass and looked at his watch as he followed Kyrle toward the door.

"Miss Aylener's told us, you know," Kyrle observed abruptly.

"That's more comprehensive than enlightening, as a statement," Gees said.

"Do you believe any of it?" Kyrle asked—rather uneasily.

"Do you?" Gees asked in reply. They had halted, facing each other.

"Not till I get here," Kyrle answered. "When I'm at the works, it feels like foolishness, all childish tales. I mean, that anyone could work magic in these days. I don't know what sort of magic, or anything about it, but she—Miss Aylener—warned me to keep Helen away from this man MacMorn, because he's got occult powers. I've never believed in occult powers. You can find a rational explanation for most things."

"But now—?" Gees asked, and waited.

"What do you mean by that?" Kyrle demanded.

"If you had felt quite as sure of your rational explanation for anything Miss Aylener thought worth a warning, you wouldn't have asked me whether I believed in—anything she may have told you."

"It's Helen." Kyrle let his anxiety appear in his tone. "Ever since that first time we went to see MacMorn, she's been—different. You know, I'd already heard of you. That Kestwell case you figured in. And now I

meet you I can see you're a good scout, and don't mind telling you Helen means everything to me. And since that day something of her has been withdrawn. As if something, somebody or—I don't say it's MacMorn—but as if some part of her were held away, imprisoned, almost. It won't go into words. Unless you can sense what I mean, I can't make it clear. Absolutely intangible—the merest shadow—”

“Are you sure it's not you who've changed?” Gees asked.

“I? Good Lord, no! Except—I suppose it's thinking about her—I don't sleep so well, and I get dreams. About her—as if something whispered to me about her. The oddest fancies. Unreal people, shadows of people, whispering at me in the night.

“Ridiculous, of course, but you know how things exaggerate in sleep. I even saw a doctor, and he prescribed for liver. It helped for a night or two, or I thought it did, and then they came back.”

“Who came back?” Gees persisted.

“The whispering things. And yet it wasn't whispering—it isn't whispering, but as if they thought at the inner me, not in speech at all. Again I can't explain that any better, but always it's as if I ought to go to Helen, hold her back from—from the things that whisper at me themselves. I could disregard it at first and think it was liver, but it goes on. You must think me an ass, unless—”

Gees made no reply. As he had told Margaret Aylener, he could do nothing, even if he believed all that she had told him.

“Unless you believe what she believes,” Kyrle added. “Common sense tells me there's nothing in it, and so I wondered if you—” Again he broke off, seeking encouragement from Gees' face and not finding it.

“Have you told her—Helen—any of this?” Gees asked.

Kyrle shook his head. “I couldn't. It won't go into words with her. I know she ridicules anything of the sort, and even more so since we met MacMorn. This place—this damned place! Not 'The Rowans,' but Brachmornalachan. Have you ever been at Glencoe?”

“Driven through it, once,” Gees answered.

“Drive through it by night, and stop there for a few minutes to feel it—then you'll know what I mean about this place. Not what's ordinarily known as haunting, but the influence of the evil done there surviving to color one's thoughts. Oppressing—closing in on you—shadows of people. I felt that in the pass of Glencoe, at night. Imagination, knowledge of what had been done there, perhaps.”

He shook his shoulders and, smiling, moved toward the drawing room.

"We ought to go and talk to Miss Aylener, if she's come down again yet," he said in a lighter tone. "Otherwise, she'll wonder what we two have been doing with you. You're going back tomorrow, I know, and it's no real use my telling you all this. But"—he paused, grasping the handle of the door—"I just wondered if you believed any of it, and even now you've not told me whether you do or no."

"Since I'm going back, it makes no difference," Gees said.

Kyrle, opening the door, stood back for Gees to enter.

Margaret Aylener looked up at them. "So you have got to know each other," she said. "This afternoon, Ian, I am foregoing my usual rest to discuss things with you. The last opportunity before your marriage, you know. Mr. Green, I hope you will excuse us till tea time—my niece can look after you."

"I shall be glad to fit in with anything you wish," he said.

"Take her for that walk we were talking about," Kyrle suggested. "She can show you all the sights, and you can get back for tea."

By the time Gees set out with Helen, leaving Margaret and Kyrle in the dining room with a businesslike portfolio she had brought in, the sun had disappeared, and the hills that had loomed so clear and near in the morning had receded, become hazed and dim. They went the way Gees had gone in the morning, the girl silent and, it appeared to him, hurrying along by the brink of the loch. She kept a pace or so ahead of him, as if eager to reach their destination rather than to make a walk of it.

"Good fishing in this water?" he asked, for the sake of something to say, when they had come to where he had turned aside from the loch to inspect the southern monolith that still stood.

"Good—I'm sorry." She slackened pace for him to come level with her. "I'm afraid I was day-dreaming. I think—yes. Pike, I believe, and small fresh water fish. Not that I've ever tried." She inclined away from the water, toward the monolith. "Pike are horrible, don't you think?"

They reached the standing stone, and passed within the circle. Unseen by the girl who was hurrying again, Gees crossed himself. It could do no harm, even if it could do no good.

"I'm sorry Kyrle couldn't come with us," he said.

"Yes." She sounded abstracted over it. "But he's got to—my aunt wanted him to drive me up here so she could have this talk with him."

Such a reek as had developed to fog the day before chilled the air about them, and the distant hills grew less distinct. Presently the frontage of MacMorn's house masked the horizon, and the red-flowering thorn

away to their right shone like a great live coal. They faced the main entrance, and Helen lifted the heavy knocker and thudded three times.

"He told us—Mr. MacMorn told us, when we came here before—there is not a scrap of iron in the construction of the house," she said as they waited. "All the metal is copper and bronze. Oak rots iron or steel, he said, and there is none anywhere about the place."

Gees remembered that the knife he had seen the man Partha lift over the goat had had a yellowish sheen.

The door swung inward silently, and a black-attired, black-haired, respectable-looking serving man faced them.

"Mr. MacMorn?" Helen asked.

"Mr. MacMorn is not at home, madam."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Will you tell him we called? Miss Aylener and Mr. Green."

"Yes, madam." He inclined his head toward her as he spoke.

"Thank you. Nothing else—just that we called."

She turned to Gees as the door closed, and he turned to go back. Now, he observed, she walked slowly, draggingly, as if there were no object on which to concentrate, as there had been in coming here.

"I suppose we just go back," she said, listlessly.

"This haze is dampening—there seems nothing else to do," Gees concurred. "A pity. I'd have liked to see the inside of the house."

"And I—Oh, well!" She shrugged. "I suppose one cannot expect—"

"Crimson cocktails all the time," Gees suggested.

"Now how did you know I was thinking of that?" She turned her head to look at him with the question, seemed irritated.

"I didn't. But you said you remembered that drink so well."

"You might have known I was only fooling. I remembered the strangeness of it, two whites making a red. As red as that tree."

"And the flavor, apparently," he insisted.

"Yes, that too. Twister said he shut his eyes and opened them again after he finished his, and had an illusion that an hour or two had passed. And since then he's been inclined to credit Gamel—Mr. MacMorn, I mean—with some of the tricks Aunt Marge blames on him. Not that Twister actually believes anything, but sometimes I think he's a little bit credulous. Can you smell the sea in this reek?"

"I hadn't noticed it," Gees answered.

She stopped, and snuffed the air. "The coast is not more than ten or twelve miles away," she said. "But—no, it isn't the sea tang at all. An odd smell, like—like—what is it like?"

"It'll be like getting wet if we don't hurry back," Gees told her.

She nodded impatiently, without quickening her step at all.

"Yes. But I've smelt that smell before somewhere, but can't place it. Coming directly from the house toward us—the wind has eddied. I don't like it, and yet I do. Gone, now. The wind is west again."

They went on. Gees, too, had detected the faint odour, and recognized it. The smell of blood newly-shed.

Chapter 7

The Lady Bewitched

Back to the normal, material world tomorrow. Away from all this. Gees was sitting on his bed in ›The Rowans‹ guest room, pondering over all the incredible things he had heard and half glimpsed since he had got there. A knock at his door interrupted his thoughts, and, clad only in his dressing gown, he went and opened the door.

“Just off,” Kyrle said. “Thought I’d come and say goodbye. Helen tells me you didn’t see MacMorn, after all.”

“She doesn’t know I saw him this morning,” Gees answered. “But you’re late starting, with all that way to go, aren’t you?”

“The light will hold for hours,” Kyrle explained. “I’ll make Edinburgh well before midnight. And if—” He hesitated. “If—if anything should happen—”

“On the road?”

“Lord, no! To Helen—at any time. I don’t know what could, or if anything could. But if—and I got in touch with you—”

“If anything did, the whole situation would be altered,” Gees said. “Get in touch with me by all means, but don’t rely too much on me.”

“What do you mean by that exactly?” Kyrle asked.

“Just that if anything did happen, it would be because of a bigger agency than mine,” Gees answered gravely. “Something that has been built up and built up since the very beginning of time—and I’m not initiate in it. Nor do I know anyone who is. But get in touch, by all means.”

For a minute or so Kyrle stood silent, thoughtful. Then—

“That’s good of you. We’ll be married in a month’s time, thank heaven! Good luck to you—goodbye.”

In a little while, from his window Gees saw Kyrle and Helen come out to the car, and saw the tenderness of their embrace. Then Kyrle got into the car and went away, his engine running smoothly and well, while the girl stood to watch his going. He looked back and waved his hand, and she too waved and then stood as before until the car had disappeared. Then abruptly, amazingly, she dropped to her knees on the fine granite rubble, crouched, and with her hands lifted above her head bent forward until her forehead appeared to touch the ground. Thirteen times she prostrated herself in this fashion, after which she rose to her feet again and entered the house.

Gees heard her close the door, and went back to his bed to resume his reflections on this case he had declined to undertake.

Over that crimson drink of MacMoran's Kyrle had said that he merely closed his eyes and opened them again and had had an illusion that an hour had passed. Had it been an illusion, though? Those dreams of which he had spoken indicated—what? Was it that MacMorn was not quite master of his immaterial, slavish crew?

"Unreal people, shadows of people, whispering at me in the night," Kyrle had said. Not here in Brachmornalachan, but away in normal surroundings ...

MacMorn had been frank in his implication that it might be dangerous for Gees to stay long in Brachmornalachan. The man must have utter confidence in himself to give such a warning. Then the smell of blood driven on the wind to Gees and Helen, and the way in which she had owned to being attracted as well as repelled by the scent.

Had she too closed her eyes for an hour that had seemed no more than a moment?

If ever a man radiated hypnotic power, MacMorn did. And inside the ancient circle, on his own ground and with the powers he could summon—if one accepted Margaret Aylener's fear as true. Even here, guarded by the lines of the rowan trees and with her lover's kiss still tingling on her lips, Helen had made the prescribed obeisance of an unholy old ritual, prostrated herself in the thirteen genuflexions with which worshippers preceded the culminating invocation in darkness to the Unseen One. And on the altar, around and over which his house was built, MacMorn had made sacrifice that day, Gees guessed.

Yet, in this twentieth century, MacMorn dared do no more than suggest, surely? He might have influenced the girl hypnotically, but, short of kidnapping her, he could do her no real harm; and her aunt's suspicion of him was safeguard against any interference with her.

These fancies with which he might have infected her, such as the one which had induced her to prostrate herself, would all vanish after marriage.

However that might be, Gees could do nothing. One had to be practical, and there was nothing definite of which MacMorn could be accused. Any man was free to kill his own goat for food, in his own house, if he felt like it. Any man was free to offer people drinks, and if they accepted the offer and suffered no visible harm, the fact that he was enough of a hypnotist to make a colourless fluid appear crimson was no more than an interesting and even amusing trick.

As for attaching any significance to living in a Druidic or pre-Druidic circle, Avebury village was built inside one, and its inhabitants were good, sound, Wiltshire people, just like those who lived outside the circle.

One might say that MacMorn was a strange-looking man, but there was no crime in that. And to accuse him of unholy practices, or even of undue influence on anyone at all, would merely invite doubts of the one's own sanity.

There was just reasonable time for a hot, lazy bath before dinner.

After dinner, Gees followed the two ladies to the drawing room for coffee. Helen pushed a settee forward and sat down directly in front of the fire.

"This wind reminds me of the night I got lost in Athens, auntie," Helen said, as she tossed her cigarette end accurately into the fire.

"You were a bad child," Margaret Aylener said, and smiled.

"It was your fault, for not teaching me Greek," the girl retorted, and smiled too. "Have you ever been to Eleusis, Gees?"

"And felt disappointed over it," he answered. "There is so little left. Though whether there was ever much, beyond charlatanism—"

"There had been much," Margaret said, "but I think it was before the time of the mysteries of which so much is made. They were trying to re-create what had been. What the first people had known."

"The dark people who came here in ships," he suggested.

"Their predecessors," she dissented. "The very old ones."

"Auntie knows it all," Helen remarked. "You'd think, by the way she talks sometimes, she was chief bridesmaid when Tirzah and Ahirad were married, and the sons of the gods came down to the daughters of men till Deucalion took to boatbuilding."

She swung her long legs over the edge of the settee and sat up with a suddenness at which her aunt stared. "I feel too restless to sit still," she

explained. "It's this wind, I think. Auntie, would you be too annoyed if I wanted Mr. Gees to come out for a little walk in the dark?"

"Mr. Gees, as you call him, may not feel like going out," Margaret said, rather coldly.

"It might be a good idea, Miss Aylener," he said, after a pause.

The girl stood up. "We'll go, then," she said decidedly. "Half an hour or thereabouts, Aunt Marge, to make me sleepy."

She went out, and Gees followed to find her donning a waterproof in the entrance hall. He opened the front door and looked out on a greyish blackness into which the light behind him penetrated less than a dozen yards. He closed the door and turned to the girl, who had advanced toward him.

"I think not," he said. "We'd get lost."

"Oh, no!" she retorted. "The feel of the path will guide us as far as the front gate, and I couldn't get lost in this place. Come along."

She opened the door again, and he followed. Twenty steps or so took them into a wet, driving fog such as the Scottish highlands and the west of Ireland experience, a blanketing density that hid the lighted windows of the house. Helen took his arm, and their footsteps crunched on the granite chips.

"If you'd not been here, I'd have slipped out alone," she said.

"Being the madder of the two," he suggested.

"Quite possibly. And Eleusis means nothing to you?"

"Next to nothing. Those mysteries—fake, I think. Nothing is known for certain, but probably they were impositions on the credulous."

"I remember it, because I saw Gamel MacMorn there," she said. "Aunt Marge doesn't know he was there. Where—you know they still show the place where the oracle used to speak. She was tired, and I went alone. He was there, and we got talking—you know how one gets talking to anyone, even an acquaintance, you meet abroad. I'd never talked to him before, though of course we knew him, living so near each other."

"You talked about what?" Gees asked, keeping pace with her.

"I wish I could remember, but I can't. That's always seemed odd to me. Things he said about the mysteries. I know he seemed to believe in them as real mysteries, only he didn't talk about Demeter and Persephone in connection with them, but spoke of Kronos and—and—"

"Rhea?" he suggested, and paused as the gate appeared before them.

"Yes, it was Rhea," she agreed, "And the rest of what he told me I can never remember, though I can feel it, sometimes."

"That's a rather incomprehensible statement," he observed.

"Yes, isn't it?" She struck down the latch of the gate and thrust at it with her foot, swinging it outward. "I mean I feel myself a part of those mysteries. The crazy abandonment of them."

"Oh! So you know that part of it, then?"

"Know it?" She laughed, oddly. "Come outside, Gees. I can't tell you inside our wall." She led on, and he followed her into the dense wet fog until the gate was invisible, and then stopped.

"Not another step," he said determinedly. "We've got to find that gate again as it is, and I don't intend to lose myself and you out here for the rest of the night. It's too damp, and too cold."

"Anything else?" There was an odd note in her voice, and she held his arms tightly.

"What was it you wanted to say outside your boundary?" he asked.

"Just that—you see, the cult of Kronos and Rhea was more primitive, nearer to elemental things. I don't know how I know that, whether Gamel MacMorn told me or I read it somewhere. And—it's got me. I've never told Aunt Marge, and I daren't say anything of the sort to Ian, but it has. Intermittently, not all the time. Ian's sane—you don't know how I try to submerge that side of me by clinging to him. I trust you enough to tell you about it, Gees, in case you might be able to help me. To—kill that other side, altogether."

"The other side being—Eleusinian?" he suggested.

"I think it must be that. An almost uncontrollable—desire to be what they were. Quite mad. Do you know the Venusberg music?"

"Quite well. You mean—that defines what you feel?"

"Expresses it. My love for Ian—his for me—quite apart from it. I feel like one in a Sabbath of whirling, dancing devils—yes, devils! Capable of any ecstasy, any abandonment of myself. Not human, but all animal. At the point to which they must have worked up—"

Abruptly she swung herself to face him, put both her hands on his shoulders and peered into his eyes, so closely that her own eyes were quite plain to his sight, and her breath warm on his mouth.

"So," she whispered. "At this moment, I wish you felt it too."

He grasped both her arms above the elbows, and held her back. "My child," he said, "your aunt is right, terribly right. It isn't Eleusis that's bewitched you, but this Gamel MacMorn."

He felt her go limp in his hold, as if the momentary madness had passed. "But he—Oh, that's impossible—absurd!" she exclaimed.

"Impossible, absurd, and true," he insisted. "Listen here. You don't remember clearly what he told you at Eleusis?"

"No, I don't. But nothing—nothing like I've just told you. He didn't—didn't try to make love to me, of course."

"As you tried, just now with me," he said grimly, and kept hold on her arms. "Naturally he didn't. But the man is a master hypnotist, and he managed to plant in your mind this suggestion of evil—it is evil, Helen, and most deadly evil at that.

"I'd say that there, in that first real contact you had with him, he got you. Got your will, imposed his own on it, and planted the suggestion that you should go to see him here in his own place. Which you did, you and Kyrle. He doesn't want Kyrle, so with the help of that strange drink he got you all to himself, put Kyrle into a state in which he would remember nothing, know nothing—"

"But he didn't," she interrupted. "We bade him goodbye over the drink, and left only a minute or two after we'd had it, I remember."

"I believe, after you'd had it, MacMorn wiped an hour or more clean out of your consciousness, and Kyrle's consciousness too," he insisted. "The natural, conscious side of you knows nothing about it, of course, but he—MacMorn—took that opportunity of stimulating what he had already wakened in you, which is no more nor less than the devil that sleeps in every one of us, the instinct to unrestrained evil surviving in us from the very beginnings of humanity on earth."

"But I don't feel it as evil," she protested. "If—just now—if you'd felt as I did, given way as I nearly asked in words, I know I'd have been utterly happy—and so would you. Don't you see?"

"My dear girl, the instinct that was driving you then is father and mother of lust and hate and murder, every evil there is, but it wouldn't drive or hold anyone on earth if it didn't give them a sense of just the glamour that makes its power over you. The devils men make and worship as gods promise unutterable joys—and give torment in the end."

"He—I—what must I do? Oh, what must I do?" she moaned.

Gees released his hold on her, and faced about beside her. "I'll tell you all I can as we go back."

For, abruptly, he had become conscious that they were not alone in the thick, clogging darkness. Cold, inhuman presences crowded on them on every side, incorporeal shadows that thickened the mist and moved in it with a life that was not life, but rather death-given sentience.

The girl felt them too, and clung to him, quivering with sudden terror. "Yes—Oh, which way? I'm lost, Gees! And look! The living dead are all around us in the fog! We're lost—quite lost!"

"Just keep your wits, Helen," he bade, trying to keep his voice steady, since he too knew some of the terror she felt. "We are not lost at all, and have only a few yards to go before we're back at the gate."

Realizing how easy it is to lose sense of direction in a night fog, he had noted every step they had taken, every turn or part of turn that either of them had made.

Now, disengaging himself from her fearful hold on him, he took her arm and impelled her to where, he felt sure, they would again encounter the gate.

Every step was a vast effort, for though the intangible things that she had called the living dead were of no more substance than the fog itself, they sucked at his strength so that he felt as if he walked in deep water, in part controlled by it.

He had to drag the girl along, for she was incapable of independent movement, and her audible breaths came and went catchily, uncertainly, almost in sobs. After a vast age of struggle he found that he had miscalculated their direction after all, for they came to the wall surrounding ›The Rowans,‹ but found no sign of the gate nor could Gees tell if it was to right or left of the point they had reached.

Now, as they both touched the wall, the sense of clogging presences about them increased, and Gees knew that these living dead were making a final effort to hold them back, drive them away from the wall and the house beyond it.

He took a few seconds for breath, and then put one arm around Helen's waist and the other behind her knees and swung her over the wall, setting her on her feet on the inside. Somehow he scrambled over after her—it was no more than waist-high.

He stood beside her, recovering breath and steadiness. Here, they were unmolested, but beyond the wall shadows swayed and swirled, dark-nesses on the thick darkness of the night. Helen turned and pointed away to the right, her arm a white line on the darkness.

"I think the gate is there," she said.

"And I think it's the other way," Gees dissented. "Before we begin looking for it, though—you understand a little more clearly, now?"

"I'm so tired," she half-sighed. "So terribly tired, Gees."

"So am I, after that," he said grimly. "But if I tell you what you've got to do to save yourself, will you do it?"

"I'm so tired, I tell you," she insisted tremulously.

"If I say what to do, will you do it?"

"What? What do you want me to do?" she asked, sluggishly.

"See here!" He grasped her arm and shook her, roughly. "Do you want to become no more than a shadow on the night, like that?" He pointed beyond the wall with his free hand.

"No." But the reply was listless, uninterested, as if she did not really care.

"Does Kyrle's love mean nothing to you?" he demanded harshly.

"Yes. What is it you want me to do?"

"First, never go out here alone, either day or night."

"Yes, I understand," she assented, still in that flat, lifeless way.

"Say it," he insisted. "What is it that you must not do?"

"I must never go out here alone, either by day or night," she said.

"Repeat that, please. Get it engraved on your mind."

She repeated the words. Then—"I'm so terribly tired," she said.

"I know." He refrained from attempting to impress more on her. In her present state, he knew, the one prohibition would sink in so as to have power over her, but to perplex her with other biddings or forbiddings might spoil the effect. He took her arm and led her to the left.

"We'll find the path to the house," he said.

A dozen paces brought them to the granite chips, and Helen turned toward the gate and tried to break from his hold. "Not that way," he said. "The house is behind you."

"Calling," she almost whispered. And again—"Calling."

"You forget." He would not ask what she meant by the word. "Tell me again—what is it that you must not do on any account."

"I must never go out here alone, either by day or night," she said, and with the words turned toward the house. "I'm so very tired, too."

She leaned heavily on him all the way to the door, and, entering after he had opened it, turned and faced him.

"Will you tell Aunt Marge I've gone straight to bed, please?" she asked.

"And"—a faint smile grew about her lips—"you were right—the glamour, I mean, and the reality. I know, now. Good-night, Gees."

He watched her ascend the stairs, saw that she turned at the bend and lifted her hand to him in a little gesture of farewell.

The pale yellow of her hair showed white against the panelling, and her slender figure drooped wearily. When she had gone, he entered the drawing room.

Margaret Aylener, standing by the mantel, turned from gazing into the ashy fire. "Was it a good idea?" she asked, with a tinge of irony.

"And bad," he answered. "Both. Miss Aylener, get her away from here. Take her away—anything. Don't let her stay here, that's all."

"Do you still say you can do nothing?"

"No more than I have done," he answered. "We went outside the gate, and they came round us. Suffocatingly. Whether he was there too, I don't know, but she half-yielded to some hypnosis—she was not under control, but open to suggestion. I suggested all I dared, took advantage of her condition to insist that she should not go out here alone, and I think the suggestion is fixed, but I'm not sure. Even if it is fixed, it won't endure so get her away, soon."

"I have been thinking," she said, quite calmly. "I suppose, if I realized everything I have, I should not rank as a poor woman, Mr. Green. The total amount would be between forty and fifty thousand pounds."

"Not exactly poor," he commented.

"I will give you half that sum if you bring about Gamel MacMorn's death," she said, as quietly and evenly as before.

"I see." He too spoke very quietly. "There is a thick, wet fog outside tonight, too dense for me to travel by my headlights. If you don't mind, I'll start back very early in the morning."

She gazed at him steadily, and, as when he had first seen her, he knew she was very lovely. Her age was an incredibility he felt.

"Why, yes," she said. "It is a long day's journey to London, by road. And since I rise late, I will say goodbye now. Mr. Green. I am so sorry you have had the long drive here to so little purpose."

Chapter 8

Farewell to Shadows

The reluctant day was not an hour old when Gees nosed the Rolls-Bentley out into still, white mist. Gees could only see a dozen yards beyond the radiator cap. Miss Aylener's servant, the strange Callum, guided him to the drive in front. The rowans were giant ghosts looming high, guarding clouds on the mist.

With Callum walking beside him, Gees drove to the gate that he and Helen had failed to find on their return last night. Passing by the open gate, Gees reached out his hand, and Callum took his tip with respectful thanks.

Then the car was rocking and swaying along the track toward the post office and cottages, and ›The Rowans‹ was no more than an incredible memory behind.

Little less angry than he had been when he bade Margaret Aylener goodbye the night before, Gees drove with about one-tenth of his brains, and hotly resented Miss Aylener's calm suggestion of murder with the rest. Hire him like a paid Florentine assassin, eh? The woman was crazy.

Of course she had cause to hate and fear MacMorn, for the adventure with Helen in the fog had proved that the girl was in real danger, but—to avert it by buying a man to murder—He cursed under his breath, and jerked sharply to attention.

The car was half off the road. Either because the surface was bumpy or because he'd not been paying attention, the wheel had pulled against his hands and swerved to the right. Just ahead loomed blankness where solid ground should be.

He got out to go look over the edge of a pit which, if he had not caught himself up in time, would surely have wrecked him. Leaving his en-

gine running, he went back along his tire marks, and saw that he had swerved off the main track some thirty or forty yards back—had made almost a right-angled turn, in fact. He could not remember swinging the wheel, but he must have, somehow.

Then, looking for the tire track to guide him through the fog back to the car, he saw them in process of being wiped out—by nothing. The spongy sidetrack appeared to even itself out with the rest of the ground. As if someone were busy with a rake or broom or hoe, the earth lifted from underneath and leveled.

And he could see it being done!

His hair crisped at the sight: it might have been the elasticity of the peaty soil, but the swiftness with which the tracks vanished pointed to some sentient agency.

The car was drowned in the still whiteness that prisoned him from normal things. Fortunately, he had left the engine running, and could guide himself back by the sound. He faced toward it, took a step in that direction, and the sound ceased!

Now, unless someone had switched off the ignition, this was an impossibility. His gasoline gauge had showed six gallons that morning and a Rolls-Bentley engine does not cease running of its own accord. A new rage possessed him. Somebody—MacMorn?—had waited for him to get beyond sight of the car, and then had shut off the motor so that he should lose himself, perhaps fall into such a pit as lay just ahead of his car. Yet, why? He was leaving the place. He had given up—as abruptly as when Helen had been with him the night before, he realized that he was not alone.

Shadows thronged in the whiteness, darkened it as they wove figures about him, patterning the air with strange, half-human shapes, never quite in his sight. When he tried to look directly at any one of them, it was not there, but just aside from the line along which he gazed. By an effort he shut his mind to them, managed to concentrate on the fact that he was faced toward the point at which he had heard the purring exhaust of the engine. He must go in a straight line ahead to find the car. Only a few yards, and he would be in sight of it again.

They were trying to turn him, luring him to look aside and so lead from the line he must follow. He dare not let them. And suddenly Gees knew fear.

He advanced, looking straight before him. The shadows in the fog closed in on him, grew more numerous, and he felt the loss of strength they had imposed on him before. They took his human vitality and used

it to supplement their sub-human intangibility, sucked at his physical strength and grew as tangible as wreaths of the fog itself, pressing on him, striving to divert him from his way—and then fading to nothingness as with a gasp of relief he saw the car.

He had won! Both attempts at leading him astray—killing him, perhaps—had failed. And, as the car came to sight again, he heard the purring exhaust as when he had left it. The engine had not stopped at all! Had it, though? Yet, if it had been stopped and started again, he would surely have heard the self-starter.

He got back into the driving seat. The shadows he had seen or imagined—but not imagined, for no imagination could produce this bone-weary exhaustion—the shadows he had seen no longer patterned the mist. He was alone. How had they closed his ears, shut him away from the sound that would have guided him back here?

He backed slowly away from the pit into which he had so nearly fallen. He had only to reverse in a straight line, and the car must come to the track from which he had diverged. The wheel tracks lengthening in front of the radiator as he backed would show him if he swerved to either side. Thick though the fog might be, it gave him eight or ten yards of sight beyond the nose of the car, enough for holding to a straight line.

But the car left no wheel tracks! Sweat streamed down his body. Here he was with almost the most modern of material things, presumably in a material world; and the ton and a half of metal under his control appeared to press as lightly on the peaty earth as might Ariel on a blade of grass.

Well, keep the wheel straight—and he knew that the most difficult thing in driving is that of keeping a car in reverse to a straight line—and eventually he must reach the track from which he had diverged. Thirty to forty yards, he had walked when he left the car. Now, he backed and backed, fifty or sixty yards. He stopped. The wheel must have swung in his grasp without his knowing it.

He got out and, without losing sight of the car this time, found that he had been proceeding parallel with the track and about half a dozen yards distant from it. Had he kept on, he would eventually have backed into the wall of ›The Rowans,‹ or else, circling unconsciously, backed into the pit from which he had just escaped.

He got in again and drove on. Warned by his experience, he kept his whole attention on his driving, and presently the grey bulk of the post office showed dimly.

Passing it, he saw the postmistress, Bathsheba Gralloch, standing on the doorstep, gazing at him. She gave no token of recognition, though he passed at so little distance that with one forward step she could have shaken hands with him. He fancied or saw a glimmer of evil amusement in her dark eyes, and, hating her unreasonably, violently, remembered the ham in the back of the car. He passed on.

As he went up from the valley of the loch and away from Brachmornalachan, the fog thinned. When he reached the three-way crossroads and looked back, the white density from which he had emerged, ringed by its crouching hills with their intermittent clumps of ragged, wind-tortured firs and pines, lay like a sea of cotton behind him.

Back in the normal world! No shadow shapes marched or wove figures on the haze, here, no stone reared to show a graven Name to the life of everyday. Not that any life appeared, except the tiny, greyish blobs in the far distance that he knew were grazing sheep. But—free of it!

He felt intense relief. It was blessed to realize that, with her proposal of the night before, Margaret Aylener had put acceptance of any mission she might offer out of the question. He had bade her goodbye, finished with her and with Brachmornalachan—and with MacMorn!

He swung on to the main road, and was about to accelerate when he saw, beside the way, a scrub-filled pit that had probably been a stone quarry, and stopped beside it, remembering Bathsheba Gralloch as she had watched him pass, and especially remembering the look in her eyes. He got out, went to the back of the car, and took out the ham he had bought at the post office. Swinging it, he let go, and heard it crash down in the scrub that lined the quarry. A waste of twenty-five shillings, possibly: he had no real reason to doubt that it was a perfectly good ham.

On the other hand—He resumed his seat at the wheel, and presently the tires began their normal humming. Scent of peat fires, of springing vegetation, and the sun climbing up the east—A modern road, designed and graded and built by practical engineers for modern, practical use by sane people going about their material business.

Steadily, swiftly, the distance between him and Brachmornalachan increased.

Chapter 9

Earthly Interlude

Nearly two years before when he had established his confidential agency in Little Oakfield Street off the Haymarket, and had hesitated whether to engage a secretary, an office boy, or both, as staff, he had eventually decided that a secretary might not be all he would need, but would certainly be all he could afford.

He had interviewed seven applicants for the post, and had inquired of each in turn whether he might kiss her. Three of them said he might, three were modestly doubtful, and the seventh negated the suggestion flatly and decidedly, whereupon he engaged her.

She gave her name as Eve Madeleine Brandon, and until Gees' father, General Sir George Green, discovered that she was daughter of one old friend of his and niece of another, Gees himself was so doubtful of the name that he wanted to ask her whether she belonged to the Smith family, in reality.

She had brains, good looks, and charm; she never let her employer forget that he might not kiss her, and they got on so well in every way that Gees frequently congratulated himself on his choice.

On the morning after his return from Brachmornalachan, as he entered the room in which she worked or waited for something to do, she put down the novel she had been reading and greeted him coolly.

"Book-of-the-Month, eh?"

"I'm so bored," she explained.

"Any inquiries?"

"The usual morning sheaf," she said. "I have declined them all. Lost property, divorce evidence, psychic seekers—nothing you would care to undertake, I know. Rather an odd one this morning—I don't know why

the man should think you'd regard it as between mumps and murder. An innkeeper in the New Forest thinks his barmaid is robbing the till."

"Umm-m! Initial consultation, two guineas, too. But then, some while ago, a firm with a turnover of about a million a year found its accounts a penny out, and in tracing that penny the auditors uncovered frauds amounting to tens of thousands."

"And what has that to do with a New Forest barmaid?" she inquired.

"I dunno," he confessed. "Have a cigarette? So will I. But if I went and looked round that pub, the barmaid might lead me to a plot to assassinate a Cabinet Minister, or a burglary at the Mint, or a scheme for making Hitler king of Jerusalem. She might not, of course."

Miss Brandon frowned, and asked: "How did you get on in Scotland?"

"In Brachmornalachan, you mean," Gees amended. "For one thing, I met the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

"That is not unusual, I believe," she commented softly.

"Her being close on twice my age makes it so, though," he said. "Then, I was offered something over twenty thousand pounds to complete what I was asked to do, and turned the whole thing down and came back."

She gazed at him gravely, steadily. "I'd better finish off the morning's inquiries, and then get on with my book," she said.

"And I gave twenty-five shillings for a ham, and threw it into an old stone quarry to lose it," he added. "It looked like a good ham, too."

"Did you have good weather?" she asked sweetly.

"And a very attractive girl took me out in the dark after she'd met me for an hour or so, and tried to get me to make love to her."

Miss Brandon frowned heavily. "I'd better dispose of these inquiries," she said. "Unless you'd like to—"

"Put them aside for the present," he bade, with a return to seriousness, "And get out your book. Even if I've turned down the case, we must have a record. So I'll dictate it while the flavour of Brachmornalachan still hangs around my gills. Then I'll discuss it with you, and after that I think I'll go see the barmaid in the New Forest. A good solid barmaid with itchy fingers. You don't know how thoroughly wonderful that sounds."

He dictated for the best part of a half-hour. At one o'clock, he went out to lunch and returned about three to find her sitting idle at her desk with the neatly finished typing laid on her machine.

"By the look of it, the book of the month is like that barmaid in the New Forest—doesn't interest you any more than she did me. Have you marked and learned and mastered my story?"

"Marked and learned," she answered. "That is my limit."

"I see. This is London, of course. Yes. You're sceptical." He made it half a question. She looked up at him, gravely.

"Even you turned it down," she said. "What is it? Ghosts?"

"I don't like the word, Miss Brandon. To your question—no."

"Then—" She left it at that, and waited for his explanation.

"You know you can save life by transfusion of blood?" he asked.

"You don't mean—?"

"Take the word, 'transfusion,' and analyze it," he suggested. "Not merely transmission, or transfer, of blood from one person to another. But fusion. That is, complete annexation of the blood to the person needing it. It becomes a part of that self; is fused in it. In that way, as I see it, MacMorn has learned to transfuse not merely blood, but life itself. To fuse another life into his own, and when that wears out another, and yet another—how many, naturally, I don't know."

"But you can't—he wouldn't go on being MacMorn," she objected.

"Oh yes, he would. That, don't you see, is where the shadows come in? Not the soul—he doesn't need that. But the principle, the vital physical force—call it what you like—that makes the human body a fit habitation for the soul all through a lifetime. That, I believe, is what he transfuses to himself. D'you know any old Egyptian beliefs?"

"I've read of them, of course," she answered.

"Yes. Most people have. According to them, three entities made up a man, in addition to his physical organism. There were the *ka*, and the *bat*, and the *khou*, distinct entities. When an adept of evil like MacMorn transfuses a life to himself, one of those three is set wandering, homeless and earthbound, and never going far from the rest of the personality of which it was a part during the mortal lifetime of the whole!"

"And so the shadows MacMorn makes stay near him."

"Far more than he has made—thousands more," he said.

She shook her head. "I don't understand it," she said. "Why thousands more? There are not thousands of—adepts of evil, you called him. You say—this report—you only saw three people at his house."

"Possibly only two. Partha may have been the man who came to the door, for all I know. No, there is only one MacMorn, to my belief at any rate.

"But the circle, and the altar over which MacMorn's house is built to keep it intact as a dwelling place for what was worshipped there when all the stones were standing. I think—this is all assumption—I think

that whatever was worshipped there still has power. Whatever it was, absorbed—transfused to itself—lives by the thousand in far back time, and so made the shadows.

“While It retains power, they are bound to that place, bound to It and to obey It. Which was why they tried to destroy me, when I was leaving. I’d shown MacMorn I either knew or suspected the truth about him and was antagonistic, and he passed on the information to his—deity.”

“In that case, how do any Ayleners survive?” she asked.

“For one thing, they don’t. They’re fined down, now, to Margaret Aylener, who is powerless against MacMorn, and her niece Helen whom he intends to transfuse to himself for the sake of another span of mortal life. For another thing, the four rowans about the house.”

“The trees protect from him?” She sounded derisive.

“Throw out the old belief in the world-ash as the fountain and fore-bringer of human life, and still the tree has power,” he asserted. “Then why not as protection from what MacMorn serves? Set in a quadrangle of the rowans while they are in their own house, Ayleners need not fear MacMorn. He caught Helen and put his spell on her far from that house. At Eleusis, and could you find a more significant parallel than that?”

“Parallel?” she asked. “I’m not—not accepting all this—it’s too fantastic. But I’d like it all clearly.”

“If you look up the Oxford Companion off the shelf in my room some time, and turn up Eleusis,” he said, “you’ll find it says that the Eleusinian mysteries culminated in a rite in a darkened hall, where the worshippers were shown visions in flashes of light.

“Tableaux posed in front of torches thrust up through the floor, probably—I don’t think Eleusis in historic times ever went deeper than trickery and attempted reproduction of older rites, though of course there can be no certainty about that now.

“But MacMorn’s house is built over an altar thousands of years older than anything at Eleusis, and if sacrifice at that altar has been carried on to an extent that keeps its god there, if MacMorn is priest to that god—”

“Then Eleusis is only a faint parallel to his house,” she suggested.

“I thought it all over on my way back, and talking it out with you helps to clarify the thought,” he said. “Your questions are useful—”

“Another question,” she interrupted. “If this girl—Helen, and by what you say of her I dislike her intensely—if she is in real danger, why did you give it up and come back?”

"We have had two cases of the type to which this belongs, since I started this agency and engaged you. In this case, if I admit the threat to Helen Aylener, that threat emanates from an ordinary human being, a rather peculiar-looking man, I own, but to the best of my knowledge a perfectly law-abiding one whom I can't accuse of anything, whatever I may think of him.

"He has made the acquaintance of the girl, invited her and her fiancé to his house and given them a drink. So what? If I allege that he's living on the life of a woman who disappeared when she was a girl, I invite questions as to my own sanity. Medically, transfusion of life in the way MacMorn may or may not accomplish it is an utter impossibility. As for the shadows, spots before the eyes make a favourite line in patent medicine advertisements. And what's a shadow, anyhow?

"I might sit in Brachmornalachan till the birth of Helen Aylener's fourth baby and miss my chance at whole rows of New Forest barmaids. On top of all which, my goat was gotten nicely by the suggestion that I could have twenty thousand pounds if I'd only wipe MacMorn off the face of the earth."

"You think the god—whatever it is—still exists?" she asked.

"Gods exist only by virtue of belief in them," he answered. "That is, the gods within human conception, distortions of the real Power behind things. I feel sure the god of MacMorn's altar still exists, because of the shadows, for one thing.

"The multitude of human sacrifices made on that altar in old times must have built up a god of very great power, and the way in which lives were absorbed—transfused—and the resulting shadows bound near that spot would maintain life in the god.

"Destroy worship of it, belief in it, and it will cease to exist, but while a priest of the cult remains to serve it and stand as master of the shadows, minister to the god, it will live and have power inside the circle marked by the stones as its dwelling place."

"In reality," she observed thoughtfully, "you found—nothing."

He laughed, and offered his cigarette case. "What is reality?" he asked.

"Are you and I both real as we sit here, or does one of us exist only in the imagination of the other? The whole universe may be unreal, no more than a picture in the brain of an ant belonging to some other universe. There is no ultimate, conclusive proof of the reality of anything."

"Well, of course, if you're going to strike that note, I give up."

"More questions?" he asked.

"What is this antipathy to iron in his house?" she asked.

"Ah! I wondered if you'd spot that. Fellowship with the Daoine Shih—the very old ones who are only half-human. They avoid iron—it is in some way a plague to them. I don't understand it—there it is."

"And they are—what are they like?"

"Mainly responsible for the legends of fairies—they let themselves be seen by humans, at times. Loathly things, far below human standards. Driven out of sight by the first savages who wandered into the lands they occupied, long before any civilization dawned.

"You can meet them dematerialized at séances, posing as Napoleon or a departed relative for the credulous, trying to mix with full human beings in that way. Rags of mind, mainly cunning and deceit, in or out of semi-material travesties of bodies, some horrible and some merely grotesque."

"And how do you know all these things?" she asked caustically.

"Soaked them up," he answered. "Fair lady, I was not always a policeman, and things quite beyond proof always interest me. I claim to be so far proof against influence by them as to be able to study them without harm to myself, too. So I studied. MacMorn recognized that I had, and got a certain amount of panic over me in consequence."

"And now you wait for another case," she observed.

"We wait for another case," he corrected her. "Lord, it was only yesterday morning I chucked that ham into a quarry in Scotland, and it feels about two years ago! Miss Brandon, I've got an idea. Let's close down tomorrow, and I'll turn out the buzz-wagon and take you to that New Forest pub for a bread and cheese and beer lunch. You can get off with the proprietor while his wife isn't looking, and I'll see what the barmaid is like. How does it appeal to you?"

"All but the proprietor part."

She nodded contentedly at his back as he went out through the doorway. He had never suggested anything of this sort before—she had never ridden in that wonderful car of his. The invitation had been given in a friendly way only, but—did it mean that he was about to wake up and turn human, see her as other than his secretary?

If so, she would know how to manage him.

Chapter 10

Plague of Locusts

Taking the cross-over from the Guildford road to the old lane over the Hog's Back, next morning, Gees said: "I have never driven a more silent passenger. Not that I drive many."

"Do you object?"

"Not a bit. There are so many fools on the roads these days, especially near London. You have to concentrate to dodge them."

"You seem quite sure of your way."

"Looked it out before starting," he explained. "The wise man—I'm one—always plans his route before he turns out. The others stop beside the road at intervals and consult a map, which will tell you everything except how to fold it up again. We wise ones get there first."

She made no comment. Gees took the Winchester road, swinging over its switchback undulations as one might drive a boat across the crests and hollows of an unquiet sea.

At a distance of three miles or less from the city, the flies came ...

A little black cloud, compact as a swarm of bees, appeared to leap over the low hedge on the near side of the car—and envelop both him and Eve in a blinding, buzzing mass.

She cried out as he braked to stop, and, quick though he was, one front wheel struck the guard rail forcefully as a northward-bound car flashed past them. Had he swerved to the right instead of pulling off the road, the speed at which the other car was going would have meant sure and sudden death to them both.

Great, blue, buzzing foulnesses, thousands of them. Both he and Eve Brandon fought at them with their hands. Although he had been going at a good clip, they had got in behind the windshield, and the car

was alive with them. He beat at them with his hat, and smelt freshly shed blood, as when he and Helen Aylener had walked away from Mac-Morn's house in Brachmornalachan.

Then, suddenly as it had appeared, the swarm rose up, and swung back over the hedge. Their buzzing grew faint and ceased, and—assurance that he had not dreamed it all—hundreds of dead or dying flies littered the floor rug and seats. "If you'll get out, I'll clean up a bit." She stepped on to the grass, while he threw out the seat cushions, took up the rug and shook it into the road, and knocked out all that remained on the floor of the car. All this in complete and grim silence. The smell that had struck on his nostrils was in his mind.

"Now you can get back," he said, after he had replaced the cushions and deposited his hat in the locker.

"I felt—still feel quite sick." She seated herself as she spoke.

"M'yes," he observed unsympathetically. "I could have understood it better if it had been July, but even then I've never seen a swarm like that in this country. We'll stop in Winchester and get you a spot of brandy. You look quite peaky over it. Or shall I drive you to the station at Winchester and send you back by train?"

"Certainly not!"

He drove on. "Did you—er—smell them?"

"That was what was so sickening," she said. "A beastly smell—I know no other word for it. Utterly repulsive."

"Yes." He remembered Helen Aylener's saying that she both disliked and liked an exactly similar smell. Over its recurrence here, and the appearance of the flies, he refused to think.

In a hotel lounge in Winchester he and Eve sipped neat brandy, and went on. He scarcely observed the notice: Beware of wandering cattle as they entered the forest. Here, with spring foliage at its gayest in the brilliant noon sunlight, he slackened his pace.

They dipped down from a crest toward a shaded hollow from which the road rose again, straight and straight under an arch of green. To their left, a half-dozen forest ponies grazed on a stretch of sward. There were rushes and reeds fringing a stream in the hollow—The brakes saved them.

The pony nearest the road had leaped directly in front of the car. Had Gees been going faster, he could not have averted a crash. As it was, the front bumper was not two feet from the animal when the car came to a standstill.

With a lurid oath he got out, and as his foot touched the ground the pony leaped away with a terrified snort and disappeared in the brush-wood. The other five beasts went on grazing quietly.

"Sorry I cussed, Miss Brandon," he remarked, getting back to his seat and easing off the hand brake. The car moved on.

"It was justifiable," she rejoined. "Quite a—a fruity effort, too. Do you often have adventures like these on the road?"

"As nearly as I can remember, no."

"Perhaps I'm a Jonah," she suggested, as they began the ascent beyond the hollow. "Inexplicable flies, and a mad pony—"

They came out to open, heather-covered waste, and still the road ran straight and straight, with no life but their own on the landscape. But Gees kept to thirty miles an hour as carefully as in a restricted stretch.

"We'll have lunch at the first likely place."

"But what about the barmaid?"

"She'll never know what she's missing," he answered. "I'm not going near her, and we're not going back this way, either. Nor am I telling you which way we are going back. I'm smitten with a hunch."

"So am I," she admitted, after a pause.

"Good! We'll have lunch, and not swap hunches till we get home."

"But why am I not to know our way back?" she asked.

"Your mind might leak," he explained. "And I'm keeping mine tight shut, too. We've been annoyed quite enough, for one day."

Chapter 11

Fear Is a Shadow

There was a big limousine with white ribbons stretched between the front corners of its roof and the headlamps, at the end of a row of five cars, parked in front of a countryside hotel like the one where they had lunched. Gees nodded at them as he drove past. “Just as well we didn’t,” he remarked.

“What didn’t we?” she asked, after thinking it over.

“That’s where she lives,” he explained. “Works, anyhow. With a wedding party in the place, I’d never have a chance to vamp her and find out she bilks the cash register. And now, next on the left.”

“Did you mean to take the next on the left when we started out this morning?” she asked.

“No. I began to mean it about a minute ago. I’m going to navigate by the sun from now on, and don’t ask any more about it.”

Any road, he told himself, except the one by which he had planned to return. Keep roughly parallel with the coast for awhile ...

“About that report you dictated yesterday,” Miss Brandon remarked after he had turned left into a rather narrow road, obviously not a main highway like the one they had left. “Do you mind talking about it?”

“I see no reason why I should,” he answered non-committally.

“Then—can you tell me—why are all the old gods such fierce beings? Except the Egyptian deities, perhaps—Osiris and Isis were fairly reasonable and polite. But the others—even the last of them, the Roman Jupiter—were no more than bloodthirsty hobgoblins and most of the earlier ones were simply unspeakable. The Hebrew Jahveh was more often angry than not, and had to be propitiated with all sorts of sacrifices.”

"The Egyptians got an easy living in the Nile Valley," Gees said, "And therefore nature appeared to them as fairly benevolent. They patterned their gods on their own way of life—and so did all the other tribes and civilizations of antiquity.

"Most of them found nature fierce and evil. They saw life as a perpetual struggle against unyielding cruelty, some sort of supreme rule, to their belief, which perpetually tortured them by famine and storm and war, and they attempted propitiation out of their own experience. Life was an evil thing, therefore the gods who gave it must be evil, and had to be approached by evil and cruelty."

"It sounds reasonable," she reflected.

"Is," he insisted. "As life got kinder, the gods became less evil, until—as you said—under the *pax Romana* Jove was no more nor less than an unpleasant old roue, everlastingly dodging away from Juno after some mortal maiden. Where you get a fierce, hard life, like the old Norse civilization, the gods are fierce and hard too. Man has made gods in his own image from the very beginning of time."

She nodded and fell silent. With the sun striking over his right shoulder Gees drove on, keeping a steady slow speed. The road was wide enough for two cars, and bordered on either side by a low hawthorn hedge set on a sloping bank, about a foot above road level.

One small sports car passed them, and, coming in the opposite direction, an occasional truck rumbled by. Empty ones gave way freely enough, but those with loads swerved off as little as possible in passing.

With one of them, the flies appeared again.

The truck was from twenty to thirty yards away when Gees saw the small black cloud lift over the hedge to his right and swing like a thrown ball to envelop the truck driver, hiding his head and shoulders in its blackness. The lumbering vehicle swerved, drove at the Rolls-Bentley—inescapably, it seemed for long, tensed seconds. Tramping hard on the gas, Gees swung his wheel, and the car shot ahead, its near wheels mounting the bank.

There was a clanging crash and shock, and he stopped with the car at an angle just short of turning turtle, to see the truck also stopped behind him—and his rear mudguard quivering down on the tire, held to the car by no more than two studs.

"All right, Miss Brandon?" he asked cheerfully.

"I—I think so," she answered, her voice very shaky.

"Good! I'll investigate the damage, then."

He got out, and waited until the approaching truck driver stopped facing him. The man's face was ash-white, and he was trembling visibly.

"How many had you had?" Gees asked.

"Not a drop today, I'll take oath, sir," the man answered. "Blinded, I was, sir. I thought it was bees, at first—didn't you see 'em, sir?"

"I saw something," Gees admitted. "License?"

The man produced it. "Ten years clean record!" he said bitterly. "Gorn! And jobs ain't easy, these days. I'm to blame, I know—you got a witness. I ain't. And if I said flies, they'd larf."

"They surely would." Gees said deliberately, and returned the license after glancing at the name and address. "Here, take it, and give me a hand to pull that mudguard clean off so I can put it in the back of the car. I think that's the extent of the damage."

It was, he found when they had pulled the sheet metal clear. A projection on the back of the truck had caught under the mudguard and ripped it away, and, since the wheel was already angled by the slant of the car, it had escaped damage. They laid the bent and crumpled guard down in front of the back seat, and Gees pulled the waterproof cover over again and buttoned it down. Then he turned to the glooming truck driver.

"They'd laugh," he said. "I don't. Your license stays clean."

"Blimey!" He gasped the ejaculation, and stared incredulously.

"I've met those flies before," Gees explained.

"Gord! D'you mean there's a plague, sir?"

"One pip of a plague, but it's over as far as you are concerned. You won't see any more of them—they don't attack the same man twice. Your truck isn't damaged, I suppose?"

"No, sir." He shook his head. "It takes a lot to damage a six-tonner like that. But you lettin' me off like this, sir—I'll stand the racket if you think I ought. My wheel tracks show who was to blame!"

"Man, you're something new in drivers." Gees laughed, and brought two half-crowns out from his pocket. "Here, I've been so lucky this is just a thank-offering, and I know the blame doesn't rest on either of us two. What made you swerve when the flies hit you, though?"

"I dunno, sir. Didn't know I did. It felt like the wheel was wrung in my hands, somehow. I tried to steer straight, too."

"Oh, well, forget it. And good luck."

"Gord bless you, sir!"

Gees turned back to his car, and saw tears running unchecked down Miss Brandon's cheeks. He leaned toward her, anxiously.

"Shock," he diagnosed. "Would you rather walk to the nearest house, or can you stand being driven till we come to one?"

"Not—not that, altogether," she got out, whisperingly. "You—your utter kindness to that man, when you might have—" She broke off, and got a handkerchief out from her bag to wipe her eyes.

"When I might have batted him on the beezer—yes." He got into the car and took the wheel. "But to tell the honest truth, it didn't occur to me. I know another beezer I badly want to bat."

She laughed, shakily. "Shall we—shall we ever get back?" she asked. "Your—your new way home doesn't seem to work very well."

"Maybe the worst is over," he said. "Maybe, on the other hand, it isn't. So far, you've got to own, we've suffered no personal damage."

He drove on, and the car became level again. "Also," he observed, "I've got another hunch. I believe I've made a discovery. Not a very useful one, at present, apart from its effect on my self-esteem."

"Mr. Green, I think you are the sanest man I've ever met," she said impulsively, with, as he noted, far more steadiness of voice.

"Testimonial filed for production before the lunacy commissioners," he remarked calmly. "If we can find another pub that doesn't look too immoral, what are your views on the subject of tea? Or not?"

"Not, I think, if you don't mind. If—if I got out, I might not have the courage to get in again today. Don't think me too silly."

"I think you're probably wise. We'll head for home, then."

Keeping a north-east course by the sun, he struck the main London-Southampton road, and breathed more easily when he saw its width before him. Miss Brandon sat quite still and silent beside him until, having encountered no more flies nor mad ponies, he stopped in Grosvenor Place.

"Handiest for you, I believe," he remarked. "I'm sorry it's been such a lurid day for you. I hoped for peace and barmaid."

"It's been splendid, really," she assured him. "I'm very grateful Mr. Green, and—do we exchange hunches tomorrow?"

"After going through the mail," he answered. "There might be another barmaid case in it, worth investigating. Good-night, Miss Brandon. Ring me in the morning if you don't feel fit."

"But I shall feel fit, I know. Good-night, Mr. Green."

Nobody, Gees decided over his coffee and cigarette the next morning, could have behaved better than Eve Madeleine. He knew she had guessed some part of the reason behind those flies and the mad pony, but she had kept her head and made no fuss, even over the most nearly successful attempt at wrecking him. Yes, she had grit, and he congratulated himself again on his choice of a secretary.

So much so, that yet another idea entered his mind as he went along the corridor of the flat to her room, having heard her remove the metal cover from her typewriter after entering. He leaned against the doorpost and watched her slit envelopes with a paper-cutter.

"End of the week, Miss Brandon, pay yourself an additional ten bob, and keep it up from now on. It's the first raise since you began work here, and I wonder you haven't started a mutiny before now."

"But, Mr. Green"—she stopped work on the envelopes to protest—"I'm doing absolutely nothing nearly all the time!"

"Makes no difference," he insisted, "And I can't tolerate insubordination. Raise or the sack—take your choice."

"Well, it's very good of you."

"Yes, isn't it? Unless there's anything that looks special among that lot you have there, leave 'em alone and let's consider our respective hunches of yesterday. Yours for a beginning. What was it?"

She made little stabs with the paper-cutter at the palm of her left hand, nervously. "It was—first, though, I take back all my scepticism about the report you dictated to me the day before. About your view of the man MacMorn, I mean. I don't believe in those things as a rule, but after yesterday—well, I see no alternative."

"And very noble of you, too," he commented. "It amounts to being convinced by what happened yesterday, I take it."

"It amounts to—My hunch"—she paused to consider her words carefully—"Amounts to your being in very grave danger, as I see it. For some reason, and I can't tell what it is, somebody wants you out of the way. Wants you dead, to put it plainly. Tried to kill you."

"MacMorn, you think," he suggested.

"Against that is the fact that you left Brachmornalachan without doing anything against him," she pointed out. "So I don't see—"

"Then my hunch—the first of my two, rather—takes on where yours leaves off," he said, as she did not end her sentence. "I do see—but we'll take my second hunch first. Ever heard of Beelzebub, Miss Brandon? You'll find him described in the New Testament as the prince of devils, I think. I'm not quite sure of the quotation."

"Yes, of course I've read that," she said.

"In reality, Baal-Zebub, one of the Carthaginian Baals or gods—known under that name all over Phoenician civilization, too. The god of corruption—of flies. Does anything occur to your receptive mind?"

"You mean—those flies yesterday?" she asked.

"Remember the report on the case," he urged. "I remember dictating the bit about the black goat, and how MacMorn and I talked about it. Incautiously—I dictated the remark to you—very incautiously, he said—'This soil breeds flies.' That is, the soil inside his circle."

"I think I begin to understand," she said reflectively.

"The symbol on his gateway stone is undoubtedly that of Kore," he said, "but it looks as if he makes sacrifice to Baal-Zebub. Being able to use flies like that, I mean. Not that my knowing it amounts to anything, except, as I said, it enables me to call myself a clever little feller. And since MacMorn seems determined to take up the flies against me, I feel like taking up the cudgels against him. Full of fight, in fact. It'll cost pounds to put that mudguard back, and I'm annoyed."

"What do you propose to do?" she asked. "What can you do, in fact? As that truck driver said, mention of flies would merely be sure to raise a laugh."

"Quite so, but it won't be MacMorn who does the laughing," he said grimly. "It's fairly obvious to me that there'll be another move on his part, and soon, too—which brings me to my first hunch, the one that dovetails in on yours. You're quite right about his wanting to eliminate me, and I can see his reason for it too. Quite a good reason."

"Do you propose to tell it to me?" she asked, after waiting awhile.

"Obviously. I said we'd swap, didn't I? Have a cigarette?"

He moved to lean over her desk and offer his case.

"All MacMorn knows is that I went to Brachmornalachan, stayed at ›The Rowans,‹ and came away again because there was nothing doing at the time. That is to say, I think it is all he knows, though after the infernal exhibition at which we had front seats yesterday, I'd hesitate to say quite definitely how much he does know, or how far his information service can reach. I don't believe he can find out anything of what goes on at ›The Rowans.‹ The four trees cut him off from there."

"Then, you mean, he will not know that you have refused to act for Miss Aylener," she suggested, "but thinks you are merely waiting for some—something to justify you in taking action against him."

"It makes no difference either way, whether I intend to act or no," he said. "That is, as far as MacMorn's obvious actions against me go. From

his point of view, the trouble is that I know, and if he carries out any plan against Helen Aylener, I may be able to pin it on him.

"We were both incautious when I had that talk with him. He gave away too much, and so did I. He knows now that I might be dangerous, might turn up evidence against him. Therefore, clear me out of the way before he attempts to transfuse Helen's life to his own, to put that plainly."

"But then there is Miss Aylener—the aunt," she objected.

"Her word against his, and a fantastic, unbelievable accusation, if she makes it," he rejoined. "Be quite assured there will be no trace left of Helen, if he succeeds—except, that is, a wandering shadow like the others. Nothing as evidence of what he has done."

"The man Callum, for one, would confirm Miss Aylener," she urged.

"Callum's evidence—if he had any—would be suspect," he said. "Employed by Miss Aylener, he would naturally side with her. Further, you cannot allege murder, which is what this would be—you cannot allege it unless you produce a body. And there would be no body."

"But there must. What could he do with it?"

"I don't know. I do know that thirteen deaths—sacrifices—went to the erection of every one of the stones in that circle of his, and even after thousands of years there ought to be at least a bone or two. But I'm quite certain there isn't.

"Why, I don't know. What happens at the time of sacrifice, I don't know. One has to be initiate—like MacMorn—to know. Which is to say, one has to hand one's soul over to the object of that altar of his, to whatever it is he serves."

"But if no evidence would be left, why does he want to get rid of you?" she asked. "Surely you are no more danger to him than Callum and Miss Aylener? And he is not trying to remove them."

"MacMorn is afraid of me because he doesn't know the extent of my knowledge," he explained. "He showed it when he warned me away from Brachmornalachan, and now he's thought it over and suspects I may trace Helen Aylener to him—when she goes.

"Probably there is suspicion, unexpressed but there all the same, about the disappearance of Margaret Gralloch some four decades ago, and if another disappearance could be traced to him, it might mean trouble. You see, Margaret Aylener and Callum are there all the time, and probably he knows what to do about them.

"I'm an outsider butting in, an unknown quantity both as to knowledge and power, and he doesn't know what to do about me—doesn't feel safe. You couldn't trace any of yesterday's happenings to him, any more than

you could connect him with my experiences in the fog, the morning I left the place. He'd feel safer if I were inexpensively removed."

"What are you going to do about it, then?"

"Watch my step, and nothing more, for the present," he answered. "Think the whole thing over, and you'll see there's absolutely nothing in it—nothing but a lot of wild fancies, practically speaking. I had a talk with MacMorn, and he was quite polite, just warned me that places like pre-Druidic circles have uncanny influence over some people. Which is a general belief—the warning is justifiable, a kindness to a stranger.

"I turn out in a fog and very nearly drive into a hole that might have wrecked the car and killed me—more fool me for not waiting till the fog cleared. My tire marks disappear—as they would, on that resilient peat turf. You and I go for a drive and run into a swarm of flies—nothing in that. A forest pony jumps out in front of the car—I believe quite a few of those animals get killed by cars, and cause accidents to motorists.

"Another swarm of flies—I know it's the same swarm, but I'd be a fool to say so—another swarm blots out a truck driver's sight so that he nearly runs me down. What about it? All perfectly natural, and no sign of MacMorn anywhere in it."

"And Helen Aylener, and her aunt?" she asked.

"An eccentric, elderly lady has a phobia about a neighbour of hers, for no reason whatever. A highly-strung girl let her mind dwell too much on the Eleusinian mysteries, whatever they were, and has enough theatricality in her make-up to believe she is in some way connected with them. Delusion due to brooding on them too much, of course.

"Callum, if you want to ask about him, has a very good and well paid job with Miss Aylener, and expresses belief in her phobia because he doesn't want to lose his place. And there you are!"

"Nothing whatever in it," she observed reflectively.

"Nothing whatever."

She looked at his eyes and smiled at him gently. "And yet you're frightened. Terribly frightened, and I've never seen you afraid before."

Gees crushed out his cigarette. "That's the damnable part of it. There's something about this whole thing that makes me realize I never have been afraid before. That I didn't know what fear was until I met Gamel MacMorn ..."

Chapter 12

The Fifth Attempt

 n two successive Fridays, Miss Brandon paid herself at her new salary, having done nothing whatever to earn it, since there was nothing to do.

The Rolls-Bentley had been returned, its replaced guard indistinguishable from the others, as far as glossy perfection went. Gees had taken it out twice, once out of boredom and once to drive his father to Cheltenham to visit another old soldier, and the two trips had been eventless. MacMorn and Brachmornalachan receded to the back of Gees' consciousness; the series of incidents connected with them was closed, evidently, and the shadow of fear was fading out within him.

He left the office on that last Monday in May, and went to his club, the Junior Nomads. Gees found a vacant armchair in the smoking room, ordered a pint of bitter, and surveyed the sporting pages of the *TIMES*. This club, he decided irritably, was as anti-social as mumps: every Junior Nomad in sight was either grey-headed or bald. Sleepy, beefy, unadventurous. As dull as if being that way was their profession.

Tony Briggs, of the Foreign Office, joined him presently, looking—as usual—like an adventurous tailor's dream. Gees looked up from his paper.

"Y'know, Tony," Gees snarled, "whenever I see you in soup and fish like this, I wonder in what joint the bird's lurking."

"Roberts told me you asked if I were in," Tony retorted, "but if I'd known you were in that sort of temper I'd have gone straight out again after getting my letters. What's wrong with you?"

"Have a beer." Gees rattled his tankard on the table beside him, and sundry members frowned fiercely while a waiter hurried over. "Repeat this, Henry—and you, Tony? One like it?"

"Double Haig well splashed, Henry," Tony amended. "You dining, Gees, or have you?"

"I intend to wrap myself round a steak in an hour or so," Gees answered. "Eating early is a mistake—it makes a long evening, especially this time of year. What's going to win the Derby?"

"There's only one horse worth backing, and he won't win," Tony prophesied. "He can't, because I've backed him, and that's fatal."

Gees paid for the drinks and took his change, and the waiter left them. After the merest taste at his tankard, Gees put it down.

"Y'know, Tony, you give tone to the place, sitting there like that. Did you know I've been away in the wilds? The far north?"

"Labrador, or Iceland?" Tony inquired skeptically.

"Brachmornalachan." He gurgled the gutturals. "I met Gamel MacMorn, and Bathsheba Gralloch—and came back."

"Just as well. And do not injure your tonsils by trying to tell me any more about it."

"What did you say is going to win the Derby?"

"It'll either be disqualified or come in fourth, so I'm not telling you," Tony answered. "Hullo! There's that odd-looking beggar again!"

Turning his head, Gees too looked out of the window. "Again?" he asked. "When did you see him before?"

"Saturday—no, Friday evening, passing here just as he is now. I was just coming into the club, and met him face to face. And he's got what I've never seen before—absolutely black eyes. He looked full at me, and I noticed them. All the more because I realized I'd never seen such a thing before. Very dark, I've seen, but not utterly and entirely black."

"His name," Gees said gravely, "is Gamel MacMorn, and he comes from Brachmornalachan. I met him there."

"I came through Trafalgar Square just now," Tony said with equal gravity. "Nelson climbed down his column and shook hands with me."

"Do we each tell another before the next drink, or after?" Gees asked.

"Finish that, and I'll buy you another," Tony offered. "But don't tell any more. I'm going on to one of Lady Benderneck's small-and-earlies after eating."

Gees took up his tankard, emptied it without taking breath, and put it down again. "I don't see what that has to do with it," he said. "In all our long and precious comradeship, Tony, never have you as good as called me a liar till now. I feel hurt. Mine is pink gin, a double. To drown the insult and give me an appetite for dinner."

"Grant that I lied level with you," Tony begged, and turned to the waiter to give the order for two more drinks. "I told the truth."

"I take it back, Gees. If you know him—well, you know him."

"That's a sight worse! I do know him, and he is Gamel MacMorn from Brachmornalachan. Coincidences do happen."

"I wouldn't call him so much a coincidence as a—but if he's a friend of yours I won't say it. I'd hate to hurt your feelings."

"He isn't, and you wouldn't," Gees told him. "Oh, Henry"—he addressed the waiter, who had returned with their drinks—"tell the man on the grill to put me on a large fillet steak and cook it, but not shrivel it to splintering point. Tell him it's for me—he'll know, then."

"Very good, sir. Chip potatoes?"

"None whatever. Green peas."

"Very good, sir," and Henry took the money Tony had put down, and went his way. Gees leaned back and looked at the heavy old chandelier pendent from the ceiling, just over his head.

"Junior Nomads," he said, with an inflection of disgust. "And look at that thing! This club ought to be burnt down and rebuilt, Tony."

"Put it in the suggestion book for the committee to consider," Tony retorted. "Or set fire to it yourself."

"You could get double the light out of a modern contraption at half the cost," Gees pursued. "And those glass lustre things are no more than a happy hunting ground for flies."

"You need something to occupy your mind, obviously," Tony observed. "Why not close down that fool agency of yours and do some work?"

"Ah! If only you knew, my lad!" He blew smoke up at the offending chandelier, watched it wreath among the lustres.

Tony let the statement pass, and looked at his watch. Gees rose.

"If you're in a hurry, go and eat by all means," Gees advised. "I can't alter the rate of grilling in this place, any more than I can make 'em put these infernal chandeliers on an ash-heap."

"You've got chandeliers on the brain," Tony interrupted.

"Commodious resting place for 'em, in my case." Gees straightened his length out of his chair and moved over to the window to look out. "But you know those bowl lights, alabaster-looking things—"

A thudding crash and a shout from Tony interrupted him, and he spun about to see the chandelier embedded in the chair in which he had been seated. The leather upholstery was torn in a score of places, the chair

itself broken down, and Tony had a handkerchief out to staunch the trickle of blood where a splinter of broken glass had struck his hand.

A smile that was almost a sneer twisted Gees' lips. "I wonder how he did it," he said. "To plagiarize Mark Twain, this sort of thing is getting monotonous, but how the devil did he do it!"

"Who did what?" Tony inquired, as two waiters came hurrying.

"Gamel MacMorn of Brachmornalachan chopped it down," Gees said.

"What bee have you got in your bonnet?" Tony inquired caustically.

"Exactly what Helen called it—a bee," Gees said. "Don't mind me, Tony—you don't know the lady, anyhow. But it strikes me, with all we've seen tonight, things are about to happen."

"You're madder than usual," Tony remarked.

"Three—four—the fifth attempt," Gees reflected aloud. "Tony, you're right. I'm so mad that if I could draw a bead on the right target, I should shoot to kill. And maybe I will. Maybe I'll have to ..."

Chapter 13

The Web Is Tangled

When Tony Briggs had gone his way, Gees loafed aimlessly through Piccadilly Circus toward Leicester Square. He had a nodding acquaintance with a number of its nocturnal frequenters—those of whom the average man disclaims all knowledge among his respectable fellows. But Gees said none never knew when they might be useful. Tonight, there were plenty of these weary ladies on parade.

He found one of them close beside him, from nowhere. She said, without looking at him, “Oh, Puritan, got a few minutes to spare?”

“Now you know that’s no good with me, Betty.”

“Don’t I just? Might as well try to get a smile from the Cenotaph. No, but I do want to get into the beer parlour, and you know they won’t let us girls in alone. Take me in, and I’ll pay for the drinks. Will you?”

He turned about with her. “I’ll buy ’em,” he said. “What’s he like—or do you want to scratch somebody’s eyes out?”

“Darling, you’re an angel,” she told him, “And I wouldn’t spoil my manicure for any double-crosser. But it ain’t that at all. A pasty-faced jossler I bumped into the other night—only I wasn’t quite stony then and didn’t like his complexion—he told me I could find him down in the beer place every night this week up to tomorrow. And I am stony now. If you hadn’t said you’d pay for the drinks, I’d had to borrow a half-crown off you to do it. I’ve only got threepence left.”

“The moral is obvious,” Gees observed, as they reached the doorway of the place she wanted to visit, and turned in.

She paused on the top step and said: “Moral be blast! I could get twenty pound on the piano, and I haven’t pawned a thing, yet.”

The commissionaire in the doorway, overhearing the statement, grinned, and caught the shilling Gees threw at him before following Betty

down the stairs. Inside, they took a bucket chair apiece and he ordered a small lager for himself and advocaat for her. She looked round the place carefully, and in the end shook her head.

"Not got here, yet," she said. "You couldn't mistake him."

"You should have ordered a longer drink," Gees painted out. "It's rather late, though. What's this prize packet like, when he arrives?"

"Oh, weird," she said, and left it at that till the waiter had gone off with his tip. "Face like chalk and eyes like coals. He spoke quite good English, but I don't think he was. Creepy sort of foreigner, I thought."

"I'm interested." Gees leaned his folded arms on the table between them. "Now tell me all about it, Betty. I've been batted in the face by so many coincidences lately that I think this may be another."

"Well it was—let me see—yes, last Friday. I'd left the flat about seven, and came down here and ran straight into him, just about where I met you before we came in here just now. He looked at me, and I spoke. Without thinking, before I'd looked at him properly and got a sight of his eyes, really. And then I saw he was taking me all in from top to toe, as if he was measuring me up to see if I'd fit into a space or something.

"It was weird, I tell you. He wanted to stand there and talk, but I wouldn't. So he walked along with me as far as the Circus, and I tell you I was glad to get his eyes off me. Weird, they were. Black as coals.

"I made up my mind to quit him at the Circus and turn back. He told me he'd give me twenty pound, cash down, if I'd promise to go to Bristol some time toward the end of this week—go by the train he'd tell me, from Paddington. He said he'd meet me there, and give me the twenty pound to start with so I'd know it was all right. But it smelt fishy to me.

"I couldn't see what sort of decoy duck he was making out of me, and thought I might get landed in something nasty if I agreed. So I turned it down, but he slipped a ten-shilling note into my hand and said if I did happen to change my mind I'd only to look down here any night up to tomorrow, and the trip would be on."

Gees reflected, as she took a tiny sip of the advocaat and put the glass down. "Betty," he said, "do something for me, will you?"

"Anything you say, darling." Her eyes were fervent.

Gees smiled. "All I want is for you to stand up for about half a minute, away from the table so I can see down to your feet. You can pretend to look round for somebody."

"Right-ho, darling." She rose to her feet and stood clear of the table, and Gees made a swift survey of her, noting every detail of her figure and

dress. He said: "That'll do, thank you," and she sat down again and took another sip at the advocaat.

"Got a nice figure, haven't I?" she said, with obvious self-satisfaction. "Sometimes I wish my legs weren't quite so long, but it's better that way than the other, isn't it?"

"A long way better," Gees agreed, rather abstractedly.

Seeing her casually, he knew, one would take her for something better than her speech proclaimed her. She was built on fine lines, and had quite an attractive face and clear complexion. Pale gold hair, too, and as nearly as he could estimate she was Helen's height. There was not half an inch of difference between them, at most. High-waisted, like Helen, and obviously long-legged. Put the two of them side by side, and there would be no mistaking one for the other, but, issue a description of Helen, and Betty would fit it, past question. But why Bristol?

"Did he tell you any more than what you've told me?" Gees asked.

"No. Only he said we might go a little sea trip, perhaps."

"Did he, though? Whereabouts, from Bristol?"

"Up the coast. He said it was lovely round the—the Orkneys, it was. But that wasn't definite. He said we might, that was all."

"Do you know where I live, Betty?"

She shook her head. "You're around a lot, and that's all I know," she answered.

He took a card from his pocket, and then a ten-shilling note. "If this black-eyed boy of yours turns up either tonight or tomorrow night, I want you to hustle round to that address the minute he leaves you, and let me know what train you're taking for Bristol and anything else there is to know. Okay?"

"I promise, darling. You save my life with that note."

"Come around with definite news of him, and you'll find five more waiting for you. Third floor, and ring when you get there."

"Oh, Gees!" She gazed at the card. "Confidential, too! Darling, make it two notes now, and four then, in case he doesn't turn up till tomorrow night. Last week's rent is heavy on my conscience."

He watched a second ten-shilling note disappear inside her handbag. "I'll leave you to it," he said, "And count on seeing you."

"Good-night, angel. Be good till we meet again."

Half past ten, his watch told him when he reached the pavement outside. For a quarter of an hour he paced slowly back and forth, idly

scrutinizing shop windows, keeping the entrance to the beer parlor in sight all the time.

Then, deciding that Betty would keep a vain vigil that evening, he turned toward the Haymarket and Little Oakfield Street, and home.

Some force, he reflected as he undressed and got into bed, was acting for him in this series of escapes that had been his since he set out to return to London from ›The Rowans.‹ The pit into which he had so nearly driven, the swarm of flies that had blinded both him and the truck driver, and the falling chandelier had all failed as death-traps, and he knew that, reasonably speaking, one of the five incidents ought to have resulted in his being killed.

One or two escapes of the kind would be within reason, but five in succession—no!

If the law of averages had not been suspended, he told himself with absolute certainty, he would have been dead.

Then, of all the thousands of people who passed back and forth between Piccadilly Circus and the Hippodrome, he had met Betty. He refused to regard the meeting as a coincidence. Something had impelled her to accost him, and then to tell her story, just as something had impelled him to rise from his chair at the club and go to look out of the window, just in time to escape the falling chandelier. Why she was to go to Bristol he could not yet see.

MacMorn was in London. Lying awake and puzzling over the problem, linking up MacMorn's presence with his own series of escapes, Gees questioned whether he was intended to follow Betty to Bristol, under the impression that she was Helen Aylener. It was a farfetched idea, not less fantastic than all the rest of this sequence of events, but ...

MacMorn, of course, was ignorant of the fact that Gees had declined to take any action for Margaret Aylener. It was just possible that he intended to present Betty in some guise that would induce Gees to believe her Helen, and—but why Bristol?

Was some other trap laid, either on the way to Bristol or in the city itself, into which Gees was to walk? MacMorn's anxiety to get rid of him was evident enough. Evident, too, was the existence of something working against MacMorn.

The shadows of Brachmornalachan, Margaret Aylener had said, were of her own people, forced to submit to MacMorn's control, different entirely from willing servants.

Supposing some of them—one of them, even—had so far escaped from control as to be able to impel Betty at the right moment, to impel Gees

himself to go and look out through the club window at the right moment?

The theory was fantastic, but was there anything in connection with this business that was not, from a sane, practical standpoint?

Dawn was paling the sky when Gees fell asleep.

He was pulled back to consciousness by a series of coughs, raucous, vulgar explosions not far from his ear, and he opened his eyes to see the lady who came in every morning to cook him a breakfast and clean the flat. On paper, Mrs. Hogg, she insisted on being called Mrs. Hoe. It was no part of her program to enter his bedroom before he vacated it, and he scowled at her.

"Beg pardon, sir, there's a gentleman wants to see yer."

"My secretary will be here at ten," Gees said, observing the clock by his bedside, which pointed to half past eight. "Tell him to come back then. This is the middle of the night."

"Beg pardon, sir, I told him I dassen't disturb you, but he said it was most important, an' I must. I was to tell you 'is name is Kyrle. 'E spelt it, an' I was to tell you. K-y-r-l-e. Kyrle."

Gees sat up. "Tell him to come in here," he said.

Chapter 14

Journey to the Mists

As he stood in the bedroom, looking up at Gees, who had got out of bed and stood beside it in his pajamas, Kyrle appeared shrunk, a different man altogether from the one who had bidden goodbye at ›The Rowans.‹

“You said I might get in touch with you,” he said without greeting of any sort. There was a flat, hopeless note in his voice. “Helen’s gone. Last night, and this morning. Gone.”

“Begin at the beginning,” Gees said. “Sit down and tell me.”

“I can’t sit down,” Kyrle said. “I’d only—it’s no use. Her aunt was right—I feel sure of it, now. And what’s happening to her—”

“You’ll do no good, like that,” Gees cut in sharply. “I’m going to have my bath and breakfast. Gone from where? Brachmornalachan?”

“No, here,” Kyrle answered. “She and Miss Aylener went to Edinburgh two days after I drove her to ›The Rowans‹—the day after you left. Then they came to London to do some final shopping before the wedding—Helen told me that was what they were after, before they left Edinburgh. I had to come here for the firm, yesterday. Helen and her aunt are staying at Grey’s Hotel—you know it, I expect?”

Gees nodded, and seated himself on the edge of his bed. Grey’s, one of the quietest, best, and most expensive hotels in London, was only three or four doors away from his own club—and he had seen MacMorn pass the club once, while Tony Briggs had seen him twice.

“What day did they arrive in London?” he asked.

“Last Friday. Does it matter? She’s gone, I tell you.”

Tony Briggs had first seen MacMorn on that day, Gees remembered, outside the club. He asked: “You saw Helen yesterday?”

"Dined with them," Kyrle answered. "I didn't stay long, because Helen said she had a bad headache and wanted to get to bed early. I'm staying at the Mornington.

"About an hour ago the telephone in my room went, and when I took off the receiver it was Miss Aylener. She'd gone into Helen's room and the bed hadn't been slept in. So according to that, Helen went out last night. I went round there to see Miss Aylener without even stopping for a bath or a shave.

"And then the man on the door this morning—I went down to ask him—he said he'd seen Helen get into a taxi outside the hotel not more than ten minutes before I got there. He hadn't seen her go out, and she hadn't got anything more than a handbag with her. He'd run to the pavement edge to open the taxi door for her, and heard her tell the driver to take her to Paddington.

"So you see—well, that's why I said last night and this morning. By the time I found that out, she'd been gone over half an hour, and I thought of you and came here instead of chasing her. I don't know London, you see, and—well, I thought—here I am."

"Have you had any breakfast yet?" Gees demanded.

"She didn't sleep in her room last night," Kyrle said, as if he had not heard the question, "And yet she was outside the hotel this morning to take that taxi to Paddington. Where was she—"

"Helen did not take that taxi," Gees interrupted him. "She came out from Grey's some time last night. Providence, or Fate, or something working against MacMorn, or plain silly coincidence if you like, put me in touch last night with the girl who told that driver to take her to Paddington, and it wasn't Helen Aylener. Whatever it was, it sent you here to me instead of letting you chase off after that other girl."

"Are you sure you know what you're talking about?" Kyrle asked.

"We start at ten-five, sharp."

"Start?" Kyrle echoed. "But—"

"For Brachmornalachan," Gees explained. "The Paddington part of it kept me awake quite a while last night, but I see it now. And I rather think hypnosis accounts for Betty not coming round to claim those other four notes—which means nothing to you, of course. Never mind."

"But—ten o'clock!" Kyrle protested. "That's an hour wasted!"

"My secretary arrives at ten," Gees explained calmly, "And I shall take just five minutes to bring her up to date on what has happened, and get her to go and see Miss Aylener at Grey's to explain that Helen isn't

quite lost yet. And my car will be outside for us—unless, of course, you prefer to stay behind. I'm going, whatever you do."

"I'll follow your advice," Kyrle said. "This—well, it doesn't exactly fit into structural engineering. I mean, I don't know anything, and you seem to know everything. But that other girl—are you sure?"

Gees got up off the bed. "Put yourself under my orders, and between us we'll save Helen."

He managed to make the prophecy with apparent certainty, but he was far from confident. MacMorn had shown that he had power even here, in the midst of a solid materialism that rendered credence of the shadow magic ridiculous. At Brachmornalachan he would be on his own ground, at the very zenith of his strength.

"All the way by car?" Kyrle asked.

"Unless you're going from city to city, distances in this country are not enough to justify going by air," Gees answered. "Besides, we may need the car at the other end. We'll make it before dark."

E. C. V.

Conducted to a sitting room on the first floor at Grey's Hotel, Miss Brandon admitted to herself that Gees had been right in describing Margaret Aylener as the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. The deep blue, almost violet eyes were wonderful, and the delicate charm of the woman's face was unimpaired by age, even perfected by it.

"From Mr. Green, I understand?" Her voice, too, was perfect.

"He asked me to come straight to you," Miss Brandon said. "To explain. He and Mr. Kyrle have gone to Brachmornalachan, and he told me to tell you, he will stop at nothing. And to ask you what you know."

"He should have come here," Miss Aylener said sharply, with a note in her voice that marred its music. "Helen has not gone to Brachmornalachan. I followed her to Paddington, and described her there—made inquiries. She was recognized—she has gone to Bristol."

"That was done to mislead you," Miss Brandon said. "It is another girl, made up to look like your niece. Mr. Green thinks she will change her make-up on the train, even alter her clothes, and if you wire ahead or do anything to have her stopped when she gets to Bristol, there will be nobody corresponding nearly enough to the description you give for recognition by it. To delay you, keep you from inquiring at Brachmornalachan. But he and Mr. Kyrle, he told me to tell you, will be there almost as soon as she arrives, and perhaps before her."

"How do you—how does he know about this other girl, if what you say is true?" Miss Aylener asked. "How does he know anything at all?"

"He has been in very great danger, more than once," Miss Brandon answered, "And attributes it to—to having visited you and heard what you had to tell him—and ask of him. He is telephoning me between one and two, and I am to tell him everything you can tell me."

"You are—you work with him, then?"

"I am his secretary. He dictated a record of his visit to you and everything connected with it, and we talked it over as well."

"And now—yes, I understand. Except—he told me he would do nothing. And now you tell me he has gone with Ian?"

"Because there is real danger, now," Miss Brandon explained. "It was only a vague threat, before—until your niece went like this."

She waited. Miss Aylener asked: "What do you want me to tell you?"

"About last night. What, exactly, happened then?"

"Last night. Yes. We had been shopping—my niece and I had been shopping all the afternoon, and when we came back here I went to my room to rest. If this suite is available when we come to London, I always book it. This room, with my niece's bedroom on one side, and mine on the other—and a bathroom, of course.

"I went to my room, as I say, till nearly seven o'clock. When I came in here, my niece told me Mr. Kyrle was in London and had rung up. She had asked him to come to dinner with us, and he did. We all came up here after dinner, and at about ten o'clock my niece said she had one of her bad headaches and wanted to go to bed. Ian—Mr. Kyrle—bade us good-night and left—"

"Just one moment, Miss Aylener. One of her bad headaches, you say. She is subject to them at times, you mean?"

"For the last year, since we came back from our Mediterranean trip. I made her see a specialist, in case she had caught some germ on that cruise, but he could find no cause for them."

"Was it on that cruise you and she went to Eleusis?"

"Yes, but I don't see why you should attach importance to that. We made the excursion with a party, as ordinary tourists."

"Yes, of course." Miss Brandon decided to say nothing about Helen's meeting with MacMorn on that excursion. "Mr. Green included your visit there in his dictation to me," she added. "He is always very thorough over the details of his cases in dictating reports on them."

"Until now, I thought he had declined to regard this as one of his cases," Miss Aylener said. "I wish he had not—" She broke off, then.

"You say your niece went to bed at ten o'clock," Miss Brandon prompted.

"A little after ten—it may have been half-past, even. She bade me good-night and went to her room, through that doorway." She pointed at a closed door which she faced as she sat. "My room is through the door opposite, so with this room between us I do not hear what she does in hers, after I have gone to bed. Or before, if she goes first—these walls are practically soundproof.

"I stayed in here reading the evening paper till about eleven o'clock, and then went to my room. I did not go in to her, knowing as I do that she does not like to be disturbed when she has these headaches. But quite early this morning I went in and found the bed had not been slept in, and at once I rang Mr. Kyrle."

"Not under the impression that she was with him, surely?" Miss Brandon asked, and instantly regretted the question.

"Because Mr. Kyrle was the only person we know in London," Miss Aylener said, rather stiffly, "And because my niece might have let fall something in his hearing which would help me to decide where she had gone. But she had not.

"He came round here at once, and learned about her taking a taxi outside the hotel this morning—though you say now it was not my niece who took the taxi. The man on the door said it was, and described how she was dressed when Mr. Kyrle asked him."

"Could you give me that description?" Miss Brandon asked.

"The more easily since I recognized the clothes as hers. A grey flannel costume with white pin-stripe, grey stockings and grey suede shoes, small grey velour hat, a silver-fox fur, and a salmon-pink neckerchief. All of which she was wearing when we went shopping in the afternoon. I knew her at once by the description."

"And have you looked over her clothes since?" Miss Brandon persisted. "Are they the things that are missing from her room?"

"They must be! Why, who could—"

Miss Aylener rose and went toward the door she had indicated, and Miss Brandon followed her. They entered a fairly large, well-furnished bedroom, and Miss Aylener went to the wardrobe on the other side of the bed and opened it. She took out a long, silver-fox stole, and stared at the girl beside her.

"The costume—yes." Miss Brandon eyed the few clothes hanging in the wardrobe. "But there are the grey shoes"—she pointed at a row of shoes beside the dressing table. "Unless she had two pairs."

"She had not," Miss Aylener said. "The shoes—and the fur—"

"He saw her out yesterday afternoon," Miss Brandon guessed. "If the girl who went to Bristol changes the grey stockings for flesh-coloured ones before she gets there, and takes off the neckerchief, and possibly throws the fox fur out of the window or hides it under a cushion in the train, who would identify her as the girl you described to a ticket-collector at Paddington? A pair of stockings would go in her handbag, and the rest is merely a matter of discarding things."

"You mean—?" The older woman looked at her, and in the look was respect for this swift, intuitive interpretation of evidence.

"Only that you—Mr. Kyrle—anyone interested was meant to inquire about somebody who went to Bristol. Quite possibly interest the Bristol police in a mysterious disappearance, for the girl who went there knows nothing about your niece, and couldn't attempt to impersonate her, even if she wished.

"One sentence, by what Mr. Green told me, would betray her as not your niece. Not that she would try, unless we are greatly mistaken. The impersonation was intended to last only until she had got on the train at Paddington. After that, the absolute disappearance of your niece, together with the utter mystery of her having gone to Bristol at all, was to drive you distracted and make you go on searching there."

"Yes. Yes." She laid her hand on Miss Brandon's arm. "My dear, how logical you are! I'm so very grateful to you for your kindness to an old woman. And you think—Mr. Green—?"

"The wisest man I know, and the best. You—you shouldn't have offered to pay him to commit murder. He isn't like that. But I'm forgetting. About your niece's actual leaving here. You say you heard nothing, know nothing about it? The time she left, I mean. Didn't anyone see her go out last night? She must have gone then."

"I haven't asked," Miss Aylener answered. "You see—the taxi, and her being seen then, as I thought till we saw this fox fur. But there was a dinner party here last night, and I heard cars and people leaving until after midnight. A send-off for some expedition, and about a hundred guests dining in a special room. Men and women, all sorts of people, and some of them in ordinary day clothes. So she might have slipped out when they were leaving, and not been noticed."

"You think she went entirely alone and of her own accord?"

"My dear, he had only to call, from anywhere. She would have to respond—she would have to go when he called. If you understand."

"Not altogether. I don't know as much as Mr. Green knows. You mean, if he exercised some sort of influence, she would get up and walk out to him, without letting you know anything about it?"

"If he called from the other side of the world, she would go to him or die on the way. It was my fault. I should have gone quite away from Brachmornalachan with her, never let her see him."

"But—Miss Aylener—Mr. Green said in that report of his that it began at Eleusis. She first got really to know MacMorn there."

"Then I can forgive myself." She spoke after a long interval, and led the way back to the sitting room. "We have fought him so long, so very long! So many ages. I saw the dark men land. They should have killed them all, then!"

She went to the chair she had left to go into the bedroom, and sat down in it. The pupils of her eyes had shrunk to pin points, and left a blue deeper than that of the sea which rolls round Ithaca.

Miss Brandon stood, facing her, and did not speak.

"They took our people, thirteen to each stone," Miss Aylener said, and her voice that had been so perfectly musical was flat and dull. "In the blood of our people they drew the Unseen to dwell in the circle, and with him the Daughter, the Maiden possessed of all, yet whom none may possess. They made shadows, outside the lines of the rowans they made shadows. For each one of our people, a shadow to obey them—"

Her eyes closed, and she relaxed, shrank to the lines of the chair as if all the muscles of her body had lost their governing power. Miss Brandon went to her and took her hand, lifted it, and found it ice-cold. She slid her fingers until she found the pulse: it was normal, unhurried, but strong as that of her own heart's driving.

Margaret Aylener opened her eyes, and warmth came back to her fingers as they closed around those of the girl.

"Go now," she said. "Soon, he'll call you. Go, and answer."

Miss Brandon released her hand from the grasp of the older woman's fingers, and went out from the hotel, hurrying back to Little Oakfield Street.

These were things she could not understand: she knew only that she had to play her part in them.

"Don't argue. Go and get a large pork pie." With the admonition, Gees himself got out on the offside of his Rolls-Bentley, and spoke over his shoulder. "Get two bottles of beer too." Then he crossed the street to the post office and entered, while Kyrle went on his errands, meekly.

Within three minutes, Gees heard Miss Brandon's voice.

"We're near the halfway mark," he told her. "What did you dig out of Miss Aylener, please?"

She told him of the finding of the fox fur and suede shoes, not forgetting also to recount Miss Aylener's strange words toward the end of the interview. Gees asked her to repeat them.

"'The Maiden possessed of all, yet whom none may possess,'" he repeated back to her. "That's a new one on me, Miss Brandon, and I don't recognize it as belonging to any of the mythologies. But about Miss Aylener—did she say whether she meant to stay in London?"

"I was just going to tell you," she answered. "She telephoned me less than ten minutes ago, to say she was leaving today to return to Brachmornalachan, and asked me to tell you when you rang me."

"Well, Miss Brandon, I want you to keep an eye out for that girl Betty, and give her four ten-shilling notes if she turns up and tells you a story of any sort. Be as nice as you can to her, tell her you're acting for me and know all about it, and get out of her just how and why she went to Bristol—if she did. That's all for now. If I'm not back by the end of the week, I'll write to you."

Returning to the car, he found that Kyrle was already in it. Gees took a clasp knife from his pocket before he started the engine.

"Take that, and slice the pie," he bade. "I can eat pie and drive, but first—" he opened one of the bottles Kyrle had put down on the floor, and took a drink from it. "Now for pie and the open road, and when I told you we'd get there before dark I had in mind that it isn't dark till nearly eleven, when you get as far north as that." He engaged gear, and the car moved on.

About an hour later, the second beer bottle went hurtling out from the car and hit the soil of Cumberland. By that time, Kyrle had ceased to press his feet against the floorboards and hold his breath at intervals. They had shaved disaster so many times that he began to feel the crash would be a relief, when it happened.

When they rocked through Gretna, Gees peered at the trip figures on the speedometer and nodded his satisfaction. "Average forty-five, including getting out of London," he remarked. "I doubt whether it's ever been done in the daytime."

"The next time it's done, I'll stay home," Kyrle said. "I take a risk occasionally with my bus, but you—"

"Curse me when we hit something," Gees advised.

"That's a fool challenge to Providence," Kyrle protested, "And a direct hit at this speed won't leave me any time to curse. Oh, carry on! I'm more anxious than you are to get there, but I want to arrive in one piece. And if you average forty the rest of the way, we shall arrive before it gets altogether dark. Ahead of them, I still think."

"Fog," Gees said. "After we leave the main road."

"Weather like this?" Kyrle derided. "Impossible!"

"Quite—if we get there ahead of them," Gees assented. "Otherwise, not in the least impossible. Probable, in fact."

The sun was setting when he hurtled the car past the inn at which he had had a late lunch on the way to his first meeting with Margaret Aylener, and, when he slowed to turn off the main road, the afterglow had begun to fade out from the western sky. The car rocked along the uneven track, and, as they ran out from between the low walls to open, Kyrle pointed ahead at a saloon car approaching them.

Gees swung aside to let it pass, and they saw that it was empty except for the driver.

"He's beaten us to it," Gees said. "Probably he made Glasgow or Edinburgh by air, and either chartered that car to take him on, or else got to the nearest station and took it from there."

"Then you were right," Kyrle admitted. "All the way I've been afraid it was Helen who went to Bristol. I wouldn't tell you before."

"If I hadn't been sure," Gees said, "I wouldn't have risked my neck and yours in the attempt at beating him to it."

They reached the point where three ways branched, and, a little later, topped the last rise between them and Brachmornalachan.

Kyrle's breath hissed through his teeth as, gazing ahead, he saw a whitish cloud hiding the loch and all the tiny village, thinning to reveal only the ragged copses of evergreens toward the summits of the hills.

"Right about the fog, too," he half groaned. "What'll we do?"

"If you feel in the pocket of that door beside you," Gees said, "you find an automatic pistol small enough to go in your pocket. It's loaded. Do you know how to use it?"

"I do—but you don't think it will come to shooting, surely?"

"I have a great respect for the man we are going to see," Gees answered.

"That is, for the man I hope we are going to see. I think we need every

form of persuasion there is, when we met him. Therefore you'd better pocket the gun. I've got one like it for myself."

Kyrle found the pistol and put it in the right-hand outer pocket of his lounge coat, after which he buttoned the weatherproof he was wearing, for already the car had dipped down to the first thin layers of fog, and there was a chill in the air.

The long twilight of the north was as yet but little advanced, but under the thin, upper strata of mist through which they moved, the greater density which altogether hid Brachmornalachan was a darkness as of utter night.

They dipped another half-mile down the long slope toward the tiny village, sank into a tangibility of blinding wetness, and Gees stopped.

"His devils are out," he said. "You get down and walk by the front end of the off-side wing, to keep us to the road."

Kyrle got out and went round the front of the radiator, and Gees shifted his gear lever into first to move on at a walking pace. Kyrle asked for headlights, bade him dip them, and then asked him to switch them off.

Dipped or level, the lights made a grey wall ahead that reflected the rays back on the car, and without lights the track was more easily discernible in the Hades-gloom to which they had descended.

Presently Kyrle called to Gees to stop, and his voice sounded back faintly through the thickness before he came to stand opposite the driving seat.

"It's no use," he said. "I can't be sure. We may be off the road even now. I think you were right—there must be devils out."

Gees switched off the engine and took out the ignition key, pocketing it. "How far would you say we are from the post office?" he asked.

"Half a mile. A mile—anything. Impossible to tell."

Gees went to the front of the car and dropped to his knees to peer at the ground, went down on his hands and crawled a little way. "It's all right," he said as he stood up again. "We're still on the track. We'll leave the car and go ahead on foot. To ›The Rowans,‹ first."

"If—if she arrived with him, would he have let her go there?" Kyrle asked.

"No. But Callum may be useful. I was a fool, Kyrle. We ought to have stopped that car we passed, and asked the man in it what passengers he brought here, as well as making sure of the number."

"You did that, then?"

“It’s registered in my mind, an easy one to remember. Now let’s go. I’ll take the rut on the right, and you keep in the one on the left and tell me if you feel you’re missing it.”

Slowly they went on through the wet, blanketing fog, only just visible to each other as they kept to the wheel tracks, with no more than the width of a vehicle between them.

Chapter 15

Creatures of the Darkness

Presently the stone bulk of the post office loomed up on Gees' right, and, passing the vague, unlighted frontage, he sighed relief that they had kept to the right track, not followed other ruts and got themselves lost in this clinging darkness. A little way farther on, Kyrle said: "It's thinning, Gees. I can see the way, now."

"How's the moon, do you know?" Gees asked with odd abruptness.

"Quite well, thank you," Kyrle answered. "I have an idea it's new either tonight or tomorrow, so it won't be much use to us. Why, did you think it might rise and help us, later on?"

"The dark of the moon," Gees reflected, ignoring the question. "But is it new tonight or tomorrow? You don't know, I suppose?"

"I don't. Nor do I see what difference it makes."

"There is very little darkness here at this time of year—complete darkness, I mean," Gees remarked, abandoning the subject of the moon.

"And there—yes, that's the wall of ›The Rowans.‹ Kyrle, isn't that someone by the gate? A woman, too, by the look of it—"

He broke off as Kyrle began running toward the gate, and followed without hurrying his pace.

Twelve hours at the wheel of the Rolls-Bentley, and at such a pace as he had maintained throughout the day, had left him with little surplus energy. He saw the figure by the gate move away, for the fog had thinned to reveal even the outline of the house at this distance, and saw, too, that she moved little less quickly than Kyrle.

They had almost vanished in the haze when their voices came back to him, Kyrle's first, sharply questioning:

"What were you doing there?"

Equally sharp, the rejoinder: "Dinna fret yersel'! 'Tis my ain business." And Gees knew the voice, but could not place it.

Baffled, apparently, Kyrle stood still while her figure grew faint and vanished in the mist. Then he returned to where Gees waited by the gate, and shook his head as if far from satisfied.

"I thought it might have been Helen," he explained, "but it was that woman from the post office. Gralloch, her name is. What the devil would she be doing here at this time of night?"

"Search me," Gees answered, and opened the gate to hold it while Kyrle passed through. He followed, and they went toward the house.

"Yes, but—" Kyrle began but left the words unspoken as Gees pulled at the bell-handle beside the door.

"Going directly away from the post office, at this time of night." Gees looked at his wrist watch as he spoke. The luminous hands pointed to ten minutes past eleven. Then, since his first summons had brought no response, nor produced any apparent movement in the house, he rang again, and before the sound of the bell inside had ceased, the heavy door swung open and revealed Elizabeth, her bare ankles showing from under the edge of her nightdress, which was all but covered by a heavy coat, and her long hair twisted in an untidy bun at the back of her head. "Ye're ower late," she said drily, with no apparent surprise. She swung the door wide, and by the light of her candle found and pulled down the switch for the lights of the entrance hall. "Wull ye have eggs and bacon?"

The practical directness of the question made Gees smile. Elizabeth evidently went to the heart of things, and knew men's needs.

"Nothing on earth would please me more," he said.

"'Tis quickest," she remarked, and opened the dining room door. But Gees did not move, and Kyrle waited on him.

"Elizabeth," he asked, "can you tell me whether new moon is tonight or tomorrow night?"

"By the almanac," she said with no hesitation, "new mune's six-therrty tomorrow night."

"Then there's plenty of time for eggs and bacon," he remarked, and made for the dining room. "And for a rest as well."

Kyrle, following him into the room, asked irritably—"What are you gibbering about? All this about the new moon—what is it?"

"The difference"—Gees pulled the carving chair back from the table at which he had dined with Margaret Aylener, and slumped into it—

"between tackling our problem after twelve hours of Hell's own driving, and tackling it fresh. I want grub and a rest, I do."

"What do we do next, then?" Kyrle demanded.

"Personally, I hope she cooks me no less than four eggs," Gees said. "That pork pie wasn't bad, but it was no more than a mere snack. And it was a long while ago, too. If you cast an eye leftward, that decanter we punished some years ago isn't empty, and I spot soda in the syphon. As a prospective relative, what about doing the honours?"

Kyrle got up, wearily, and poured two stiff drinks. As he put one tumbler down beside Gees he said: "This is a mere waste of time."

"And of me, and of a perfectly good Rolls-Bentley," Gees retorted. "If you're in such a blasted hurry, go and get busy. New moon is not till six-thirty tomorrow night, and I want all the energy I can raise to face what it means. Therefore"—he lifted his glass—"here's how."

"I'm in your hands," Kyrle said, and drank deeply before he put his tumbler down. "I don't know what it all means."

"And I'm only guessing," Gees told him, "but I think I've guessed right." Elizabeth looked in on them. She hadn't bothered to dress. "Wull ye have tea, or coffee?" she asked from the doorway.

"Coffee, please, the way you know how to make it," Gees answered, without waiting for Kyrle to speak. When she had disappeared, he said: "It must have been that French invasion in the time of Mary Stuart that taught these people how to make coffee—if they had coffee then."

"To the best of my knowledge, they hadn't," Kyrle snapped.

"I'll look it up when I get back," Gees promised. "Probably they hadn't. If Mary and John Knox had drunk coffee together—the sort of coffee Elizabeth makes—history might have been different—"

"Do you realize why we took that drive?" Kyrle interrupted, angrily.

"Why I drove like that, you mean," Gees reminded him. "To beat Mac-Morn to it—yes. But we didn't beat him. Hence the fog—if you look out, you'll find there isn't any fog, now. I realize that since he beat us to it, there's nothing to be done until—The new moon is nineteen hours away, and we've got to be on hand for it, fresh and fit. That's why I'm all for eggs and bacon, and a sleep."

Kyrle got up, went to the window, and drew a curtain back. He pulled it over the window again, and said: "You're right. No fog at all."

"It was his fog," Gees said. "It didn't stop us, so why keep it on?" He lifted his tumbler, and put it down empty.

"And Helen?"

"I don't even know that Helen is anywhere near here," Gees said.

"You mean—" Kyrle stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I was a fool. I took the number of that car, mentally, and I've still got it in my mind. But I didn't stop the driver and ask him whether he brought one passenger or two to Brachmornalachan."

"But—good Lord, man!" Kyrle began, and stopped.

"Not that it matters much," Gees said. "Fill me another, till she gets here with those eggs," he asked, and held out his glass. "I tell you, Kyrle, we're all in, or next to it, after that drive, and we'll render thanks to all the gods there are that new moon is tomorrow night instead of tonight."

Kyrle was at the sideboard with Gees' glass and his own. Elizabeth appeared with a tray.

"I suppose you haven't seen anything of Miss Helen Aylener today, Elizabeth?" Gees asked.

"Miss Margaret sent a telegram," she answered. "It's the morrow they come back. Callum's to go to rail with the car."

"They?" Kyrle put down the decanter and faced about.

"She'd no leave Miss Helen ahint," Elizabeth told him, ironically.

"Did the woman Gralloch from the post office bring the telegram?" Gees persisted, as she seemed about to retire.

"Nay, she sent a laddie," she answered, bristling. "She'd no show her face at this door while I'm here and Miss Margaret awa'."

"And this fog—have you had it here all day?" he asked.

"Fog?" she echoed, with a hint of incredulity. "Nay, I've seen no fog. 'Twas a clear night when I went to bed."

"Ah! Only a night mist, I expect. Thank you, Elizabeth."

She got as far as the door of the room, and then flung over her shoulder:

"That de'il beyond the loch needed it, maybe."

"Just a minute, Elizabeth," Gees asked, and she faced about and waited.

"Why should he need a fog, and what makes you think he could raise one if he did?"

"I maun mak' beds for ye an' Mr. Kyrle," she answered uneasily.

"Miss Helen has disappeared," he said bluntly. "I think—I believe Mac-Morn has got her, brought her here tonight."

"Ye think? Ye believe?"

"We've driven here from London today because of it," Kyrle put in.

"Aye? Trouble for naught. I was fey to his hold on her, long syne. Ye'll no brak' the hold. No man nor wumman can fecht MacMorn and win."

"A cheerful outlook," Gees said. "But you may be wrong, Elizabeth. What's your feud with Bathsheba Gralloch, by the way?"

"Nay, there's no feud," she answered somberly, "but I'm fey to her compact, and she knows it, and keeps awa' from the paths I walk."

"That's talking in riddles," Gees reproved her, and eyed the bacon fat coagulating in the dish. "What compact, and with whom?"

"Wi' the Unseen, to the which she sold her ain blood kin," she answered, broadening her dialect. "I'll say nae mair. I kenned weel, when ye turned yer back on Miss Margaret, ye had sicht o' a' that yon de'il i' his hoose o' sin is maister to, an' that y'd kenned the shadows i' the mirk. I maun mak' beds—I'll say nae mair."

"Will you tell me why Bathsheba Gralloch sold her own blood kin, as you put it?" he asked.

"Nay," she answered, stubbornly, "for ye'll find it a' i' the hoose o' sin. I'm fey tae ye, and the path ye baith must tread leads there."

She went out, then, and closed the door noisily.

Gees helped himself to the rest of the eggs. "I guess the oracle at Eleusis was about as enlightening," he observed. "Don't mind me, Kyrle—I've gone primitive, and I'm eating all there is, manners or no manners. And according to the oracle, we're booked for an early visit to MacMorn—there can't be more than one 'hoose o' sin' in a place this size. But I wish she'd been more explicit."

"To let you in on a bit of family history," Kyrle said, "Elizabeth has always had a grudge against Helen. She was devoted to Helen's mother, and Helen's mother died in childbirth. So in her stubborn way Elizabeth blames Helen for her mother's death. That's the trouble."

Without replying, Gees ate steadily.

"I shall be most interested to find out what price Bathsheba Gralloch got for her sister," he said. "According to Elizabeth, we shall be able to inspect the invoice in the 'hoose o' sin,' when we get there."

"Aren't you rather making light comedy out of it?" Kyrle demanded, sharp anger in his voice. "If what you believe about Helen is true, the situation we've got to face hardly calls for funny remarks, surely?"

"The situation," Gees answered soberly, "is as vague as all the rest of this business, and if my remarks sound funny, then your ear's out. And, now, having eaten, I think a sleep's indicated."

"Do you mean to say we've damned near broken our necks to get here, only to go to sleep?" Kyrle barked out.

"If I weren't so sleepy"—Gees broke off to give a stupendous yawn a fair chance—"I'd damned near break your neck in the hope of lamming

some sense into you. I underrated MacMorn—he got here first, in spite of my magnificent driving. You can go and call on him in the middle of the night if you like. I won't. I'm for a sleep."

"I'm sorry," Kyrle said frankly. "I just don't understand—any of it. I feel as if I were blanketed away from reality."

"You are," Gees told him. "There's no reality in it, from start to finish. It's all mad. And it's only the heroes of romance who go twenty-four hours and then turn up fresh. I can't—I'm human. Me for the hay, and maybe I'll break records and MacMorn too, tomorrow."

"Today, you mean," Kyrle amended. "It's past midnight. She hasn't told us which rooms. I suppose I take the one I usually have, and you see whether she's got the one you had last time ready for you."

He pushed his chair back from the table and got up, just as Elizabeth entered again. Gees too stood up and faced her.

"Wull I call ye?" she asked.

"I shall waken," Gees answered. "I always do, if I set myself a time. Do I go to the room I had before?"

"Aye," she assented, "And Mr. Kyrle knows his. Ye'll need breakfast afore ye go?" This last as if she knew their errand.

"We've given you trouble enough tonight," Gees said.

She smiled, wintrily. "Aye, but 'twill be Callum'll sairve it." She looked at Kyrle, and her lips worked oddly. Then: "Dinna go," she broke out, with harsh forbidding. "Yon warlock's ower strong. Dinna go. The day's nigh when his de'ils'll drag him down."

"Maybe"—Gees hid the yawn—"I'm one of those devils. And the longer we stay talking, the less sleep we get. I wish there were time to hear all you know, Elizabeth, but there isn't. If you'll show me your room, Kyrle, I'll give you a call when it's time to go."

"And what time will Callum make breakfast?" Elizabeth asked.

"About six, please," Gees answered. "That gives us twelve hours."

They went up to their rooms, while Elizabeth set about clearing the table as if meals in the middle of the night were commonplace at ›The Rowans.<

Callum's sedately respectful "Good morning, sir," when Gees appeared in the dining room just before six o'clock was that of the perfectly trained serving man whom nothing could surprise. He drew out a chair but, waiting for Kyrle, Gees did not immediately take it.

"Mr. Kyrle will be down in a few minutes," he explained. "I suppose you know where we're going, Callum, and why?"

"Elizabeth told me of your arrival last night, sir," Callum answered indirectly, "And the time at which you would want breakfast."

"More than that, I want you to come with us," Gees said.

"I am sorry, sir, but I have to take the car to meet Miss Aylener."

"But you know what has happened to Miss Helen?" Gees asked, in surprise at the flat denial.

Callum looked straight at him. "Do you, sir?" he asked.

Gees had to own privately that he did not. If only he had stopped the car that had passed them the night before, and questioned the driver as to his passengers! He said: "We both know, man!"

"Excuse me, sir." Callum spoke as the servant respectfully putting a guest of the house in his place. "I don't know anything about her. Miss Aylener has wired me to meet a train today, and her orders come first. If anything out of the way had happened to Miss Helen, she would know, surely. I concluded I was to meet them both."

The explanation set Gees thinking. "What time did you get the telegram?" he asked.

"Between six and seven o'clock last night, sir."

"Remember that talk we had at Miss Aylener's request?" Gees demanded.

"It was some days ago, sir," Callum answered, and the manner of the reply indicated that nothing Gees could say would make him change his attitude. "The conditions are quite different, now."

At that moment Kyrle entered, and Gees said no more.

He realized that Margaret Aylener, at the time she sent the telegram, had known not only of Helen's disappearance, but of his and Kyrle's setting out in the hope of finding the girl and taking her back from MacMorn's hold. He knew it was useless, trying to persuade Callum to ignore the telegram. That "conditions are quite different, now" had a sinister ring about it.

Elizabeth had openly warned Kyrle to leave MacMorn alone: Callum too appeared to think the quest was hopeless, or else felt that his duty consisted in obeying Margaret Aylener's orders, whatever might happen to her niece.

But that reference to different conditions chilled Gees.

"I don't like this time of day," Kyrle observed. "Everything looks bleak at this hour of the morning. I didn't sleep much, either."

"I will leave you gentlemen to help yourselves," Callum remarked, and went out, closing the door on himself.

Gees carved himself a Gargantuan slice of ham. Kyrle looked at the piled plate, and shuddered visibly.

"I couldn't eat a breakfast like that," he said.

"Then you can watch me," Gees retorted and began to eat. "I don't know when I shall eat again, so I'm laying in a stock."

"What do you propose to do?" Kyrle asked, sitting with an empty plate before him, and making no move toward filling it.

Without abating any of his interest in ham and scrambled eggs, Gees eyed his companion, and saw dulled, uninterested eyes, and an air of slack inertness. This was a different man from the one who had come to Little Oakfield Street to report Helen's disappearance.

"I propose," Gees answered between mouthfuls, "to spoil MacMorn's game and quite probably spoil him too, before new moon tonight. I propose also to get your Helen out of his house and back here."

"Yes." He sounded as if the statement had little interest for him, and with sudden dismay Gees remembered the incident of the crimson drink that Kyrle, together with Helen, had taken from MacMorn. For this was not the normal Kyrle: it was no more than the shell of him.

"Are you going to help?" Gees barked out the question, harshly.

"Yes. Yes, of course I'm going to help."

A gleam of enthusiasm lighted Kyrle's eyes momentarily, and faded out. Gees finished his breakfast in silence, while Kyrle drank coffee thirstily and ate nothing.

"Now look here, Kyrle." Rising from his seat, Gees went to the younger man and put a hand on his shoulder. "Either you pit your soul as well as the rest of you against MacMorn, or else you don't go. I'd sooner tackle it alone than have you as a drag on me. It's your Helen who is in danger of death and worse, so what about it?"

"Yes, man—yes!" A brief enthusiasm again flamed in Kyrle's expression.

"I'll go through Hell to save her. Do we go now?"

"We do. Have you got that gun ready to your hand?"

"All ready, and loaded. Only to pull the safety catch off."

"Right. Keep your wits about you. Let's go."

Chapter 16

Blood-Red Nectar

“**T**he path we both must tread leads there, according to Elizabeth,” Gees remarked to Kyrle standing in the doorway of ›The Rowans.‹ The sun was still low in the east, and its rays slanted across his face. Quartering from behind the house, a wind with the tang of the sea in it bent the rowan branches so that they tossed like plumes on the heads of prancing horses.

Halfway up the slope out from the valley the abandoned Rolls-Bentley looked like a child’s toy with the sun-rays glinting on its chromium. Gees pulled at the bell-handle, and took his ignition key from his pocket as Callum opened the door he had just closed on the pair of them.

“I don’t think it’s going to keep fine very long, and when we had to leave my car last night I didn’t stay to put the hood up,” Gees said. “We’ve no time to spare now, so I wonder if you’d be so good as to take this key and drive the car into the garage at the back?”

“Certainly, sir.” And Callum took the key.

With a word of thanks Gees led off along the drive, and Kyrle went with him, along the path Elizabeth had foretold they must tread toward MacMorn’s squat, grey house beyond the loch.

A vanguard of fleecy little clouds scurried eastward across the sky, and behind them came heavier masses, dark-bodied. The wind that struck on their backs and drove them on raised waves on the loch, and by the time they reached the soggy soil near its brink, heavy, fast-driving clouds had blotted out the sun, so that the water was grey and sullen-looking; Brachmornalachan lay in gloom.

Up on the hillsides the tortured firs bent in the suddenly risen gale, the sound of which was like the trampling feet of a distant army.

When they passed the lone monolith between the loch and MacMorn's house, Gees looked up at the worn lines carved near its top, and the racing clouds gave an illusion that the pillar swayed against the sky, as the moon may seem to travel across the heavens when scud drives before its half-obsured face.

The prison-like frontage of the house before them revealed no sign of life within. At its eastern end the thorn tree, sheltered from the main force of the wind, shivered ever and again as a curving blast struck on it, and the last of its crimson petals fluttered, faded, to add their substance to the red carpet that hid the ground under its branches.

"The hoose o' sin," Gees remarked. "The description fits it, I think."

"What do you propose to do inside?" Kyrle asked.

"Get your future wife out of his hold," Gees answered. "We may have trouble over it, and in fact I think we shall. Trouble of some sort. Where are you carrying that automatic?"

"Right-hand trouser pocket. It sits flat against my leg."

"Handy for a draw—yes. I hope it doesn't come to that."

Abruptly he grasped Kyrle's arm with his left hand, and, as Kyrle turned his head in surprise to ask his reason, laid the forefinger of his right hand against his lips.

Kyrle obeyed and kept silence. Gees, perhaps because he was more sensitive to the presence of such beings as MacMorn could control, or perhaps because he had not drunk of MacMorn's crimson fluid, which Helen had admitted had affected her and which Kyrle too had tasted, had realized that they were no longer alone.

Things, not even tangible enough to be visible as shadows, eddied about them on the wind and became perceptible to his inner consciousness. Eavesdroppers for MacMorn?

He was over strong, Elizabeth had said. Within this circle, Gees knew, he was master as well as maker of shadows, and of strength to which they might even add by discussion of their purpose with him.

Here, with the bulk of the house to oppose its charge, the wind hummed a deep, angered protest. Before Gees and Kyrle gained the shelter of the deep doorway, a flurry of rain struck on them, and Gees looked back to see his car moving slowly toward ›The Rowans‹ with its hood up.

Gees advanced to the door and struck twice with the bronze knocker.

With an upsetting promptness, MacMorn himself opened for them and stood back with a smile of invitation.

"Good morning," he said cordially. "Not a very good one, I fear. Will you come in? I am glad to welcome you to my house."

They entered, Kyrle with perceptible eagerness, and Gees, following him, taking in the character of the house, alive to the influence of immense age which it radiated as soon as he set foot inside.

They stood in a corridor not more than six feet in width, running transversely to the frontage.

MacMorn closed the outer door, and Gees saw that the inner side of the house wall was plain, bare stone, as was the outside. It looked as if this outer wall were a shell enclosing another building, and the wall that he faced on entering was of wood, shining and black with age.

In a swift glance that he took at the door as he waited for MacMorn's guidance, Gees could see no fastening of any sort, nor any projection by which to pull the door open. A latch of some sort may have clicked, but, not expecting any peculiarity about the door, Gees had not heard it, or perhaps the sound had made no impression on his consciousness. The humming of the wind, deadened to some extent by the thickness of the wall, came to his ears in the brief interval before MacMorn spoke again. He felt that he ought to have been more observant about that door. As nearly as he could see, they could not get out of the house again until MacMorn chose to let them.

"An early hour for a call," MacMorn said, "but all hours are alike to me. I half expected that you would call last night."

"We arrived much too late," Gees said.

"And no doubt were tired, after so long and hard a drive," MacMorn observed with friendly solicitude. "But before I show you my house or offer you refreshment. I wish to tell you, Mr. Kyrle, that your future wife is not in my hold, as you appear to think."

The exact words, Gees reflected, that he himself had used just before he bade Kyrle keep silence. "Future wife," and "hold"—the significance of the statement was unmistakable.

Then, as Kyrle stared at him open-mouthed, he spoke again: "And while you are my guest, I must ask you to remove the automatic pistol from your right-hand trousers pocket. Otherwise, with your entirely unfounded suspicion of me, I should not feel quite safe. As my guest, I hope you will see that the request is not unreasonable."

Sheepishly, Kyrle took out the pistol and held it out for MacMorn to take, while Gees wanted to shout at him to keep it but could not. In some way, material or uncanny, their talk as they neared the house had been overheard. How far, Gees asked himself, did MacMorn's prescience extend? No visible agency for the transmission of their talk had been near them when Kyrle had said the pistol was in that pocket.

"No," MacMorn said, "I will not take it. I do not understand those things. If you put it down on the floor here, beside the door, you can recover it before you go. It will not be touched, I assure you."

Kyrle put the pistol down, and, reluctantly, Gees let it stay there.

"You will forgive my small eccentricity, I know." MacMorn smiled at them both, quite friendlily. "And now what shall we do? Would you care to see the house, or talk a while?"

He sounded bafflingly cordial. Gees said, rather grimly: "We are in your hands."

"Ah! Then if you will come this way, please—"

And, turning, he led to the right along the corridor, toward the eastern end of the house, and opened a door in the inner wall by the simple expedient of pushing at its surface, on which was no more sign of a fastening than on that of his front door.

This one swung inward soundlessly, and revealed a room panelled in black, old wood, softly carpeted, and furnished with low divans covered and cushioned in dark green, and with little, ebony three-legged stools and tables.

There was a breast-high shelf opposite the doorway, and on it stood an array of bottles and decanters and glasses. Light, only just strong enough to reveal these things, entered through apertures in the ceiling, one at each corner, and Gees surmised an arrangement of reflecting mirrors on the roof of the house.

"This was where you brought Helen—Miss Aylener and me, when we came to see you before," Kyrle said with a certain eager appreciation of his surroundings.

"I believe it is—yes," MacMorn assented. "Do sit down." He pointed at the divan nearest to his two guests. "You too, Mr. Green."

"We seem to be losing sight of our purpose in coming here," Gees said quietly, and did not move. "It was—not a friendly purpose, as you seem to assume."

"But before we even go so far as to sit down, I want to tell you—on our way here, we met the car which brought you and one other to this house yesterday afternoon, so your statement that Mr. Kyrle's future wife is not in your hold does not impress me in the way you intended it should. I may tell you, too, that I saw you in London."

MacMorn seated himself very deliberately on one of the little ebony stools, and smiled, quite unruffled.

"I have told you," he said, speaking very slowly, "that Miss Aylener, Mr. Kyrle's future wife, is not in my hold, and it appears that you do not believe me.

"Since we are to understand each other fully before I can offer you entertainment of any kind, or before you go, answer me one question. Did the driver of the car I hired yesterday describe my companion of the journey to you?"

As, voicing the question, he gazed at Gees directly, the little specks of fire that had appeared in his eyes when they had talked before over the incident of the black goat appeared again. The question itself revealed that his apparent omniscience was only apparent. He did not realize that Gees had not so much as spoken to the driver of the car.

"He did not," Gees answered, truthfully enough. "It was not necessary. You see, I know who went to Bristol."

For a fraction of a second, just long enough for Gees to see that the shot had gone home, MacMorn's expression betrayed fear. Recovering his composure quickly, he gazed up from his stool at Gees, steadily.

"I will not pretend to ignorance of things I know," MacMorn said, as deliberately as when he had spoken before. "I do know, and how I know does not concern you, that you two men drove here from London yesterday, and since I overheard that you intended to get Mr. Kyrle's future wife out of my hold, I conclude that you accuse me of kidnapping her.

"I assure you that she is not here. Bring as large an army as you like, and you have my full permission to search the house and prove for yourselves that she is not. As for my companion on the journey here, if you will excuse me for a minute, I will see if she can receive you and assure you that she accompanied me yesterday."

He stood up as he ended his statement, and, without waiting for either of them to speak, went out by the door by which they had entered the room. It opened outward at his touch; evidently it swung both ways, but when it had closed on him and Gees tried to push it open again, it would not yield. There was some trick in its fastening.

"Then we're prisoners?" Kyrle said, dully.

With his forefinger on his lips, Gees turned to him. "It doesn't pay to say too much, or even to think too much, here," he said.

Kyrle went to the shelf and stood looking at its array of glassware, and Gees inspected, one after another, the four apertures in the ceiling through which light was admitted to the room, to see the sky reflected in angled mirrors.

When his gaze ranged over objects in the room again, he realized how very little light the apertures really gave. It was no more than a twilight, for which their eyes had been prepared by the greater gloom of the corridor from which they had entered here with MacMorn.

"Is it all a mistake of yours?" Kyrle asked abruptly.

"We shall know better by seven o'clock tonight," Gees answered.

"Why—do you mean we shall be kept here till then? Must you talk in riddles all the time?"

"Because I don't know all the solution," Gees answered. "If you choose to go—well, there's nothing more to be said. And we've already said far too much for my liking, as it is."

The gloom in which they waited was heaviest in the middle of the room, farthest from the lighting apertures. There, Gees either saw or imagined, the faintest of mists was rising, an emanation that spread out as might smoke from a chimney into still air. He was not sure whether his eyes were tricking him until Kyrle spoke again:

"Scent," he said. "I didn't smell any when we came in."

Gees too smelt it, then, and knew that what he had seen was no illusion, but some trick of MacMorn's for which the reason would declare itself sooner or later. It was a sweet, heady scent, sensuously alluring.

Gees tried to resist its influence on him, but Kyrle inhaled, open-mouthed and deeply, and laughed aloud.

"It's divine!" he exclaimed. "It's like that drink he gave us."

He dropped back on the divan nearest to him and lay back among its cushions with closed eyes, luxuriating in the influence of the scent. With angry disgust at his weakness, Gees turned to the door and pushed at it, exerting all his strength, but in vain.

And the strange, sweet scent was sapping his power of thought, assailing his will. Did he want so much to escape from it, in reality?

"My companion of yesterday is tired after her long journey. I have asked her to receive you both, and in a few minutes we will go to her. Then you may hear from her own lips that she accompanied me here."

It was MacMorn who spoke, deliberately and quietly. Gees swung around from the immovable door and saw that all the walls of the room were solid-seeming as when he had entered, nor had there been sound or sign of a door, opening anywhere.

Yet there stood MacMorn, a yard or so away from the corner opposite Gees and the door, and Kyrle had opened his eyes and sat up on the divan, though with no appearance of surprise. He looked like a man half-drugged, Gees realized.

"And where in Beelzebub's name did you spring from?" Gees exclaimed. MacMorn shook his head in reproof, and the little sparks gleamed momentarily in his eyes. "That is not a name to speak carelessly in this house, as you should know," he said. "But I forget. Before I take you both to see my companion of yesterday—"

Without ending the sentence, he turned to the shelf at the back of the room and ranged three small glasses, and, as Gees watched him, took a bottle of clear fluid, removed its glass stopper, and from it half filled each of the glasses.

Restoring it to its place on the shelf, he took another bottle of colorless content and from it filled each glass nearly to its brim, and the change that Helen had described took place.

In each glass the contents foamed up pinkly, though not to the point of overflowing, and as the effervescence subsided and cleared away, the three fluids showed a deep, rich crimson.

MacMorn took one glass and handed it to Kyrle, who took it without question, eagerly. Then, taking up the other two, MacMorn advanced to where Gees watched him, and held out one glass.

He said: "I want us all to drink to our better understanding," and waited while Gees hesitated.

The heady allure of the scent was reason-destroying, a reinforcement to the friendly invitation. All Gees could think for the moment was that he had watched MacMorn pour all three drinks from the same bottles, and thus, if the stuff had a drugging effect, it would act on them all.

He wished he had thought to ask Kyrle or Helen if all three of them had drunk together on that other occasion, but knew he could not put such a question, now. MacMorn's fire-flecked black eyes were hypnotically compelling, and, though a sixth sense told him he ought not to touch the glass, Gees resisted the prompting and took it with his left hand.

As he did so, the sleeve retracted from his wrist, showing the dial of his watch, with the hands at ten minutes past nine.

"It's early to start this sort of thing," he said, in final, uselessly faint resistance. "And I think we already understand each other quite well."

MacMorn lifted his glass high, and the crimson fluid showed ruby-clear against the shaft of light in the corner behind him. "To our better understanding," he said, and Kyrle stood up away from the divan and echoed, "Better understanding," on which MacMorn put his glass to his lips and emptied it at a draught.

Then Gees too drank, but without echoing the toast, and felt the drink as a limit of ecstasy as he put the glass down on an ebony table beside

him. Involuntarily, facing MacMorn as he stood, he closed his eyes, and felt that he lived through limitless years of joyous strength.

For a brief interval the warning sense that had bidden him refuse the drink insisted that he must be on his guard, held him to his distrust of MacMorn, and then it dulled to sleep.

The man was a magician, but a splendid magician; he had said with obvious sincerity that Helen Aylener was not here, that he was not responsible for her disappearance, and had offered to show them the one who had accompanied him here. The almost invisible mist with which the scent had first become perceptible had thickened so that the room was in a haze: Kyrle half-reclined among the cushions of the divan, smiling, his eyes shut.

The whole affair was monstrous, devilish! MacMorn had tricked them as easily as if they had been children. Gees opened his lips to damn the man for his black art, but all he said was:

“A magic compound, your drink.”

Thus the sense of it, but he knew he was speaking in a language he had never spoken before, never heard before. There were two of him, the sane, practical self of everyday, and this new self which spoke with tongues, felt at one with MacMorn, and felt, too, an immeasurable vitality with which his normal self was shut from expression.

“Let us go,” MacMorn said, and Gees knew that he too spoke in the odd, musical-sounding, unknown yet known language. “I will prove to you that your suspicions were wrong,” and he went toward the door.

“But Kyrle is to come too,” Gees found sanity enough to question.

“When he awakens,” MacMorn dissented. “It is you whom I must convince.”

Chapter 17

Through the Magic Doors

He laid his hand against the door that Gees had found immovable, and it swung outward with, apparently, no more than a touch. Gees lifted his hand to his forehead momentarily in puzzlement, and again saw the dial of his wrist watch. Half past ten!

And not more than five minutes before, he would have sworn, he had drunk the crimson fluid! But, unless the watch was misleading him, an hour and twenty minutes had passed since he had put the glass down.

They were in the bare corridor again, and the door closed of itself, quite silently. Again the humming of the gale outside was audible, and there, by the outer door, lay the automatic pistol Kyrle had put down. MacMorn almost paused as they passed it, as if to see whether Gees would move to pick it up, but he did nothing of the sort. His sane self remembered that he had another pistol in an armpit holster inside his shirt, one that MacMorn had not suspected.

The bare floor of the corridor was soft and rubbery, and gave back no sound as they walked on it. So much strangeness in this place and in MacMorn called for explanation, but there was no time to ask for it. Coming to another doorway, MacMorn knocked and listened, but if a reply was given Gees did not hear it.

Then MacMorn thrust the door inward, and stood back for Gees to enter just such a dim, sensuous-looking apartment as he had left. It was twin to the other in every way, except that its fabrics and cushions all had a silky lustre of paler green, shot with silver.

In the very middle of the room, where the light fell least, stood a girl with night-black hair and dark, soft eyes. One slender-fingered hand was laid on her breast, her other arm revealed its perfect modelling

through a semi-transparent sleeve as it hung beside her, and the ankle-length, antique-looking robe she wore betrayed the lines of a perfect figure.

With her dark eyes directed full at Gees, and a half-smile curving her lips, she waited for one or other of the two men to speak.

"I have brought my friend to see you," MacMorn said, still speaking in the language Gees knew and yet did not know. "Will you tell him when and how you came here?"

"Yesterday, with you," she answered, glancing momentarily at him, and then returning her gaze to Gees.

He felt that, if she had not spoken in the language which made all this fantasy still more unreal, he would have recognized the voice. Yet he knew that he had never seen her before. She was one with that strange scent, one with the crimson drink—she was in the incarnation of them both, ecstasy embodied.

"That is all," MacMorn said. "Rest again, now."

"May your friend not stay awhile?" she asked, and her half-smile grew to completeness as she gazed at Gees. He knew he would have responded to the invitation, but MacMorn said: "Not now, child. Later, it may be," and drew back from the room. Gees had no choice but to follow him.

The door closed noiselessly. Again the gale outside sounded, a roar of driving fury, now.

For a moment Gees remembered the hour and twenty minutes of which MacMorn had somehow robbed him, and was about to question him, when MacMorn spoke.

"This inner wall that you see," he said, "is that of the central tower of the castle which stood where the house stands now. It is old, so old that the wood covering was needed to preserve it."

"Wood to preserve stone?" Gees asked incredulously.

"I did not say the castle was built of stone," MacMorn answered.

"Then—?" He left the question incomplete, and realized that he was speaking his normal language again. Some of the spell was passing, evidently, for while MacMorn and the dark beauty had talked, he himself had thought in that other tongue, understood without need for translating.

"We built with what came to our hands," MacMorn said.

"So?" Gees laughed. "You know what you have just said?"

"Only we two know that I said it," MacMorn retorted. "And if you repeated it, who in this age of fools would believe all that you and I know as real?"

He took a couple of steps toward the room in which they had left Kyrle, and faced about again. The gale outside, strengthening as the day advanced, rumbled in deep-toned anger, and though there was a floor above this on which they stood, the faint hiss of hard-driven rain on the roof was audible. MacMorn looked at Gees and smiled.

"Have I convinced you?" he asked.

"Convinced me?" Gees echoed. "We talk in circles, arrive nowhere. You show me an impossible woman for a minute, and try to convince me Helen Aylener is not here, because that woman says she came here with you yesterday. Before that, you made some spell that took an hour and more clear out of my memory—"

He saw MacMorn's eyes dilate momentarily at that accusation, and knew he had not been intended to realize the passing of the lost time. "And how do I know what you did in that hour, or what instructions you gave the woman we have just seen? For all I know, she may be one of your shadows made visible, not flesh and blood at all."

"No." MacMorn was still smiling. "She is not yet a shadow."

"You mean you would—take that life?" Gees almost gasped.

"To convince you that I have no need of Helen Aylener," MacMorn answered, "there"—he pointed back at the room they had just left—"you saw for yourself is greater vitality, life more intense—"

"But you're contemplating murder!" Gees broke in. "This is the twentieth century, not the fifth—"

"Are you sure it is not the fifth, inside these walls?" MacMorn interrupted in turn. "Or a thousand years before the fifth? And to weld another life to my own is not murder. I tell you, you are blinded by modernity, though enough of memory of things past survives in you to waken in you the knowledge of the old language—as I wakened it in the hour that you forget. And tomorrow, if you or any other make the accusation against me that you make now, I shall laugh."

"Where is Helen Aylener?" Gees demanded grimly.

"How can I tell?" MacMorn evaded the question, and still smiled. "Go back to ›The Rowans‹—when I let you go—and ask there."

"What do you mean—when you let me go?" Gees fired out sharply.

"You came here in your own time, you go in mine," MacMorn told him. "Your knowledge is too great—I cannot let you go till my time of renewal is past. Your will is too strong for me to break, but in the hour I took and

you forget, I bound it—bound you! See for yourself if I did not—strike me, full in the face, as your will bids!”

He leaned forward, his wax-white face within easy reach, and Gees wanted to strike at the point of his chin and smash him to the floor. But he stood as still as stone; he could not lift his hand.

“You see?” MacMorn spoke with quiet confidence, not mockingly or as if he wished to vaunt his superiority.

“What is this—a madhouse or a dream?”

“I should have wakened more of your memory,” MacMorn said. “Man, you might be one with me, not an enemy! No one thing you know or have, could give you such a summit of life as I gave you in one little drink, and I can take you up to greater summits, set you on the way to powers and pleasures such as your little modern self has not dreamed. I will open gates for you—”

“And the price?” Gees interrupted him.

“Is for others to pay. Come with me, and see!”

Not because he willed it, but because some power greater than his will impelled him, Gees followed past the door behind which he had left Kyrle, and turned left at the angle of the outer wall to find that the inner, old wooden wall continued the corridor along to the back of that house.

A kilted figure—the man Partha, he guessed—vanished at the far end of this second corridor as Gees turned into it, but MacMorn did not go as far as the end. He turned inward, to the middle of the house, through even deeper gloom until he opened a door and revealed daylight striking down into a circular, central court, open to the sky, round which the house had been built.

Overhead, the wind roared, but the upward slant of the roofs prevented it from striking down to their level, and Gees stood beside MacMorn and knew he was looking at one of the altars of a very old people, the exact centre of the ring of standing stones.

An oblong of basalt, twice the height of a tall man in length and of a width half as great, rose a foot or more above the ground. The floor was a crazy pavement of granite blocks, originally rough-hewn, but worn smooth by the many who had trodden about the altar since it was laid, bedded on a block of granite which extended beyond its edges for a foot and more.

There was a shallow channel in the granite, extending all round the black stone, and continuing at a slight upward angle to the edge of the wall, opposite the point at which MacMorn and Gees stood. It appeared

that some fluid was intended to flow down and circle round the basalt block, but only the rain that fell thinly wetted the channel now.

The circular wall, some forty feet in diameter, was of weathered planks to a height of ten feet or so, and then of stone to the level of the roof, and in the planking were two more doorways, one toward the front of the house and one giving on the back.

"Little enough to see," Gees observed, keeping his voice level. For he knew the significance of the stone, and knew too, beyond question, that MacMorn had seen and shared in the sacrifices made here, and that all the blood shed on such altars was no more than a cupful by comparison with the floods that had drained away from this terrible stone. Still more, at the very fount and centre of the shadow magic he was conscious of thronging presences, a host of shadows pressing in on him, though outside the range of mortal sight.

"They are shadows. I live," MacMorn said, with a note of exultation. "They, not I, paid the price."

"I will not pay, and none shall pay for me," Gees told him, and found that he had difficulty in speaking his defiance. "You have me in one way, but my soul is still my own." He would have added: "Which makes me your master," but kept back the words.

"So," said MacMorn. "You will not enter my kingdom? I offer you entry, new life with me with the new moon today."

"And I refuse. Take off this spell of yours and let me go."

"After my hour is past—after sunset," MacMorn rejoined calmly. "You see, I do you the honor to be a little afraid of you."

"Then take me back to Kyrle."

MacMorn faced about without replying, and led into the corridor they had left. The door which gave access to the circle closed of its own accord as soon as they had passed it, and, since MacMorn made no apparent move to close it, the secret of these uncanny doors was still outside Gees' knowledge.

They went back the way they had come, and MacMorn merely pushed at the door of the room in which they had left Kyrle. Gees entered unthinkingly, and, realizing that Kyrle was not there, turned and threw all his weight against the closed door.

It yielded no more than if he had breathed on it.

Chapter 18

The Useless Journey

Somewhere about that time, Miss Brandon opened the door of the flat in Little Oakfield Street and saw facing her a slender, tall girl with pale gold hair, dressed in a grey flannel costume with pinstripes, below which showed stockings more orange-hued than flesh colour, and shoes of white kid patterned with black strapping.

They faced each other, slightly hostile, in silence for nearly a minute. The caller spoke first.

"A Mr. Gees said he'd like me to call here," she said.

"Ye-es." Miss Brandon concealed her hostility. "Is your name Betty?"

"That's right. Then you know he was expecting me?"

Miss Brandon drew back. "Come in, please?" she asked. "I am his secretary, and he told me you might call. In that case, he said, he wanted me to interview you and hear your story of the Bristol journey."

"Pretty rotten, it was." Betty followed into Miss Brandon's own room, and stood looking about. People like Miss Brandon were not in her line.

"When did you get back?" Miss Brandon asked, crisply.

"Last night. I hung about there all day, and he didn't turn up—the gentleman that asked me to go, I mean. It all seemed a bit fishy to me, and still I think it is."

"I hope you got your twenty pounds, though?" Miss Brandon asked.

"Oh, he handed me that when he fixed it all up with me in the beer parlour. That was—but you know that part of it, though."

"I don't know anything, except that Mr. Green—Mr. Gees, I mean—took you down to the pub and left you there. And that you told him about this man offering you twenty pounds to go to Bristol. So if you go on from there—what happened after Mr. Gees left you?"

"I see. You want the whole story." She lit a cigarette. "Mr. Gees didn't tell me why he wanted to know about all this, but he said there'd be something for me if I came and told him. I s'pose you know about that?"

"Four ten-shilling notes—I have them here," Miss Brandon answered coldly. "In exchange for the full story."

She opened a notebook on the desk, and took up a pencil.

"Oh, you're going to take it down, are you?" Betty surmised. "I don't mind." She smiled.

Miss Brandon's tone was still frosty. "If you will go on please."

"Well, it's rather a long story. It'd be just on closing time when my gentleman comes down the stairs and across to me, but there was time for him to order more drinks when the waiter turned up, and he got me one too. And he said he wanted me to go early next morning. I told him I never got up early, hated it, and he sort of fixed me with his weird black eyes and said it wouldn't be any trouble, I'd find. Something like that—I don't remember his exact words, but it meant that, and I knew I'd have to get up, too."

"Do you mean that he threatened you?" Miss Brandon ceased her rapid pencilling and looked up.

"Oh, no, nothing like that! He was quite pleasant, but it was more like that what you call mesmerism, isn't it? I just felt I had to do what he said, and not anything else. I was to have told Mr. Gees about it—come here and told him—before I started, he said, but I just couldn't. Not only because there wasn't time, but because I couldn't do anything at all except what that man with the black eyes said I must. I reckon it was mesmerism, wasn't it?"

"Will you tell me what he told you to do?"

"He'd got a parcel with him, and he said it was the clothes I was to wear, and if the shoes didn't fit I could stop the taxi and get another pair on the way to the station out of the twenty pounds. He'd allowed time for that, he said. It got to be closing time, and I took him round to my place. There wasn't time for him to instruct me in the beer parlour. When we got there I opened up the parcel, and he showed me how the handkerchief was to go under the fur—it looked quite a good fox fur, in that light, but I'll never forget what it was really. Makes my flesh crawl now when I think of it—"

"Then don't think of it," Miss Brandon interrupted.

"Well, I was to dress in those things, and I had to wear the grey suede shoes till I got into the taxi. He insisted on that especially. I don't mean

he said it over and over again, because he didn't. Only once, and quite quiet he was, but somehow he made me remember every word he said till I'd done what he told me to do. Then we went out again, and he took me to Grey's hotel.

"He showed me exactly where I was to go and stand the next morning—yesterday morning. Then I was to move forward so I could be seen from the hotel doorway and hail a taxi, and tell the driver to take me to Paddington so somebody could hear me give the order. As it happened, one of the hall porters from the hotel came and opened the taxi door for me, but I didn't look at him or thank him, even, because I thought he was just being officious and wanted a tip, which I wasn't going to give him. He told me all that, and how he'd meet me at Bristol half an hour after the train got in, and then went off and left me, just as if I mightn't have run off with his twenty pound and nobody the wiser for it. And he couldn't do anything to me if I had."

"But you didn't," Miss Brandon suggested in the pause.

"I couldn't. I went back to my place and went to bed, and sure enough I waked up as he'd said I would. And though I just hate getting up early I got out and dressed as he'd told me to. It seemed as if I couldn't help myself. I could almost see his uncanny black eyes boring into me and hear his voice telling me what I had to do, and I did it all as if he'd been there driving me. And the shoes nearly crippled me. I got to outside the hotel and told myself there wouldn't be any taxis crawling at that hour of the morning, but one come along just as he said, and I stopped it and the porter opened the door, just as I told you. I got to Paddington and knew I couldn't stand those shoes another hour, so as there was plenty of time I found a shop which was just opened and bought these I'm wearing now, and changed in the train. The others was a poor pair, and my feet being too big one of 'em begun to split across the top. Only just begun, but I left them under the seat. They were no use to me."

She broke off and stubbed out her cigarette end.

"Are these the stockings you were wearing?" Miss Brandon asked.

"No. He said I was to wear the grey ones—this pair was in his parcel too. I wore the grey ones, but when I changed my shoes I saw they'd laddered as if I'd been through a hedge, and the shoe heel had rubbed a big hole in one, too. I changed them for these before I put these shoes on. But that wasn't the worst of it. That beastly old fur. Ugh! I can't forget it! I feel all crawly now."

"Moth?" Miss Brandon suggested.

"It was after I'd finished putting on these stockings and shoes, and I was thinking how much better they looked—sort of give a finish to the outfit—the contrast, if you know what I mean—and then I felt something on the back of my neck. I reached up and grabbed it—I just thought a fly or something had got there—and it was a maggot!

"I can tell you that fur was off my neck and down on the floor before you could say Jack Robinson, and the sight of it just about made me sick. I turned it over with my foot, and the inside was fairly crawling. How it was I hadn't felt anything before I can't think, the state that fur was in. Maggots, and—and lice! Little white lice, dozens of 'em.

"It must have been the warmth waked 'em all up when I put the thing on. I snatched the handkerchief off my neck and looked at it, and there was lice on that top! I can tell you that window went down and the fur and the handkerchief both went out like lightning.

"Well," she went on, "I was thoroughly disgusted, and felt half naked with this low-necked blouse I'm wearing now, and not so much as a string of Woolworth pearls round my neck, and I knew what I was going to tell that black-eyed beauty when he met me at Bristol, landing me with rotten things like that.

"Well, the train got in, and I made straight for a hotel and got a bath. I went over every inch of this costume, but you can see for yourself it's quite new, and there wasn't anything got on it."

"And then?" Miss Brandon asked.

"Then I went back and looked for him as he'd told me, but there was no sign of him. I waited about there till a station policeman began to look at me all suspicious, so I went to him and asked him if he'd seen anything of my uncle who'd told me to meet him there. Of course I described him, black eyes and hair and chalk complexion, but I think that policeman had an idea I was pulling his leg. Then I went and had two double whiskies in the refreshment room, and felt a lot better, and when I come back the policeman said my uncle hadn't turned up, but would he do instead when he went off duty? You know, they're all alike—but no—you wouldn't know."

Miss Brandon's colour heightened a little. She looked up from her notebook and smiled. "So you didn't see the uncle again, then?"

Betty shook her head. "I gave it up," she answered. "I was near on eighteen pound and this costume and a pair of shoes to the good, and if he couldn't keep an appointment it wasn't my fault, was it? I hope I never see that black-eyed blighter again. There was something uncanny about him. I reckon it was mesmerism, don't you?"

Miss Brandon opened a drawer of her desk, took out four ten-shilling notes, and handed them over. "There is a good deal of mesmerism in twenty pounds," she said reflectively.

"Thanks for this," Betty said coldly, "And you can think it was the money if you like. P'raps it was, some of it, but not all. The way he made me move about and do exactly what he wanted, and not think it a bit odd till I was in the train coming back. I didn't think at all—I just acted as he said I was to act, as if he was the ventriloquist on a stage and I was the dummy."

"Thank you for coming," Miss Brandon said. "I am sure Mr. Gees will be very interested in your story, which I expect I shall send on to him." Betty stood up, understanding the implied dismissal. Again she took in the furnishing of the room, and, for a moment, its occupant.

Then she turned and went out very quickly.

Miss Brandon went carefully over the story, in which the post-hypnotic suggestion was clearly evident—and MacMorn was a master hypnotist, at that. A chemist, too. Some compound had been used to render the shoes unwearable as soon as her feet warmed them; the stockings, too, had probably been treated so that a brief period of wear would rot their fabric. But over the fur and scarf, post-hypnotic suggestion alone had been brought to bear on the girl.

MacMorn had etched on her mind that she would see maggots and lice after she had got in the train, and feel the maggot on her neck, and she had both seen and felt, though in reality there was nothing of the sort on either of the things. Thus she had arrived at Bristol, as he had intended, so different in attire as well as in looks from Helen Aylener that, if an alarm had been given, she would have passed unquestioned. Like Gees, Miss Brandon felt that something other than mere coincidence was working on Gees' side, for coincidence was not enough to account for Betty's meeting him and telling him her story. From the moment of his arrival at Brachmornalachan the first time, everything had been preposterous, unbelievable. If all that Gees had told her were to be credited, then MacMorn had had lifetime after lifetime in which to acquire and store knowledge, and had worked along lines which, although almost discredited today, resulted in powers that had produced strange effects in the past.

And Gees, with only a decade or two of knowledge, had set himself against this being, this maker of shadows ...

After two years of association with Gees, Miss Brandon had faith in his ability and strength of will. But he had gone alone against one who

controlled abnormal powers. She discounted Kyrle, whom she had seen for a few minutes: an average young man, not a bad sort, but quite useless ranged against MacMorn, who would blind him with illusions as easily as he had Betty. No, Gees went to his battle alone.

Suddenly she frowned. Suppose MacMorn had meant him to follow to Brachmornalachan, get entangled in the web of shadows, and held until it was too late to save Helen—

Chapter 19

Satan's Pact

So Kyrle had gone, either of his own accord or by compulsion. Gees reflected, it was no great loss; the completeness with which Kyrle had yielded to the influence of the scent, his response to MacMorn's cordiality, and his intermittent forgetfulness of their purpose in coming, proved him of little use. As to where he had gone or been taken, it might be only a few feet away; whatever sounds he might make would be inaudible, since the room was so far soundproofed that even the roar of the gale went unheard.

A dozen times or more Gees tried the door, but it remained immovable. He tested the floor and walls, but could find no hidden spring. Then, seated on one of the divans, he realized that he had a headache. The effect of that crimson drink, probably.

That self in him which had talked in and understood the language he had never heard before he entered this house, the self which had almost yielded to MacMorn's promptings, lost its hold on him. He felt that if MacMorn invited him to strike him now, he would, and powerfully, too. Yet there was the hour and more which he had lost. Aided by the effect of the scent and the crimson drink, MacMorn had hypnotized him, and what suggestions the man had planted in his mind during the period of complete control were outside his knowledge. He must keep watch on himself, suppress any abnormal impulse.

Meanwhile he was a prisoner, and MacMorn had won the first round. By his watch, it was just noon; there were six and a half hours or thereabouts to go before new moon.

In what form would the Maiden present herself when, at the crowning moment of the ritual which MacMorn must observe to summon her, she became visible to human eyes? Rhea, Astarte, Isis, Tanit—they were all

one. Kore, or that earlier and more terrible Unnamed, who brooded over such blood-washed altars as the black stone he had lately seen?

Futile questionings, these. He was a prisoner.

Had MacMorn told truth or lied when he said that he had no need of Helen Aylener, because the dark-eyed girl in the green and silver room was the life he meant to blend to his own? Or was Helen a prisoner somewhere in this house? MacMorn had spoken with every appearance of sincerity but he was holding Gees until search would be useless.

It came back to Gees that MacMorn, after leaving him and Kyrle, had reappeared from somewhere while he, Gees, had been attempting to reopen the door. Whatever MacMorn's powers might be, he was human enough, incapable of de-materialization, and therefore there must be some other means of ingress to the room.

With this, Gees set to work to examine all the walls. He tapped and tested and passed his hands over them vainly, until retreating to the middle of the room to consider where MacMorn had been standing after his startling entry, he noticed that about three feet of the shelf at the back was clear of glassware, and damned himself for not observing it before.

At a light push, the bare section of the shelf swung outward and took with it a door in the panelling of the room, revealing a practical and modern fitted lavatory, white-tiled from its plain, smooth stone floor to the ceiling of black wood.

The lines of cement between the tiles were unbroken everywhere, as Gees found on inspecting them. Faint though the available light was, it was enough to determine that there was no possibility of a join, no means of entry except that on which the section of shelf was fixed. After an examination as thorough as it was futile, Gees gave it up and got rid of the last of his headache by splashing double handfuls of water over his face from the basin.

Ten minutes to one, now. He began to feel hungry. There were plenty of drinks on the shelf, but he let them alone for the one drink MacMorn had mixed for him was quite enough.

Time dragged on. He tried the door again and found it as immovable as before.

He would not believe that Helen's disappearance was in no way connected with MacMorn; the object in keeping him, Gees, here was plain enough. For, if she disappeared completely, nobody (except Margaret Aylener) would believe the fantastic story by which he would account

for the girl's vanishing. Let him, Gees, remain prisoned in this room until tomorrow morning, and MacMorn could laugh at any story he might tell.

Then Gees remembered the weather-worn inscription on the gateway stone—the symbol of Kore. For her entry, or for that of the Unnamed from whose rites the cult of Kore had developed, all doors must be opened. Whether opened for a minute or an hour, Gees did not know: little record remained of these old mysteries: even the nature of the visions shown to the devotees at comparatively modern Eleusis was unknown now.

MacMorn, of course, must know it all, or else he would not attempt what he had virtually owned as his intent. But, at the time of the moon's new birth, the culmination of MacMorn's purpose, there was a chance—If he could keep his wits about him, take advantage of the open doors, he might yet save either Helen Aylener or that dark beauty he had seen, and by defeating MacMorn release the shadows now bound in a state as drear and desolate as the fields of asphodel.

Yes, there was still a chance.

In an ordinary-looking, comfortably-furnished bedroom on the upper floor of the house, Kyrle lay on the bed while MacMorn stood looking out from the window with his back to the room. Being in the front of the house, he looked down on the loch and saw how the force of the gale splashed waves on the lee bank and tore at the thatch of a house already partly unroofed, one of the cottages near the post office.

Even some of the solid peat turves were dislodged from the stacks, for this was such a wind as Brachmornalachan, sheltered by its surrounding hills, had not known for many a year. MacMorn smiled his pleasure as he looked across at ›The Rowans,‹ and saw a bough of the mountain ash tree in front of the house hanging broken, swinging as gusts struck it. If only the wind would last until it had crashed all four of those trees to earth!

Margaret Aylener was on her way here—he knew it—but she would not attempt the drive from the station, thirty miles across unsheltered country, on such a day as this. She was growing old, past the time of enterprise and endurance, and for her there was no renewal of vitality, no barrier against the weakening thrusts of the years. He would not grow old!

Through all the lives he had lived, he had never grown old.

A sound of movement reached him, and he turned to stand beside the bed, looking down at Kyrle.

"You feel better now, I hope?" he asked with kindly solicitude.

"Much better," Kyrle answered, and slowly raised himself on his elbow.

"I can't think what it was made me turn faint like that. Was it you who carried me up here? I don't remember clearly."

"It was Partha, my man," MacMorn told him. "I felt—there is more air in this room than the one you were in. I felt you would recover more quickly here, and Partha brought you up."

"That's a quaint old name. It was good of you to take so much trouble over me. But I think I'm steady enough on my feet now to go back to Gees—Mr. Green, I mean. I ought to go, too. He will be wondering what has become of me, if I don't."

"He will," MacMorn agreed, with an irony that was lost on the younger man. "But I am not sure—let me see your eyes, will you?"

Kyrle leaned up still more and looked into the black eyes, and they took and held him, bound him to MacMorn's will, while his own eyes grew fixed and staring, all in the space of a minute. At MacMorn's bidding he lay back on the pillow, and now the black eyes were directly over his own, gazing down at him, compelling, unescapable.

MacMorn spoke slowly, evenly. "Sleep. Sleep soundly, know nothing except what I tell you. Do you know that you must obey me, that there is no one thing you may do unless I order it?"

"I know," Kyrle answered, and his tone told MacMorn even more surely than the words that he was completely controlled.

MacMorn reached down a forefinger and with it closed the eyes unable to avert their gaze from his own. He spoke again.

"Sleep, and forget all things until all doors are opened, when you will waken and wait for my order. You will obey any order I give you. You will give and do what I order, and at my word will give your life."

Breathing quietly, apparently lost in sleep, Kyrle made no response.

"Tell me, you will give your life if I order it," MacMorn repeated, speaking with quiet, confident insistence. "Give it where I will."

"If you order it, I will give my life where you will," Kyrle said tonelessly, and scarcely moving his lips.

"Now sleep, to waken only when all doors are opened," MacMorn bade.

"Then, you will waken, and will not leave this room until I bid you leave it. Obey only me. Sleep and forget all things, now."

For a few minutes he sat over the still figure, watching it unblinkingly, by his presence and will strengthening his hold. Then, satisfied that he had bound Kyrle in chains from which there was no escape, he went

out from the room and, closing its door, descended to the corridor that ringed in the inner, wooden wall of the house.

There he opened another door by a touch, and entered the room of green and silver.

The woman stood in the centre of the room, where the light was least, so that she was little more than a column of green shot with silver against the blackness of the farther wall, with the whiteness of her face an indistinctness above the column as she stood faced toward the door. MacMorn made an odd, swift gesture with his fingers, and she sat down on one of the divans and interlaced her slender fingers before her knees.

Thus she sat silent for a time, gazing up at him, while he looked down at her steadily.

"You remember the circle and the altar?" he asked at last.

"Could I forget them?" she asked in turn, in a tone which declared that the memory was one she had no wish to waken.

"We will speak in the old tongue," MacMorn said, "for you will need to speak it, soon." And, changing into the language of which he spoke, that of the dark men who had raised the stones in old time, he went on. "When you saw the altar last, you paid a great price, for nothing. But now, I come to you to offer. Equality with me, life as I live, and there will be no price for you to pay. I bring you this as a gift, in return for all you have done—and been."

"That is a dark saying," she told him, also speaking the tongue of the dark men—quite easily, in his presence and under his influence, for, as the colour of her eyes and hair told, she was of the dark men's begetting. "For there is always a price that must be paid."

"Paid," he echoed, "At the turn of the moon today, and it shall be the younger of these two men. I have him in hold, promised to give his life where I will and when I will. A new life, for you."

Fear looked up at him. "There would be an accounting," she said. "If that were done, how would I—or you—escape, after?"

"The Duoine Sidhe leave nothing, no trace," he answered coolly. "If he is not anywhere, except for a shadow that comes and goes as I command, there can be no accounting. You think, I know, of the man you saw. But I tell you, when he goes out from this place tomorrow, you need have no fear of him. I will make him so that his word has as little power as that of the shadows who can no more make themselves heard by human ears."

"By that you mean—?" She did not end it, but looked up at him as she sat, knowing she need not complete the question.

"Not as a shadow," he said, "for if he too were not anywhere there would be an accounting. No, but with his will so bound that he is subject to shadows, his strength given to them, all that he may say derided, and with that the gift to you will be safely given."

"That is a very dark saying," she said sombrely.

"He set himself to pull me down," MacMorn retorted harshly. "He has knowledge—how much, I do not know, but he has knowledge that he sets against mine. I offered him equality with me, but he refused. I would have no pity on him. Now, I make the offer to you as I made it to him, and if you accept it he must go out as I say, powerless to harm either you or me. Stand beside me when the new moon is born, and take back such a price as you paid—for me."

She brooded over the proposal awhile, and looked up at him again.

"It is too great a risk," she said. "I wish, but it is too great a risk, and—too great—a price."

"That man?" Incredulity sounded in the question. "You have seen him only for a moment! You have not so much as heard him speak!"

"I have both seen and heard him, before today," she said. "Also, for years after that other birth of a new moon when I paid a price for nothing, I was afraid there might be question. No. It is too great a risk, and I will not take your reward, Gamel MacMorn."

"Think," he urged softly, temptingly. "To be as I am, kin to the Duoine Sidhe, having no fear of time and its power over common men, storing knowledge of things hidden from of old, growing in power life by life and, greatest of all for a woman, adding beauty to beauty—"

"No!" The interruption was a cry, as if she were afraid to hear more of what he would offer. "I will not!"

"The choice is with you," he said, and his disappointment was evident in his voice. "I can offer, but you only among living people I cannot compel. But I ask—because of the life I hold as part of mine, because of all that has been between us two, I ask your aid."

She looked up at him questioningly.

"The man you saw," he said in explanation. "The other, the younger one—this is the second time I have made him drink and then controlled him. He is asleep until the doors are opened, completely under control, and then he will give life itself if I order it—"

"He will not give it—I said I would not!" she exclaimed.

"That is finished—you have made decision, I know. But this other—even when I persuaded him to drink and then dominated him, there was something of him that would not submit, something that escaped

me. I saw it when I brought him here to you. Something in him that fought, remained unconquered—I hastened him away from you lest he should see with his own eyes, instead of with the sight I gave him.”

“Can I fight what Gamel MacMorn cannot conquer?” she asked derisively, and her clasped fingers about her knees tightened on each other. “For a time,” he answered the question seriously, “with the scent and the crimson drink as aids, you can bind him. Because of the opening doors he must be bound. While I prepare, as all must be prepared before the fires are lighted round the altar—I cannot remain with him to hold him bound. But for you, there is a way.”

“Tell me the way,” she bade.

Minutes later, she laughed and said: “Yes, I understand.”

“And agree? You will do as I ask?”

“You are great, Gamel MacMorn, a great one among the dark men who were my fathers too. I will do all you ask.”

“I have told Partha—he will do the rest. You have only to wait until this man comes to you, and take him back into the scent. I have many things to do before the fires are lighted round the altar—”

Abruptly, realizing how little time remained to him for those things, he left her. As she sat alone, waiting, she smiled to herself.

Chapter 20

When All Doors Open

Half past one. Gees put the watch to his ear, and listened to its healthy ticking. Time passed so slowly in this prisoned inaction that he feared the watch had stopped.

Beelzebub. MacMorn had said it was a name not to be spoken lightly in this house. The road to Winchester and the swarm of flies. Beelzebub, the Carthaginian god of flies.

“Damn you, Beelzebub,” Gees said softly.

The commination was useless, though, as he realized. Beelzebub wouldn’t care, for he was already damned.

At a thought Gees got up from the divan, took a strong, two-bladed knife from his pocket, and opened the larger blade. He picked up one of the stools and examined it from all points, turned it upside down, and tried the wood with his knife-blade.

But it was useless for his purpose, and he put it down again. Looking all round the room, he eyed the shelf on which the bottles and glasses stood, and then went to one end and tried it with the knife blade. Although of hard, old oak, as a sliver revealed, it was not so hard as the stool. He had no compunction over damaging it; given assurance of his own and Kyrle’s and Helen’s safety, he would cheerfully have set fire to the place.

Working carefully along the grain of the wood with the knife, he pared off the end of the shelf a lath about four inches long, and rather less than half an inch thick, with which he went back to a divan and, seating himself, cut the lath into unequal lengths.

He trimmed both pieces carefully, after which he took the raincoat which he had laid over a stool near the door on first entering this room, and by the aid of the knife’s small blade got out a strong thread about

a yard in length. He laid the shorter of his two pieces of oaken lath crosswise to the longer one, and bound them together with the thread, winding it tightly and finishing off with a few half-hitches. Then he looked at the result of his work as it lay in his hand, a neatly-made cross.

"It can't do any harm, and it may do good," he observed to himself, and then sat up, suddenly alert. The scent he had smelled before was beginning to fill the room again. There was no mistaking its heady fragrance.

Gees put the cross in his pocket, closed the blade of the knife, and returned it to security. The scent was growing stronger—did MacMorn mean to drug him?

But why should he?

Yes, though, there would come the time of opened doors. But that was hours away—it was now two o'clock, and new moon was not until half past six.

Like nothing on earth, that scent. The phrase, so often used carelessly, was completely apposite now. It was like nothing on earth, but rather was a breath from and almost sight of some Elysium of dreams. Scent of a golden-lighted lotus-land, peopled by such houris as the one he had seen robed in green and silver—green and silver ...

The language MacMorn had caused him to understand came back to his mind, and he could think in it again.

It was like the scent, appealing and direct, simpler and less capable of fine shades of expression than his own language, but persuasive, forceful. And if MacMorn had told truth, the dark girl in green and silver would be no more than a wandering shadow, soon. MacMorn would take the rest of her, blend it to himself as another period of life in which to gain more power—Gees started up.

A faint sound had reached his ears from the corner of the room opposite the door. A very faint sound, as if a mouse might have moved beside the panelling, or—It was at that point MacMorn must have entered the room, while Gees had been trying to open the door. Was the other door there? He had tried the wall at that point, even more thoroughly than the rest. There would be no harm in trying it again.

He went into the corner and began there, thrusting at the wall with his hands to see if any part of it would yield. Some two yards out from the corner, at right angles to the shelf, what had been solid before gave way with little effort on his part.

The sound he had heard had indicated the release of a catch of some sort, and now a section of the wall the size and shape of an ordinary door fell back at right angles to the rest, quite silently, revealing a passageway gloomy even at its entrance, and hidden in black, utter darkness after only a few feet of its length. If its visible beginning were any indication of its direction, it led parallel with the corridor along the front of the house.

A trap, of course. He was intended to explore the passage—and find what ugly end in the utter darkness toward which he gazed?

If so, though, why the scent? The catch of this hidden door might have slipped by accident. Stepping just inside the passage, he felt down the edge of the door, but could find no latch nor bolt, no inequality of the surface, even. Nor was there any sign of a fastening on the edge to which the bronze hinges were screwed, he assured himself.

He backed into the room, out of sight of the passage, and, getting his automatic pistol out of the armpit holster next his skin, slipped it in his hip pocket with a round in the barrel chamber and the safety catch on. For he meant to explore the passage, whether it was a trap or not.

Anything was better than sitting here, waiting MacMorn's time to release him. And, back in the full influence of the scent, he had no scruple over telling himself that the passage might lead him to the green and silver room and the girl within it.

In a straight line, it must take him there.

He entered, and moved slowly and with short steps along the smooth floor. The ceiling was within his reach overhead, the walls so close to each other that he had only to extend his hands a little to touch them both. No glimmer of light showed ahead, and he went more slowly and yet more slowly, feeling his way lest some shaft should be open to take him down and out of the sight of all men for all time.

After what seemed a long time he looked back. Yes, so far the passage was quite straight, for he could see the oblong of light framing a part of the room he had left. Again, in six-inch steps, he went on, bending each foot as he advanced it to assure himself that the toe was on firm support. The floor remained smooth, unbroken.

Until he sensed solidity close before him. He reached out and touched it, solid wood, a smooth, unbroken surface wherever his hand moved. He thought to use his cigarette lighter, and the flame showed plain hard wood. With the light still on, he pressed lightly, and the panel gave a little. He capped the lighter and put it back in his pocket, and, looking

back again to estimate the distance he had travelled, felt that he knew what was beyond this door.

A stronger thrust, and it swung open and stayed. Facing him stood the girl in green and silver, and he knew as he looked at her that though Margaret Aylener might be and still was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, this dark girl was the loveliest. With wide eyes and parted lips she faced him, startled, but scarcely afraid, a face and figure so ethereally fine as to seem only half of earth.

"Who are you?" he asked, with the bluntness of sudden embarrassment. She shook her head and smiled, as if she did not comprehend the question. Then he remembered; MacMorn and she had spoken, and he had understood, another language. It came easily to his tongue, he found, and in it he asked again—"Who are you?"

"I am named Gail," she answered, and the name as she spoke it, half separated into two syllables, was like a caress. "And you—have you found a way to freedom and come to set me free?"

"Ah! Like that, then." He reverted to his own language for the comment. Then, so that she could understand. "I am not sure, but we may find a way. If, as I think, the doors must be opened."

Chapter 21

Warning in the Shadows

The girl moved close, and her soft, dark eyes questioned him, sought to know how far she might trust him. “Then you too know of the opening doors?”

For a moment it appeared to him that the fine lines of her-face were confused with other lines, but as she drew back the illusion disappeared. He said: “Yes, and we may escape then.”

She looked toward the passage entrance. “Until you came, no door was there,” she said. “There is light—I see light a long way off.”

“Another room, like this,” he explained. “But—”

“Let us go there!” She turned toward him, interrupting him with the exclamation. “Let us go there and close this door, so that he may not know where to find me. I am afraid—let us go there.”

He hesitated. There was nothing against the suggestion, he decided. She was already at the passage entrance, looking back at him, waiting for him to follow.

“I shall not fear the darkness with you,” she said, and at that he hesitated no longer, but entered the passage and drew the door closed behind him, placing them both in black darkness. Before moving on, he gave a thrust at the closed door, and found it immovable. Useless to regret leaving the green and silver room, now. But not until he had found and grasped the girl’s arm did he realize that they were going back into the scent, of which her room had been free.

With the open doorway at the far end, and his knowledge that all the length of the passage floor was smooth, he led her confidently along into his room, as he thought of it now. The scent was stronger than when he had entered the passage, or else return into it made it more

perceptible. He saw it as a faint, very thin haze, a slightly greenish tinge on the air of the room.

While he stood, staring with mixed surprise and suspicion at a tray of food that had appeared on one of the little tables in his absence, Gail reached back into the passage and pulled at the door, which swung back level with the rest of the wall. As it came to rest, Gees heard again a faint sound like a mouse in the panelling, and, moving back to try the door, found that it had latched itself and was immovable as when he had first tried the walls.

Well, it made no difference, since the door at the other end had closed solidly. If all doors should open, as he believed, this room was as near the front entrance of the house as that other.

He faced about to look at the girl as a sudden suspicion assailed his mind. Possibly that trick of the opening doors—for now Gees felt certain it was a trick—had been contrived so that food might be placed in this room in his absence, lest he should attack whoever brought it and try to make his escape.

But was that all, or did MacMorn intend to throw this girl and him together for some other purpose? Was she leagued with MacMorn, rendered accessible as aid to some purpose of his?

The question lasted in his mind only until she gazed up at him, and he saw in this stronger light the full loveliness of her eyes. Utter truth was revealed in them: such a one was incapable of treachery, an embodiment of the sweetness that he breathed with the scent—and she trusted him to free her from MacMorn.

Adam's decisions about Eve, when she seduced him from Lilith, were probably formed on rather similar lines.

"There is food," Gail said simply, "And I am hungry."

"I too," Gees agreed, and took off a cover to reveal sandwiches—which might be poisoned, for all he knew, but he felt he would risk it. "While we eat, you shall tell me of yourself, Gail."

It was the scent, a warning consciousness told him, that made him incline to belief in an easy escape at the appointed time. As he placed two stools opposite each other with the tray between them, he tried to keep in mind that he must not relax from vigilance for a moment, but the need for care and restraint was difficult to remember. More and still more difficult.

He found himself revelling in the increased perceptiveness that was one of the attributes of this haze, and told himself that oxygen, which has a like effect, burns life itself away if increased to too great a strength.

He must watch, resist, keep a clear mind—"Of myself," the girl said as she seated herself before the tray. "Today, but for you, I should end, no longer be myself."

"I am not sure that I can save you," he told her. "Not quite sure."

"When the doors are opened, you will take me away beyond his reach, beyond the limits of his circle," she said, with complete confidence. She took up one of the sandwiches and began to eat, smiling at him.

"If possible, I will take you away," he assented. "You know of the doors opening. What else? Why are the doors opened?"

"That she, the Unnamed, may enter," she answered, with as little apprehension over it as if she had spoken of an ordinary human visitor. "All ways must be made clear for her, else the invocation brings no answer. Only when all ways are clear will she reveal herself."

"And then?" he asked.

"Then, though the ways are clear, she has no need of them," she answered. "Yet they must be clear, lest any who would win sight of her are held from her presence. There must be way for all."

It was accepted fact, Gees knew. In every circle raised on earth by the very old ones who believed in and gave strength to their Unnamed, the stones that guard her altars stand apart from each other, so that approach may be possible to the people on every side.

Thus, now that MacMorn had built his house round an altar—and had been careful to leave the altar itself open to the sky—every line of approach to the altar, every door in the house which might hold back a possible visitant, must be opened before any invocation could take effect.

He took his third sandwich and began on it. "And her way?" he asked a little later, before taking another.

She smiled. "What is the way of the shadows?" she asked in reply. "Could you stay them when they pass, or confine them to a way?"

For awhile they ate in silence, and Gees reflected on the many who had tried to evoke this Unnamed or some later form of her, even in historic times. The hecatombs of Carthage, the children of Retz, black victims in Haiti, white girls—especially girls!—in closed houses from Paris to the farthest East, sacrificed in attempts at reawakening the object of a worship conceived in cruelty, kept alive only by gifts of human life, and a devouring rather than beneficent power.

MacMorn followed it to his own ultimate extinction in it, blindly, helplessly. MacMorns had been kings; one of them —this one, perhaps—had

very nearly raised himself to rule over all Britain. So far, given the human lives it demanded, had their Unnamed led them upward, but with inevitably lessening fees for its consuming at their command, they had dwindled from kingship until Gamel MacMorn was an unknown man in a tiny, remote village. The moon god or goddess—for to them it was female—was cold as the moon, unresponsive to human needs as the moon.

“You dream? Forget me?” Gail asked.

“No man could forget you,” he answered. “I thought of ways of escape. A few hours, less than four hours, and we shall go.”

She stood up, and he followed suit. She said: “I need drink.”

“There is a door where the shelf is bare,” he told her. “You will find water there. Wait, I will get you water.”

“No,” she dissented. “Another drink. When Gamel MacMorn brought me here, he came with me to this room and made a drink there.” She pointed at the shelf. “I will make it again, and you shall taste it with me. It brings great happiness.”

She was a shining wonder as she stood, and the scent was in his brain, clouding reason. Instead of passing him on her way to the shelf, she stood before him, almost touched against him. Inevitably he held her, unresisting, as inevitably kissed her and saw her eyes close under his own, felt her yield to his hold.

“I trust myself to you,” she said. “When the doors are opened, I will trust myself to you.”

Then a shuddering took her, and he held her away from him with a sudden thought that the food had been poisoned. But she smiled, and stood quite clear of him, erect and slim. “I will make the drinks that bring happiness,” she said, “And you shall drink with me.”

She leaned toward him momentarily and her lips touched lightly against his own, but when he would have held her again she slipped away and went to the shelf while he turned to watch her.

Beside her, and behind her range of vision, he saw a shadow hovering. He could not gaze at it directly to determine its form, for as he shifted his line of vision the shadow shifted too, always escaping him. Others appeared to either side of her, but of them all he could not pin one to definiteness, could not line his sight directly on it.

Then he saw that Gail was compounding the drinks with as sure a hand as MacMorn’s. The two glass-stoppered bottles from which he had poured stood out in front of the rest, and she half filled two glasses from one bottle, to complete the filling from the other and stand to

watch while in both glasses the blended fluids foamed, gained colour, and stilled to crimson clarity.

It occurred to Gees that the change must be real rather than apparent, for MacMorn was not here now to compel a hypnotic belief in it. There was only Gail—and the shadows.

“What need has MacMorn of shadows?”

She turned from the shelf to face him, apparently startled by such a question. She said—“He has no need of them. They are lives yielded on the altar, for each life a shadow, because they died to give strength to the Unnamed. He can command them, but in this place he cannot escape them. They crave release from being, but while the Unnamed has power they are bound to existence. Need of them? If he could, Gamel MacMorn would drive them away, but that may not be.”

There they were, ever moving just beyond his line of vision, but he knew that Gail did not perceive their presence. To MacMorn, who served his Unnamed, they must appear as accusers—and though he could command them he could not drive them away! There was, then, a heavy price that he must pay for his continuing human existence. He must be—was—entirely conscienceless, or he could never endure these reminders of lives he had taken, in what fashion Gees could not yet tell, to renew his own. Drifting shadows, voiceless, craving release—Gail turned again and took up the two glasses. She came forward from the shelf and offered one to Gees, smiling, and he took and held it.

The shadows were nearer, more numerous, nebulous shapes on the greenish haze, though not once could he bring one directly before his gaze to ascertain what form these remnants of lives assumed. There was a warning in his brain that he could not reduce to definiteness, an impelling of which he did not know the source.

Something he must or must not do or say, but it was as vague as the drifting shadows. He looked at the clear, crimson fluid in the glass, and again at Gail.

“Where have I heard your voice?” he asked. “Somewhere—”

She shook her head. “There are many voices like mine,” she answered, but he detected a note of anxiety in the implied denial. “Mine is like some one of them, but you have not heard me speak until today.”

“Yet, somewhere, I have heard you,” he insisted. “If you could speak my language—is this the only language you understand?”

“I cannot speak your language. Drink with me.” She reached out the glass she held and with it touched his.

(Was that—the need of placing her, remembering where he had heard her voice, the vague warning that ticked in his brain?)

“When I drank this drink with MacMorn,” he said, “no good came of it.” (Was the warning against taking the drink?)

“But I am not MacMorn.” She leaned toward him and smiled. “Yet I warn you—when you drink, do not close your eyes.”

That must be it. He had closed his eyes—Kyrle remembered closing his eyes when he had first drunk this stuff, and both Kyrle and himself had lost periods of time in which MacMorn had done what he would with their minds. But still there was an uneasy sense of something he must or must not do or say, a consciousness other than his own warning him of danger from—what? Closing his eyes?

Kyrle had said, when he told of his uneasy dreams: “It isn’t whispering, but as if they thought at the inner me, not in speech at all.” So now, something was thinking at the inner Gees, striking at the influence of the scent, trying to tell him—what?

He ought not to have come back here: the green and silver room was free of the scent, and away from it these impulses which drove him now would have had no power. He saw Gail, not relaxing her gaze at him, lift her glass to her lips, and knew that he too wanted to drink, wanted to experience the ecstasy the crimson fluid had already given him once. If he did not close his eyes—in that lay the danger. He drank.

Gail’s glass, emptied, thudded unbroken on the carpeted floor. For a moment, as he too drank, he knew again the illusion that other lines confused the contours of her face, and then the wonderful, vital life of the fluid flooded him. His glass fell unheeded from his fingers, and he reached out—Gail’s dark eyes were so near his own that he had no remembrance of the shadows, nor any reasoning sanity left ...

Her arms clasped round his neck, and she drew him down ... the dark eyes looked up into his, and closed ... she whispered—“Yes. Hold me—” and her whispering ceased. The elysian enchantment of the scent was one with her night-dark hair and willing lips, a sweetness ...

Chapter 22

The Wind's Delay

Thirty miles away, the wheel-flanges of an engine and three corridor coaches ground noisily against the lee-side rails as, resistant to the force of the gale, the train drew to a standstill at a wayside station. Callum, waiting on the platform, hurried to a doorway of the middle coach, from which Margaret Aylener descended to face him. He looked past her, but no other descended with her. "You are alone, madam."

"Have you seen anything of Miss Helen?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, madam. Mr. Green and Mr. Kyrle came last night, and said she had disappeared. I thought—perhaps—" He did not end the sentence, nor was there any need. It was the expression of the very faintest of hopes that he knew all the time as a futility.

"They are at Brachmornalachan now?" she asked, while an aged porter, who had raked her luggage out of the van, approached for instruction as to what to do with it.

"They went to MacMorn's this morning," Callum answered. "I put Mr. Green's car in the garage for him, because he left it out last night. When I came away, madam, they had not returned."

"Why did he leave the car out?" She disregarded the waiting porter to ask the question.

"He—Mr. Green—told Elizabeth there was fog," Callum answered, "though it was quite clear when I went to bed. But—" Again he left a remark incomplete. Again, with Margaret Aylener as his auditor, there was no need for him to state his conclusion.

She turned to the porter—he had loaded and unloaded baggage here for her long enough to know the lady from Brachmornalachan.

"Put it all in the car," she bade. "In the back—we shall not wait to strap any trunks on the grid. Go and help him, Callum."

She gave up her ticket and followed them into the little booking office, toward the exit from the station. When Callum released the latch of the outer door for the porter to wheel his barrow through, the door swung wide with a crash, and the wind that drove it struck Margaret Aylener and forced her back a couple of steps before she could regain balance against it. She struggled through the doorway and on to the car.

Until the car turned to face the wind, the body rocked on its springs as gusts struck at its length. Blue-grey, high-riding clouds raced from west to east, and the land was dark under them. Within a quarter-mile of the station, they passed a great gash in the earth, and at its side a wall of soil that still clung among the roots of a newly-uprooted larch. The driving gale roared past them, and the car shook in it. Vague in the farthest distance before them, the hills that ringed in Brachmornalachan squatted, grey under the blue-grey clouds.

"What time was it when Mr. Green and Mr. Kyrle went to MacMorn's this morning, Callum?" Miss Aylener asked when they had travelled a mile.

"Very early, madam. Mr. Green asked for breakfast at six, and they left very soon after. I was out after Mr. Green's car, and saw them go into the house. It would then be not seven o'clock, I think."

"And until you left, you saw nothing more of them?"

"Nothing, madam," he told her soberly. "It would be about two o'clock when I left, and I think they were still at MacMorn's."

"And it is new moon this evening." She stated the fact, did not ask a question. Callum inclined his head in assent.

"By Greenwich, six-thirty-three," he said.

For awhile, gazing through the windscreen at bending trees, broken branches, flying wisps of straw and hay, and here and there a flung-down mass of foliage—the wrack of the great gale—she sat thoughtful. All her love for Helen, all that she had given, was futile, ran her thoughts. Within his circle of stones, MacMorn was master of old enchantments, priest of old gods and user of their powers—and the two men had not come back! He had worsted them, laid his warlock spells on them and made them helpless. And Helen—She must not despair: there was still time, still hope.

They topped a rise, and the car slowed and shook in the full force of the wind. With a crash that was the sound of its death-agony a tall tree, no more than a score yards distant from the road, fell.

"This is an awful gale, Callum," Margaret Aylener said.

"Aye," he assented. "I mind no worse. But yon tree stood exposed to the worst, and t'was spaulty wood. Else it would have uprooted, not broken as it did."

"Is that the correct time?" She looked at the clock on the dash.

"Fairly correct, madam. Maybe five minutes fast—it gains a wee bit." He depressed his accelerator as he spoke, for, though they had topped the rise, the wind's force slowed down the car.

"And another hour will see us at home," she suggested.

"Not today, madam." He shook his head. "The wind holds us back. Nearer an hour and a half, I'd say, with the last nine miles little more than a cattle track as it is. And that only if the road's clear."

"Clear?" she echoed, not comprehending.

"A tree might fall and block it at any moment, madam."

A slant of greyness charged toward them: drops of the rain rattled on the wind screen like small shot, and then the shower was behind them, racing to the east, while Callum set his wiper in motion for a minute to clear the spattered screen, and stopped it again.

They rounded a bend, and he released the accelerator, disengaged gear, and pulled on the hand brake. "I feared it," he said.

A high-roofed truck lay on its side, the wheels toward the ditch, the strutted tarpaulin top extending so far into the road as almost to block it. Two men, the driver and his mate, stood gazing at it.

"I'll go and see, madam," Callum said. "There may be just room to pass. On this curve, we are diagonal to the wind, and an inch too little might throw us into the off-side ditch. I am not sure—"

He got out and closed the door. Alternately she watched him and the inexorable clock on the dash, while he went to where the two men stood. The lorry driver nodded at him, cheerfully.

"We've sent for the nearest towing outfit, mister," he said. "I reckon another hour'll see it here. She's threatened to capsize half a dozen times when the blasted wind hit her full, and by gum she's done it at last. But you might get past." He measured the clear width of road with his eyes, and then looked at the stationary car. "It's a shave, if not more'n a shave, but you might do it."

"We will see," Callum said calmly.

With his back to the tarpaulin at the point where it projected farthest into the road, he set his heel against it, and then, heel touching toe with every step, paced to the edge of the ditch.

"What d'ye make it, mate?" the truck driver called to him.

He came back from the edge of the ditch and shook his head. "Six inches too little," he said. "And I must get on."

"You mean—real serious?" the driver asked.

Callum looked him squarely in the eyes and said: "Life or death."

"Well, that's good enough, I guess," the man observed. "The old barrow's wrecked, anyhow, an' I doubt if I'll ever drive her to Manchester again. You say life or death, so wreckin' the cover's no crime."

He detached a scout's jack-knife from a swivel on his belt, opened it, and thrust the point through the tarpaulin covering. With a downward thrust he made a long slit, parallel with the strut on which that part of the cover was braced. Then, reversing the knife and thrusting upward, he carried the slit as far as he could reach.

"Jumbo"—he addressed his mate—"open the tool-box careful, though I guess everything'll fall out however you open it. Fetch out the hacksaw. If we cut away a couple o' struts about a foot down, I reckon it'll give that six inches o' roadway. Get a move on!"

"I'll go and explain to the lady in the car," Callum said.

She watched his return, glad to see any movement but that of the merciless clock hands before her. He explained why they must wait, and she took a pound note out of her bag and handed it to him.

"Give them that," she bade, "And tell them to hurry. Make them do it quickly, Callum. There is so very little time."

"I'll do my best, madam," he promised, and went back.

By the time he reached the truck again, the driver had finished slitting the tarpaulin, and Jumbo had taken the top off the rearmost strut with the hacksaw. There was no need, Callum knew, to tell the driver and his mate to hurry. Five minutes more, and between them the two men carried aside the cut-away part of the cover. The driver eyed the resulting distance to the ditch, and again looked at the waiting car.

"Think that'll do it, mate?" he asked cheerfully.

"I am quite sure," Callum answered, and held out the pound note. "Your front end is so much farther off the road that it won't interfere with us. Give me clearance against you as I drive past."

"I will that, an' you're a toff, mate." The driver took the pound note. "Ten bob apiece outer the sky, as you might say. Thank the lady for us, mate, and tell her we wish her luck."

She needed it, Callum reflected as he went back to his seat and started again.

Now, slowly, with a tight grip on the wheel because of the thrust of the tearing, roaring wind, Callum set the car in motion. The rear mudguard scraped against the ragged edge of tarpaulin where the driver had cut it away. They were clear! Callum pushed down the accelerator, and Margaret Aylener smiled and inclined her head to the two men as the car passed them, gaining speed momentarily.

Clear, but with twenty-two minutes lost.

"Callum, did you have a good lunch before you started?"

"Why, yes, madam." Surprise at the question sounded in his reply. She said:

"Then, if we get back by six, I don't wish you to stop for tea. Go straight to MacMorn's—don't trouble about the trunks or putting the car away, but go straight there. You understand?"

"Yes, madam."

"You will have no difficulty about getting in, I feel sure. My father told me how the door stood open for a new moon, at the time of Margaret Grallach's disappearance. You will have no difficulty over that part of it."

"And the rest of it,"—Callum spoke as much to himself as to her—"well, I shall find that out when I get there."

"Helen—" Margaret Aylener said the one word, and no more.

Callum said: "I understand, madam," and drove on, into the roaring wind, neutralizing its pressure with his tight grip on the steering wheel.

Chapter 23

Maker of Dreams

A thing thought at Gees' inner self and wakened it. It used no words, but its form was: "We tried to warn you against the crimson liquid, but you were drowned in the scent, and would drink."

He thought in answer: "It is too late, now."

"She was bidden not to drink, but to keep watch. The lure of the liquid was too strong for her, and she drank. See her now!"

Gees saw her lying among the cushions of the divan, wonderful in sleep, with her outflung arm across his shoulder and her lips parted in a smile. Her alluring dark eyes were closed, and her breast rose and sank evenly. And in this dream he saw himself, too, from outside himself, one arm half hidden under Gail's dark hair, his eyes closed, his body inert.

The thing threw another thought into his self that saw these two asleep: "She did not keep watch."

Regret for Gail mixed in with an inexplicable triumph in that thought. Gees tried to sort out the two emotions, to understand the causes that evoked them, and the thing divined his thought. It put into his mind: "Because our master will punish her, and command us to trouble her dreams. And because we have triumphed over him, since she drank the liquid and so could not keep watch. It was willed that you alone should drink through her temptation, but the scent lured her, and she could not resist. She must pay a great price for this happiness."

"Then you are a shadow?" Gees thought the question at the thing he could not see nor hear, though he felt it as existing.

"We are all shadows. We tried to warn you, but the scent was too strong. Our master is too strong, and even now he prepares to gain new strength, and in the preparing relaxes his will from us. Else, we could not have won access to you."

It was no more than a dream, Gees knew, though it had a continuity beyond that of most dreams, a reasonableness in spite of its impossibility. One more effort, and he would waken. He could feel the warmth of Gail's arm, the weight of her head on his own arm. One more effort—but he could only look down and see those two bound in deepest sleep. Gail's smile told of utter, contented happiness, but he saw his own brows draw downward in a momentary frown, and his closed eyelids quivered, and stilled.

A shadow thought at him that he, one with them while that self on the divan slept, was out of time and out of distance. Nothing was either far or near, and presently nothing was real, for all things apart from existence itself were pictures on the great web of eternity in which time was woven as a pattern.

And because time was no more than a pattern on eternity, he was there out of time, with the shadows, out over the world. He could see Brahmornalachan and the altar open to the sky inside an inner circle no bigger than MacMorn's house. A red-armed man stood beside the black altar, and as others were dragged up one by one and laid on the altar his arm was splashed to a brighter red. When he looked up from his work and revealed his face, it was MacMorn's face. Then all the shadows among whom Gees knew himself one blotted out that piece of the pattern of time and were very much afraid.

"The master," they thought to Gees and to each other. "The master. If he sees us, he will drive this shadow who is not yet a shadow from among us, send him back to his self that sleeps. And a shadow which is not yet a shadow is a little rest from the fields of dead flowers and desire without hope."

He thought a wish to see such fields, and looked on a waste of land swathed in grey gloom, dotted with tall stalks on which grey petals drooped, scentless, dead.

He knew the gloom as an intensity of hopeless longing for escape—and through the field, half-buried in it yet in no way arrested from its rush, a modern express train hurtled on shadowy rails among a flock of shadowy sheep, while among the sheep, an aeon or so before sheep ever found these pastures, a pair of beetle-browed, skin clad lovers—Cro-Magnons, perhaps—caressed each other. For all these things, though happening at different points in the pattern which was time, had happened in that one place in eternal space, and so were fixed there, each in its moment or hour.

Limit of fantasy! An express train rushing through the shadowy fields

of asphodel! In the persisting fields shadows of men and women wandered hopelessly, calling to each other though none heeded the cries.

Gees thought at the shadows around him: "A mad world."

They thought a laugh at him—even shadows could think laughter, being freed for a little hour from the driving of their master, who gave himself wholly for this time to the service of his Unnamed.

He thought a question: "Helen Aylener?" Then there was a flurry among the shadows that had thought these scenes into his consciousness. They crowded in on him, and he saw one clearly as a bearded, fierce, dirty face. A mere bodiless face, thrust close at him, thinking that he had thought something they were bidden keep from him. The face drove at him. He saw Gail nestle a little closer to his sleeping self, heard her contented, rest-filled sigh, and himself moved slightly.

His arm was numb with cramp. He moved it, trying to withdraw it from under her head without wakening her. The scent was strong in his nostrils: the things he had seen among the shadows raced, picture-clear, through and through his brain, and Gail asleep was dear, infinitely dear.

She started up, sat erect. She said: "But you should be asleep!"

He looked a laugh into her eyes. "I have wakened," he answered.

She leaned close toward him. The nearness of her was unbelievable. Yesterday, he had not know that such fire and tenderness and utter abandonment could exist outside dreams. There was something he ought to remember, something the shadows wanted him to remember: they swayed round him, never completely within range of his opened eyes. Gail's eyes prevented them, her offered lips drove out thought of them, and the scent prevented reasoning, destroyed thought of yesterday or of tomorrow. Her arms around his neck were a garland.

"Gail ... loveliness ..." He spoke aloud. "You have not told me of yourself."

"What can I tell you? I am a shadow in your mind, a dream you hold close and love. All men seek a dream, and you have found it."

"No man ever found such a dream real before."

She passed a slender finger over one of his eyebrows. "I ruffled it, I smooth it," she explained, and smiled happily. "If I am a dream, you are reality. There is happiness and happiness, and you have given the greater of the two. All my life I shall remember. If I had accepted all the lives I have foregone, still I should have remembered."

"All the lives—?" He gazed into her eyes, questioningly.

"Nothing. Only, if there should be a tomorrow, remember it is because of you the lives I might have taken are foregone. If there should be a tomorrow! Do you remember that I trust you to set me free, save me from Gamel MacMorn when all doors are opened?" Her arms went round him as they sat among the cushions, and she stared at the door, not yet opened, while Gees looked into her hungry eyes.

"Trust, then. But I asked you, while we wait—tell me of yourself as you have not yet told." The language in which he must speak to her flowed as easily as his own, and he did not know that he spoke in it, so strong was the scent that drowned his reason.

"What shall I tell you?" Her dark eyes laughed at him, and for a moment she tightened the clasp of her arms while her lips lay on his own. About them the shadows swayed, never completely within the range of his sight, but stressing a warning that, because of the scent obscuring his reason, he would not heed.

"We are shadows in a shadow of a dream, you and I, Gail, but tell me of your wonderful self, of the dream that is you."

She said: "I am a shadow of that Unnamed who is possessed of all, yet whom none may possess. Yet I am not,"—she drooped her head so that the words had a muffled sound as she clung to him—"not that one. For you know—you who hold me know!"

"I hold you, Gail, and I know," he told her.

"By the Kabiri, by Tanit, by the sevenfold essences that govern the outer darkness—by the Unnamed herself, you alone know!" she whispered.

"That too, Gail, I know," he said,

She had sworn by Carthaginian gods. Was there in her a recurrent memory—was she one of the dark people who had come here in ships? Still the warning ticked in his brain, but it was clouded by the influence of the scent to indistinctness. Gail's cheek was soft against his own.

"Could I tell you more?" she asked caressingly.

"Your place and people," he said. "I know—only you and your name. There is still a little time." He glanced at his wristwatch and at the closed door. Among the shadows he had seen the utter unreality of the world beyond that door—this, with Gail beside him, was real. He tried to thrust the vague warning out of his mind, to ignore it, since he could not understand it fully.

"My people," she said. "The Azilian people. They came to this shore in black ships, against their will. They set out toward the west, toward the country that the sea drowned, but when they set out they did not know the waters had covered it. A wind took and drove them to this shore,

helpless—it was against their will, and the black ships were broken on the rocks. Only a few came alive to land.”

Into his mind came Miss Brandon’s voice, speaking into a receiver held at his ear: “Miss Aylener said, ‘I saw the dark men land. They should have killed them all, then.’”

He asked: “The country was already peopled—the Azilians landed among another people?”

She said: “It is a picture in my mind, because the dark men were my fathers. They were few, but they ruled that other people and took sacrifices from among them when they set up the stones. So they made many shadows, and became kings and begot strong men.

“Gamel MacMorn is wholly of the dark people, as am I. Neither son nor daughter of my people mixed with the slaves we made, but my blood is pure. I lay my hair against your lips—test its softness! My hands that hold you—no slave blood is in them, or in me. I am of the dark people.”

An incredibility, that through all the ages two families should not have intermingled with the race they had conquered. But it was all incredible, all a dream from which there must be an awakening. Somewhere outside, red buses ran, and express trains carried their freights—through Paleozoic swamps and the fields of asphodel!

Gail’s soft voice carried on her story—and in the back of Gees’ brain a puzzling half-consciousness told him that he knew the voice, had heard it somewhere, and would know it if only he could hear it in his own language. There was something he must do—but the scent was too strong.

She said: “Day by day the black altars of the Unnamed were red, and she gave my fathers power. They begot many children and grew very strong. They forgot the country of hot sun, because here were many slaves, and the Unnamed was hungry. So they ruled, and made shadows.”

He thought aloud: “Not always.”

“A new people brought iron,” she said. “There was a first people of all, and the race of whom my fathers made slaves drove them underground. The people who live under the hills, and still Gamel MacMorn is kin to them, because in the very first days the dark people called on them for aid and they gave it, but only when a Morn allied with a woman from under the hills. So he is kin to that very first people, a race of shadows and dreams. But we are all shadows and dreams in the mind of the Unnamed—there is no reality apart from her purpose. I who might have had many lives am glad that for a little while she has given me strength

of arms that hold me and the warm sweetness of lips kissing mine—for a little while, for a very little while!”

It was all a dream, and there must be an awakening. Green and silver held close in his arms—deep sea water under moonlight—and the velvet softness of her lips, their questing warmth ...

Chapter 24

Time of the New Moon

The car came over the last rise, and Callum gripped hard on the wheel, for the wind struck strongly, and howled and roared at this thing which drove against it. In the saucer-like hollow before them, Brachmornalachan huddled, crouching under the assault of such a blast as struck it only once in a hundred years.

Margaret Aylener stiffened at sight of one of the four ash trees uptorn, a flat lying trunk and a mass of killed foliage that had broken down the wall which enclosed her home. Callum saw it too, and spoke above the roaring gale.

“When the wind dies, I’ll plant a sapling there,” he said.

Smitten firs lay flat on the hillsides, but for them she had no pity. The fallen mountain ash brought to her not pity, but fear. The stars in their courses fought for MacMorn, it seemed to her then.

The wind took a layer of peat turves from a stack beside the way, lifted and flung them, and one went trundling back out of sight, like a little devil running into freedom to work mischief. A ragged bundle of straw careened up the slope, wind-driven: the skeleton rafters of an unroofed cottage rose like bare bones above its walls, in the valley ahead.

“You say that clock is right, Callum?” Margaret Aylener asked.

“No more than five minutes either way, madam, and likely it’s fast. A week today, it was, I set it back.”

“Then there still is time. I want you to stop at the post office on the way home, and ask if any telegram has come. There may be some message from Miss Helen, and I want to know at once, if there is.”

“Aye, madam. I’ll stop and inquire.” The slope was with them, but the wind fought every yard of their advance. There were waves, real waves,

driving across the tiny loch, and a line of white lather on the nearer, lee shore. To the right MacMorn's house squatted, a stony grey break on the peaty slope, low and far-spreading; while three grey stones, equidistant from the house, stabbed at the blue-grey sky.

Thirteen lives to each stone, she thought, and thirteen to each one that lay buried under the blackish, heather-dotted earth. There, in the circle of the stones, MacMorns had ruled while Ayleners contested their kingship: now, there were left only a dark man who made shadows, and a woman near the end of her life who would have given half her substance to end his power.

"If there is a telegram, Callum, Bathsheba can tell you its wording. And perhaps you may not have to go to MacMorn's, after all."

"Yes, madam."

The car dipped down and down. When Callum stopped outside the post office and opened the door to get out, the gale flung it back with a force that strained the holding strap, and he used both hands and some good part of his strength to shut it and keep out the wind that hurtled round the saloon and ruffled tendrils of Margaret Aylener's pale-gold hair.

The hands of the clock on the dash moved on: time fled, careless of her will to arrest its passing. Callum came out from the post office and she asked—"Was there a telegram from Miss Helen, or any message?"

"Nothing at all, madam," he answered, as he started the car on the last little part of its journey toward her home.

"Bathsheba told you there was nothing?" she insisted.

"It was not Bathsheba told me anything, madam, but that girl Jennifer she has about the place. Jennifer said Bathsheba was not there, but went out last night and had not come back to sleep in her bed, which was made as it was yesterday when Jennifer went up with tea this morning."

"Bathsheba is missing?" She thought again that today was the day of new moon.

Was Bathsheba Gralloch to disappear as had her sister Margaret, whom the years had made only a memory?

"Aye, madam, but doubtless she'll come back," Callum said grimly.

"Then if there had been a telegram from Miss Helen—" She broke off, knowing that the implication was enough for him.

"Nay, madam," he said, "Bathsheba's taught Jennifer, and she knows the instrument. She told me she called up only minutes ago, to make sure lest the wires should be down in this wind, and they were not. She's a gey clever lass, is yon Jennifer. I'll open the gate."

He drove through the gateway, and as they neared the shelter of her house the gale was a thunder overhead, updriven by the walls of unyielding stone. But away to the left lay the fallen mountain ash with the stone wall shattered under its branches, a trophy of the hurricane that roared into the land from the western sea. There was a salt tang in the air, a vestige of the hurtling waters over which this fury of wind had been conceived and born.

"Callum?" She spoke as he turned the car to draw up before the doorway. "Elizabeth and Ettie can see to the trunks and carry them in, without your help, and you can leave the car here. It will come to no harm—unless this wind throws the house down on it. I want you to go straight to MacMorn's."

"Madam—" It was not a dissent from her wish, but a question for knowledge to equip him for his errand. "You're certain she's there?"

"If there were any certainty at all, Callum, she would not have gone," she answered. "I learned in London—he met her while we were abroad, and that must have been the beginning of it. Mr. Kyrle and Mr. Green have gone there, you tell me, but they have not found her—if they had, she would have seen the car and been out to welcome me. Wait, though. I will make sure."

She entered the house. Callum sat at his wheel, waiting until she appeared again and, looking in on him, shook her head.

She said: "They have not come back, Callum, and there is no news of her. I want you to go there, now."

He said, looking at the clock on the dash: "It is very near the time of new moon."

"Go now, Callum—wait for nothing. You may yet be in time. Go now, I tell you!"

He got out of the car.

Chapter 25

The Fallen Stone

No matter how strenuously Gees might try to disregard it, there was a monition in his brain, a warning which the scent would not let him perceive fully. MacMorn had contrived the scent to block out that warning: MacMorn had designed all this enchantment ...

Had MacMorn made and sent—Gail? But that was a monstrous impossibility, a thing too fantastic for weaving into this pattern of a dream. Gail was a reality. The faint pressure of her breath stirred his hair. A miracle of undreamed loveliness, she leaned close to him, and her eyes were dark lakes of questing beauty.

Beyond their range the warning shadows ever eluded his vision, free for this hour to commune with none who was not yet a shadow, but not free to tell all they knew. Else, why had they driven him back to Gail when he had questioned as to what had become of Helen Aylener? Helen Aylener? Who was Helen Aylener?

Gail drew him down among the cushions of the divan, and leaned over him. She said, very softly, "Sleep. Sleep and forget all things." And her fingers went down and down over his face, while all her will impelled him to sleep. Enough of sanity remained for him to realize that she was trying to induce a hypnotic sleep, and he closed his eyes to escape the influence, for the wristwatch had told him that the time of opening doors was very near.

"Sleep, and forget all things. Go down so deeply into sleep that you cannot even hear my voice. Sleep, go down into sleep."

For a little while her fingers passed down his face, and he knew again what the shadows had tried to warn him. At the very time for which she had asked him to save her from MacMorn, she tried to render him powerless!

The caressing fingers ceased their touch on him, and he lay with closed eyes, breathing evenly. She asked: "Can you hear my voice?"

Lying back among the cushions, he made no reply. The scent still enveloped him, but he resisted its drugging sweetness as he had resisted her will to spell him to sleep.

He felt her draw away from him, heard the faint rustle of movement as she rose from the divan, and her deep sigh of satisfaction. Again he heard the mouse-scratching sound in the panelling, and opened his eyes. Gail stood with her back to him, looking into the dark corridor through which she had come with him from the green and silver room, and as he lay he could hear the humming of the wind outside; and the terrified "Maa-aa-a!" of a goat, and this abruptly silenced. He could guess the reason for the silence.

The sound had come from the middle of the house, where the black altar in its circle lay open to the sky.

With the opening of the door air eddied into the room, and the greenish haze of the scent became swaying vapour, thinning, becoming less potent. He had an illusion—it could be only illusion, surely—that Gail's figure dimmed, even that its outline changed. She reached into the corridor to close the door, and, knowing that she would turn to face into the room again, Gees closed his eyes.

He heard the rustle of her approach. It came into his mind that, since she knew the secret of these doors, she and he might have gone out by way of the visible door leading to the outer corridor, out from the house and beyond MacMorn's reach, at any time she chose.

The shadows had said that she had been forbidden to drink of the crimson fluid, and so had failed of her purpose. Did she think to retrieve that purpose by hypnotizing him to sleep through the time of opened doors?

Though he knew her now as allied with MacMorn, the sense of her nearness was still a wonder of expectation, for the dream they two had dreamed lingered in his mind. He could never forget it; he wanted now to reach up and draw her close to him again, hold all the shining, yielding, tender miracle of her.

He had been duped so easily. She must have been filled with inward laughter at the blind readiness with which he had accepted her for what she seemed. Were her dark eyes mocking him now as she looked down, bent over him, so closely that he could feel the warmth of her breath on his face?

But then he felt her lips brush against his own, and as she drew back he could hear the hurried unevenness of her breath. Then she must have drawn back, for he was no longer conscious of her nearness. She was standing by the divan, he guessed looking down, and he dared not open his eyes. She whispered, caressingly: "Dear man! Dear man!"

Whispered in English! Then she, too, regretted that the dream had ended.

He heard her faint, startled exclamation, and the clang of opening doors that must be thrown wide when the Unnamed descended along the path of the shadows.

A wind rushed through the room, sweeping away the last vestiges of the scent and bringing a fresh tang as of the sea. He started up on the divan, and at his movement, Gail shrieked aloud and, turning, fled. The silence gave place to clamour of the gale and a faint sound of voices. There was no more enchantment. Reality had destroyed the glamour in which he had been bound—and Gail had gone!

He thrust himself up from the divan with his hands, and ran toward the door, snatching up his raincoat as he passed the place where he had thrown it—how many ages ago? Out into the corridor, in time to catch a glimpse of green and silver as Gail fled from the house. He gained the outer, open doorway, and saw her running down the slope toward the scribed monolith, a figure already shadowy in wreathing swirls of fog that drove before the mighty wind.

He ran, neared her fleeing figure, and shouted: "Gail, Gail!" No longer a green and silver figure, and the light slenderness he had held in his arms appeared to run heavily, almost clumsily. And now it was no illusion that other lines mixed in with those of the shape he knew: to his sight she changed as she ran.

A man fighting his way through the hurricane loomed before her—for a few moments she paused, and Gees halted to get out his automatic pistol, in case the man should be MacMorn.

But he heard Callum call to her over the wind: "What are you—?" and Gail interrupting in little less than a scream: "Dinna fret yersel'. T'is my ain business!" before she ran past the man, and grew shadowy in the driving mist, a heavy, blundering figure—Gail!

Bathsheba Gralloch's voice! Word for word, Bathsheba Gralloch's reply to Kyrle, when he had run after her outside the gate of ›The Rowans‹ the night before! Gail of the green and silver room, of the enchantment MacMorn had made, was Bathsheba Gralloch of reality.

A sick rage possessed Gees. If MacMorn had faced him in that moment, he would have shot him dead. If, even when the dream had been most real, she had spoken one sentence in English, he would have recognized the voice, but MacMorn had guarded against that chance. Now, clear of the house and its spells, Gees could not remember so much as a phrase of the dark man's language; it had served MacMorn's purpose, and was swept from his mind as if he had never spoken it.

He faced Callum. "Who was that—the woman who passed you?" he asked.

"That? The woman from the post office." Callum took a long breath as he recovered his wind after the struggle up the slope. "Bathsheba Gralloch. I've always tried to make Miss Aylener understand she's mixed in with MacMorn's black magic, but she would never credit it."

They went back toward the house together. Gees wound his raincoat round his arm, for it flapped in the driving wind. Callum asked: "Miss Helen?" and Gees looked at his wrist watch.

"I don't know," he said, "but there is still a quarter of an hour. Somewhere, I believe, in that damned house of sorceries, but I don't know. MacMorn separated me from Kyrle and jailed me in a room."

"But all doors had to be opened," Callum commented. "I knew it."

The mist drove away, thinned, and the squat house stood stark before them. Hours of daylight remained to reveal it—a grey, sullen light, and the wind roared hammering at the house. MacMorn's thorn tree tossed and bent in the gusts.

"Callum"—Gees bent close to him—"the woman from the post office. What do you know of her—do you know what she was like when she was younger?"

"Eh, what does it matter now?" Callum asked in reply. "A dark tall slip of a thing when I was a child, and Miss Aylener petted her, made much of her. Gave her clothes—there was a green silk frock I remember. But the sister disappeared—MacMorn took her, and may Hell take him!—and after that this one never came near ›The Rowans.‹ Look!"

He pointed up at a window almost directly over the front door of the house.

They saw Kyrle standing, gazing out to the wind-whirled tatters of thinning mist, ignoring them completely. Callum shouted at him, but he stood still, unheeding both the shout and their beckoning hands. Quite still, staring out with as little animation as if he were a corpse propped at the window.

"He's in hypnosis," Gees said. "We must go up and get him out."

"If we can wake him, he may give us news of Miss Helen." Callum made to enter the house as he spoke, and Gees went with him. But the black clad, black-haired serving man, whom Gees had seen before, turned from looking along the corridor to bar their way.

"Get aside, you!" Callum said sharply. "We're coming in."

"Ye'll no' come in!" He stood in the doorway, a heavily-built, strong figure of a man, and bared his teeth uglily. Gees drew his automatic pistol from his pocket, and levelled it at the man's chest.

"Stand aside!" he shouted.

Instead, the man leaped at Callum with a snarl, and the two of them went down in the doorway. Callum was undermost, and Gees stepped forward, reversing the pistol. He waited his chance, and rapped on the man's temple with the butt end of the weapon. He rolled aside senseless as Callum heaved out from under him and got up, with a thin stream of blood running down from teeth-marks in his chin.

"Bit me," he gasped out. For a few seconds he leaned against the lintel of the door, and his breath whistled through his teeth. Gees passed him and looked along the corridor for a staircase which would take them up to Kyrle, but could see none. He had already been past the door of the room in which he had been trapped by MacMorn and held inert by Gail, and knew no visible staircase existed that way. Somewhere at the other end of the house—"Do you feel fit to face things?" he asked.

Callum stepped into the corridor beside him. "Quite—it was only a minute's struggle." He looked down at the crumpled figure, and Gees, dragging it aside out of the doorway, remembered the automatic pistol Kyrle had put down at a MacMorn's bidding. It was no longer there.

"We'll go up," he said. "This way—it must be this way."

He led along the corridor, and they came to the wide-flung door of the green and silver room. Gees looked in for a moment and saw two dusty old couches and what might have been a couple of roughly-made milking stools, and the very color of the upholstery on the couches had faded to brownish-grey.

Of all the green and silver sensuousness in which he had seen Gail stand, no trace was left. Callum's words came back into his mind: "A tall dark slip of a thing when I was a child—" and Callum had remembered a green silk frock. MacMorn had spelled it all back and the room too as setting for her; to what she had been he had added such beauty as the fairy folk contrive for a night, to turn to rags and dust with the coming of dawn.

Illusion—all illusion!

For just the second of realization Gees looked into the room, and then he led the way along the corridor, round the corner and toward the back of the house. A little way along they came to an un-lighted stairway, and went up, feeling a way by the wall to come into another corridor, or running from side to side of the house, dividing the front and back rooms of the first floor.

They hurried, for the minutes were racing away from them now, and came to the open door of the room in which Kyrle stood as they had seen him from outside, a still figure at the window, quite heedless of the noise they made in entering.

"Kyrle!" Gees shouted at him. "Wake up, man!"

He did not move. Gees went to him and, grasping him by the shoulder, shook him and turned him round. He moved his feet just so much as kept him balanced on them, and his wide eyes stared sightlessly past them, through them. Except that his heart beat and his flesh was warm, he was lifeless, a body in which the spirit was asleep.

"We must get him outside," Gees said. "Little chance of getting any news of Helen out of him. Come on, Kyrle."

He pulled at a limp arm, and Kyrle moved with slow, thudding steps as far as the door. But there, in a way, he came to life. MacMorn had bidden him stay in the room, and he would not leave it.

With a hand thrust out to each side to hold him back, he resisted stubbornly, strong enough in his hypnosis to thwart them both. Until, realizing how little time remained in which to find and save Helen Aylener, Gees drew back to give himself room, and with all his weight behind the blow struck Kyrle in the solar plexus and got an arm round the limp, senseless figure.

"He'll thank me for that, yet, if he remembers it," he said. "Give me a hand, Callum. I'll carry him out, and then you can get him away somehow while I go looking for Miss Helen. Once outside this cursed circle, I believe he'd wake up."

He stooped, and between them they got Kyrle across his shoulder. Then they went out from the room, Callum following down the dark stairway and to the other door.

Outside, the hurricane appeared to be lessening, though still it roared and beat at the house, and all the hurrying mist had driven eastward and left grey clarity over the valley. Gees dumped his burden on the ground and saw that the pillar scribed with Kore's symbol had fallen.

For centuries beyond telling it had stood, but now it was only a line along the surface of the earth. Was its fall a token that MacMorn's

power was failing?

“And now—Miss Helen?” Callum asked.

“I’ll look for her,” Gees answered. “If you leave him to wake up here, he’ll only go back into that room—you’ve got to get him beyond the limit of the circle, somehow, outside MacMorn’s domination. I believe you’d do it if you got him past that stone down there.”

He stepped quickly inside the doorway as MacMorn’s man stirred and groaned, and, taking his pistol out from his pocket again, Gees dealt the man a second heavy blow.

“That should keep you quiet,” Gees grunted. “All right, Callum—look after Mr. Kyrle and get him away. Come back and look for me if he wakes in his right sense. I’ll find Miss Helen if she’s here.”

He turned back into the house as Callum began half-lifting, half-dragging Kyrle’s limp body down the slope toward the fallen stone.

Chapter 26

The Black Altar

They had missed MacMorn only by minutes. He entered the room from which Gail had fled and Gees had followed her, a few seconds after they had gone; he was searching for her, since he had need of a woman's aid. Then he sought her in the dusty room in which he had made illusion for Gees, not knowing that she was then running away from the house.

No sign of her, no time to find her.

MacMorn went up the staircase and entered a room at the back where Helen Aylener, blank in hypnosis as was Kyrle, sat still on a bed. Bathsheba should have been here with the girl, should have prepared her, and now there was so little time, so terribly little time. He touched the girl's forehead with his fingertips.

"Waken to me, Helen," he bade. "Waken, but only to me."

In a way she became alive; she was an automaton, capable of doing his bidding, and no more. He said: "Stand up," to test her response, and she stood obediently, completely subject to him.

He held up a leather gag that he carried. "Open your mouth," he bade, and again she obeyed, uninterestedly.

He fitted the gag between her teeth, not ungently, and strapped it behind her head, because in the limit of swift agony she must endure on the black altar she must not be able to cry out. He said: "Undress—take off all your clothes," and while she obeyed that command too he took two black swathings that hung over the end of the bed.

In one he wrapped himself, a covering that reached from his head to his feet, and when she stood naked he draped the other robe over her, a thick black woollen fabric which left exposed only her bare feet and ankles, her face and untidy, pale gold hair.

Then he grasped her arm through the robe, and led her out and down. Had he been a minute later, Gees and Kyrle would have met him as they went up to where Kyrle stood helpless.

He took her along the corridor which ran midway of the house at ground level, giving access from either side to the circle and the black altar stone. By one end of the stone the man Partha stood, naked, his arms folded on his hairy chest and his shaggy black head bent forward—he was acolyte to the black-robed priest of ancient evil who led the gagged sacrifice to the altar, and he neither moved nor looked up as the two advanced, while the great wind roared overhead and blue-grey masses of cloud raced across the sky.

Between the altar and the top of the circle that walled it in a darkness slowly gathered as MacMorn had seen it gather—how many times?

Down the shallow channel between the wall and the black stone, a line of thin fluid trickled to ooze through a wire gauze that had been set up. On the other side of the gauze, where the channel in the stone encircled the black altar rising above it, the fluid was alight with a wavering, bluish flame that gave off flecks of oily black smut. Like the covering of a Davy lamp, the wire gauze prevented the fluid from taking fire before it passed into the channel cut round the altar stone. There was a resinous smell; the fluid may have been turpentine, or some similar spiritous distillation.

The little blue flames wavered and flickered, ringing in the black stone, and Partha stood as if he too were made of stone, his gaze directed down at the flame.

MacMorn stripped the black robe off the girl and lifted her in his hold. He stepped over the flame and laid her on the black stone, her pale gold hair just touching its edges near where Partha stood.

He took her hands, one after the other, and drew her arms down straight beside her, and she made no more resistance than a doll. Then MacMorn stepped back across the flame and, gazing upward, lifted his arms in silent invocation, his black robe falling back like a curtain hung behind him.

The darkness over the altar grew denser.

Black smut from the wavering flame was lifted up into it, and the flames grew tall and thin and steady, standing up like bluish, transparent candles, ringing in the black altar and the white, still girl laid on it. And now the darkness began to take shape—MacMorn stood rigid, his arms upraised, and Partha's head drooped still lower on his folded arms.

Above them grew the semblance of a giant figure with enormous, shadowy arms and hands of which the fingers were taloned like those of a vast beast, and with the face of a woman who knew all evil, and for whom all evil was not enough.

Slowly, second by second, this semblance sucked up form and substance from the flames; slowly, second by second, it grew more tangible, and descended, a forming horror of unimaginable cruelty and lust and fear, bearing down toward the altar and the naked girl laid there, while round and round the limits of the circle shadows, cold and devoid of all emotion except that of longing for release from their dreary bondage, waited and watched this making of another shadow which presently would be one among them.

They crowded, far off and still, while the vaster shadow accreted substance and strength from the flames, and descended—All this, through seconds of frozen, helpless horror, Gees saw, and knew that if he had overcome MacMorn it was only by a minute. Because he would not kill the black-robed man or devil without warning, he lifted the pistol in his hand and fired a shot at the wall, just over the place from which the fluid ran down to feed the fire about the black altar.

With the shot MacMorn's arms dropped as if the bullet had struck him, and the awful shape of the Unnamed whipped away like a veil and was gone, while Partha looked up, his teeth showing over his shaggy beard—And a spurting shaft of fluid from the wall struck MacMorn between the shoulders, a thin cascade curving out from the hole Gees' bullet had pierced in the tank concealed high up in the circle of stone.

MacMorn faced the source of the flow, faced about again, bewildered, and as Gees stepped out from the gloom of the corridor along which he had advanced, MacMorn almost leaped toward him, guessing his intent to take Helen off the altar.

The man's black eyes flamed in fury, and he made to pass the end of the altar—a little blue flame touched the edge of his spirit-sodden black robe, and he himself became a pillar of spouting flame, a tortured beast that ran hither and thither while Gees stood aghast at the sight and Partha fled into a corridor and vanished.

Then, fighting with his hands against the fire that perhaps gave him a foretaste of his Hell, screaming in utter agony, MacMorn slipped and fell into the lake of fire that mounted upward, ever upward, fed by the stream from the bullet hole. There, drowned in fire, breathing fire, he was no more than a thing that writhed for a very little while and was still, while the shadows that had watched and waited fled, vanished.

Release had come to them, and they would haunt this place of their making no more, for MacMorn, last of the men who had made them, was dead.

One side of the black stone was still beyond the lake of flame in which MacMorn's body shrivelled and roasted. As, pocketing his pistol, Gees reached over from that side and wrapped the raincoat round Helen's body, and then lifted her, he felt the heat of the increasing furnace scorch his eyes.

He dragged her to the side of the stone at which he stood, lifted her in his arms, and ran into the corridor, round to the front, and out from the house.

There he stopped to remove the gag MacMorn had placed in her mouth, and to clothe her more completely in the raincoat. Lifting her, he went off down the slope toward the loch—toward the fallen stone, over which two figures that he recognized as Kyrle and Callum stood, looking down until he was quite near them.

Then Kyrle, looking up and seeing what he carried, would have run toward him, but Callum held the younger man back, gripping his shoulder with both hands to arrest him.

"Nay, you don't go inside the line of the stones!" he bade.

Outside that line, past the end of the fallen pillar, Gees stopped, still holding Helen close to him, and looked down as Callum pointed. The skyward end of the pillar, rushing down, had struck Bathsheba Gralloch as she fled, crushing her bones, mangling her body, but leaving her face and head untouched.

The stone was splashed with her blood; death had struck her so suddenly that her unmarked face, turned upward to the sky, revealed only surprise, and her parted lips almost smiled.

"I tried to shut her eyes," Callum said. "They opened again."

"Someone—we must get spades and dig her out," Gees said. "The stone is too heavy for us to lift or lever it off her."

"Look—look there!" Callum pointed at MacMorn's house.

A black shaft of smoke fled away from it, drove eastward on the last of the great gale. Where the smoke poured out from the house, its underside was streaked with yellow and blue as the fed flame roared up. For a second or less Gees glanced at it, almost indifferently.

"MacMorn's roasting in it," he said. "I wish he were still alive to feel the roasting."

He glanced at Kyrle and saw him white and sick-looking, half dazed as yet. He looked down again at the blood-splashed stone and Bathsheba Gralloch's dead face beside it.

In some way death cancelled out the ugly bitterness of his wakening from illusion. This crushed and shattered corpse had once been a dark, tall slip of a thing in a green silk frock—green shot with silver, perhaps—and her eyes that had hardened as her face had coarsened were once pools of tender darkness—Gail's eyes.

Somewhere on the pattern in the web of eternity that is called time Gail, not Bathsheba Gralloch, was fixed, in green and silver, and cold reason was extinguished in a scent that was like nothing on earth—MacMorn's enchantment! MacMorn had made it all!

Helen Aylener stirred in his hold. "My tongue is horribly sore," she muttered. Then, struggling: "Put me down! Put me down!"

"I can't put you down," Gees answered. "You've got nothing on but my coat, no shoes nor anything. These heather stalks would cut your feet to pieces. I've got to carry you back home."

She relaxed to limpness, and closed her eyes. Callum moved nearer and, peering at her face, reached out a forefinger and pulled down one of her lower eyelids.

"Better get her back as soon as you can, Mr. Green," he urged. "I don't altogether like the look of her."

The wind was fast dying away, now. Behind them as they went toward ›The Rowans‹ MacMorn's house spouted fire at every window. Gees thought for a moment and little more of the man he had stunned and left just inside, but was quite indifferent as to what might happen to such a one. He had been one of MacMorn's hellish crew, and if he were burned as was MacMorn the world would be better for the loss of him.

Silent, unquestioning, his face pasty-white, Kyrle walked with them toward ›The Rowans.‹ Helen stirred no more, but lay in Gees' hold as if she slept. They reached the gate and Callum opened it; Gees saw the fallen mountain ash, and made no comment. He was reminded, by the sight of the stricken tree, of the fallen monolith, of Bathsheba Gralloch's still face and dark eyes, and dead lips that half-smiled.

They went along to the house, and just within the opened door Elizabeth took Helen in her strong arms and carried her as easily as if she were but a child.

A distant, thunderous crash made Gees face about. The roof of MacMorn's house had fallen in, and all the place was a mass of spouting,

crackling flame and lines of black smoke, from which little patches of blazing wood or fabric shot up and fled eastward on the wind.

Gees remembered the black wood on the inner side of the corridor, the panelling of the rooms—a dusty, unused room that to his sight had gleamed as a green and silver casket for an unreality of MacMorn’s conjuring.

Dots showed on the hillside, people of Brachmornalachan going to view the fire. Another crash, as inside some part of a floor or wall collapsed, and another mad medley of sparks and flaming splinters rose skyward and curved in the wind to fall. The thorn tree was shrivelling, its dried, heated branches actually beginning to break into flame.

Gees drew back, and, since Callum and Kyrle and Margaret Aylener had left him alone in the entrance hall, he closed the door.

Chapter 27

Rosemary

Standing before the drawing room window of ›The Rowans,‹ Gees heard the outer door close, and presently a big Daimler went down the drive and, turning to pass through the village, rocked and swayed on its journey away from Brachmornalachan.

Occasionally he glanced at it, ascending the long slope toward roads, radio sets, reinforced concrete buildings, and civilization; for the most part his gaze was directed across the little loch and toward the heap of tumbled ruin among which, after a week of cooling, even now some blocks of stone still kept their warmth.

Neither he nor Callum had said anything when the half-calcined bones that the doorway had sheltered from falling wreckage were identified as those of MacMorn; telling the identity of the bones would not have altered anything.

When the black altar had lain open to the sky, collapsing masonry had shattered the oblong slab to scorched fragments. And the fire and stone that between them had heated and shattered it had ground his bones to powder, so that no more trace remained of him than of the bodiless shadows that had driven along his mists, vainly seeking release from his government. He who had upheld that state had ceased his being; the state too had ceased, since no priest of dark evil, master of the old dark worship, remained to gather fresh victims as his offerings to the Unnamed.

All that he had fathered and upheld had gone; there remained nothing except a spread heap of scorched and broken stones among feathery, whitish ash, the whole enclosed in an oblong of useless walls.

Gees faced away from the window as Margaret Aylener entered the room.

She said, "Well, the doctor has gone. He merely confirms all that Callum said. She might get well, if she wished, though pernicious anaemia is very dangerous. I believe you know Callum took his degrees and is a fully qualified physician."

"I do know it," he answered. "So—does Kyrle know?"

"Not what this specialist has said, of course, but he knew what Callum said, when he went away yesterday. He had to go. Oh, I know he had to go! Only for three days he said, but—"

Gees made no comment. Except that he had saved the girl from Mac-Morn's fearsome deity, he felt that he had no part in this following tragedy—for tragedy it was, and Margaret Aylener knew it as one. She had brought this specialist from Glasgow, to no purpose but that of confirming Callum's judgement. Helen Aylener alone could save Helen Aylener, and she would not.

"She would like to see you," Margaret Aylener said. "She asked me before the specialist arrived, and I told her, after he had gone. If you would not mind—you have been very kind to us, and I feel sorry you must go back tomorrow. Until Ian comes back, I shall be alone."

"But I must go," he told her. "Of course I'll go and talk to your niece, if she wishes it. But first, I thought I'd like to ask you about the woman—Bathsheba Gralloch, her name was. The woman from the post office who was found dead under the fallen dolmen."

She smiled, a very little. "I have never heard that word used in connection with them before, in this part of the world," she said. "But they are dolmens, of course, no less here than in Brittany. What was it you wanted to ask about Bathsheba?"

"You—well, made a protégé of her, I believe?" he suggested.

"I don't know who told you," she said. "It would be an exaggeration to say I went so far. As a young girl Bathsheba was very lovely, and I thought she was meant for better things than Brachmornalachan."

"And she was like what?" he asked.

"How do you mean—like what in what way?"

"In appearance."

"At her best, of almost unearthly loveliness," she said slowly. "Sometimes no more than a tall, dark girl, rather striking in appearance. I thought for a time she might have made something better of herself than is possible in a place like this, and gave her clothes, tried to encourage her. I was young and enthusiastic, then." She smiled a little at the recollection. "But Bathsheba was stubborn and careless of herself, not willing to learn, and after her sister disappeared she seemed to

avoid me, so I gave her up. I know she might have married, more than once, but preferred to remain single. And now, by the way she died, it seems that after all she was connected with MacMorn."

"I suppose her being in that place just when the dolmen fell must count as a coincidence," he observed, "but to me it appears that MacMorn was afraid of her after she failed him, and willed her death."

"I wonder how much you know, Mr. Green?" She gazed at him questioningly. He had told her very little of what had happened.

"Not much," he answered. "I can believe and assume and guess, but know—all the proof that might establish knowledge is there on the far side of the loch, wrecked and hidden forever among that heap of stone. One thing, though, I do know.

"When you first sent for me, it was already too late. Unless you had handcuffed your niece to me as soon as she wakened in the morning and only released her to lock her into safety at night, you could not have kept her from MacMorn. You were right in saying that he could call her back to him from any place on earth, and he called before she could marry Kyrle and so get some measure of protection."

"Yes," she said. "He was very strong. I only realized how strong his hold on her might be after she had disappeared." She glanced at the watch on her wrist. "I think it is time, now, if you don't mind seeing her."

"I shall be very pleased," he assented.

She took him up to Helen's room, where the girl lay in bed, and after a word or two left him there. He seated himself beside the bed, and, to break an awkward silence, lied cheerfully: "I understand the specialist was quite pleased with you."

She did not seem impressed.

"Aunt Madge tells me you are going away tomorrow," she said. "I wanted to ask you some things. Will you tell me the truth, Mr. Gees?"

Gees spoke carefully.

He said: "As far as I can, Helen," and saw her as far different from the girl who, with Kyrle, had bent over the engine of the sports car. She had been so vitally alive, then. Now, there was a slow distinctness in her speech that told of utter lack of vitality.

For awhile she lay still, gazing up at the ceiling and frowning as if in an effort at collecting her thoughts. Then she turned her gaze toward him again and said: "I saw Gamel MacMorn take fire and burn."

"You mean—you were conscious then?" he asked.

"No. If you don't understand this, I can't explain it. I don't understand it myself. But—you knew there were shadows, didn't you? You saw them, I mean, the shadows he had made?"

"I know, and I saw them."

"Then—when he began to burn—I was like them," she said. "I can't explain it. But I saw him, and myself lying there, and you—all of it. I was with them, with many shadows. I saw very many things, not things of today, but old happenings, mixed in with what was happening then. And Callum dragging Twister away, and the pillar falling on Bathsheba—it was thrown on her, in that sight of mine, and she was held there while it fell. Great black arms and hands—"

For awhile she closed her eyes, and Gees waited. Then she gazed at him again and said: "Nobody has told me anything of what happened there since you brought me back—Callum told me you brought me back, nothing else. I want you to tell me the truth. Did Gamel MacMorn take fire and burn, and did I lie naked on a black stone there?"

He answered unhesitatingly: "Yes, Helen."

She smiled. "I felt sure I could get the truth from you. Something else I wanted to ask you, but you can only tell me what you believe about it, I know. About—about being one with the shadows. Is it—do you think that is what happens after death? Do we become no more than helpless shadows in the cold, just eyes that look back to life and the world, seeing, and nothing else?"

"I don't see that as the purpose or end of life, Helen," he answered gently. "Those shadows MacMorn and others who held his belief made—they were only parts of existences, just as what saw him take fire and burn was only a part of you—the rest of you, the human life of you, was lying on the stone, held there by MacMorn's will. Now he is dead, there are no more of his shadows. Say that the vital force in man is made up of both soul and spirit—can you follow that, though?"

"I'm not quite a child, Gees." Some of her complete, vital self flashed in the reply.

"No, not quite," he agreed. "Well, say that there are both soul and spirit, and that MacMorn or whatever he served managed to trap away either of those two to use, and left the other helpless in the cold, as you put it. As soon as he is destroyed, the shadow is released and rejoins the rest that made up an individual self—there are no more shadows of his making. His death released them all."

"You honestly believe that?" she asked.

"You asked for truth—I'm giving it you as I see it."

"But—he took something of me. Some part of my life that I can't get back, and I know—"

"What?" he asked, after waiting for her to end it.

"I know—well, say this is the last time I shall see you."

"Helen, that's fool talk," he said gravely. "Some part of the hypnosis he used on you is still at the back of your consciousness. You've got to get rid of it, got to get up over it and be yourself again."

"It's no use, Mr. Gees." She smiled at him. "Twister knows—I told him and he understood, because MacMorn had stolen some part of him, too. No, it's no use. There's some part of me that I shall get back in the end—only in the end. I've got to go and find it, and so—and so—since you're going tomorrow I know I shall not see you again."

"This is absolute foolishness, Helen," he said gravely. "What it means is that your will is preventing you from getting well. There's Kyrle, remember—all life waiting for you."

"Say it is my will, if you like," she insisted. "My will to completeness. I must go and find—I don't know what I must find, but it is a part of me that he separated from the rest. I know that, much more surely after this talk with you. Something that will make the real me complete again, perhaps just a shadow somewhere in the cold. And when I looked down on myself and him and you and the black stone, I saw so much else. So much more than I could ever tell you. As if all time unrolled for me to see. One mere little life isn't much, is it, Mr. Gees?"

Again she smiled, contentedly, and in a way he wished he had lied to her, denied the existence of the shadows that the priests of the Unnamed and MacMorn had made. Yet he knew all the time that lying could not have saved her; this which talked to him was not all of Helen Aylener, and she must find and recapture that which MacMorn had robbed away. And now he knew; the shadow must be made, driven out from a life, before MacMorn's Unnamed would accept that life. So, somewhere out in the cold, driven from this Helen who smiled at him, wandered—Perhaps! Or was it all illusion? She had asked him for truth, but what was truth?

"That's all I wanted to ask you, Mr. Gees, and all I wanted to tell you. Except, thank you very much. I'd like you to remember that as the last thing I said to you, except goodbye. Thank you very much."

But, when he stood up and for a moment held the hand she reached out to him, she said, "I'm so very sleepy, now. Goodbye, Mr. Gees."

He opened the door for Margaret Aylener, and followed her to her drawing room after dinner that evening. At her request he had stayed out

the week after giving evidence about the fatal fire that had destroyed MacMorn's house.

There was little left for either him or Margaret Aylener to say.

"I have told Callum not to plant another tree where the rowan was blown down. There is no need of them, now."

"No," he agreed.

"I shall be the last Aylener, and we outlast the MacMorns." There was a spice of quiet satisfaction in her remark.

"I wonder," he said slowly, "why these things are permitted."

"I remember reading, once—" She paused to recollect the phrasing. "Yes, it was this. 'All that we do goes to the weaving of a pattern. We can only see the tags of threads and the semblance of a design, but God knows the right side of the pattern, and when we see it we shall understand.' Perhaps there is truth in that."

"By sight of that pattern, understand another one that I saw in a dream," he said thoughtfully.

"I should like you to tell me that dream." She smiled at him, confidently. But he shook his head. "It involves too much," he said. "Everything, from beasts in primeval ooze to a fat man raking in a cheque. A girl in green and silver and myself. No, I could never tell anyone that dream." "Green and silver!" She reflected over it. "I once had a shot satin green and silver dress. I gave it away, I remember."

He did not ask who had been the recipient of the dress. There was no need to ask. Very nearly, he recaptured the fragrance of the scent, for MacMorn's spells had been strong.

Instead, he said, "That was a very wise saying about the pattern, and how we shall yet see it. The more I think about this, the more it seems to fit God's plan."

For a time they sat silent. Elizabeth entered to take away the coffee tray. Miss Aylener said, "Mr. Green will be leaving early tomorrow morning, Elizabeth."

"Aye, madam."

The look she gave him was one of complete approval, and then she took up the tray and left the room. Margaret Aylener said: "I think Elizabeth likes you. She seems to relax for you."

"That's her relaxing, is it?" he observed. "Then I'm glad I don't have to face her when she's stiff. But you're well served."

"With a qualified medical man on the staff," she said. "But the specialist told me—I am going up to see her now, if you will forgive me. He told

me this is a form of pernicious anaemia—not all the skill in the world could save her, since she doesn't try to save herself. But one thing, before I go. Because I am going to say good-night, and shall not see you again."

"Then the one thing?" he asked.

"I told you—if you brought MacMorn to his death, the half of all I have is yours. You did make an end of him. I meant it."

"If I took one farthing, Miss Aylener," he said soberly, "I should reckon myself no more than an assassin. I'm glad he's dead, glad I saw him shrive in flame, and still wish the life in him had lasted longer, so that he could feel one thousandth part of the agony his victims had to suffer on his infernal altar. But if I were starving, and you gave me a penny for other reasons than pure charity, I'd commit suicide there and then to cleanse myself from any payment for making an end of MacMorn. I feel like that about it."

"I understand, Mr. Green. I'm going to Helen, now, and there are no words I can leave with you—there is nothing I can give you, I see, in return for what you have done. But I say, and it means so pitifully little of all I feel—I say, thank you very much."

When she held out her slender, delicate hand, he lifted it to his lips. He said, "Goodnight, Miss Aylener."

She said, "Goodnight, Mr. Green. Thank you, very much."

E. O. V.

Two months later, Miss Brandon handed him a small package marked "Personal" that had come with the morning's post.

It bore a Scottish postmark, and, scenting something to do with the Brachmornalachan affair, she felt a slight renewal of the irritation that had come to her over his statement that he would not dictate a report of the end of that case.

Being only human, she wanted very much to know what had happened during his second stay in Brachmornalachan. There were typed records of all his other cases, and this—Well, she wanted to know.

He took out a pocket knife and cut the string of the package with irritating deliberation. He stripped off the paper, dropping it in her wastepaper basket, and disclosed a small cardboard box. Opening the box, he revealed a tiny spray of rosemary, and a card. He read:

*From the wreath I laid on Helen's grave. Once more thank you,
very much.*

He had so held the card that Miss Brandon could read it with him. There was on it nothing but the writing, nothing to indicate who had sent it. He said: "That was very kind of her. Not that Helen meant anything to me, for she didn't—"

"I didn't ask," Miss Brandon said.

"No." He sounded very thoughtful. "The rest—it was all illusion."

Gail—Illusion!

THE END