

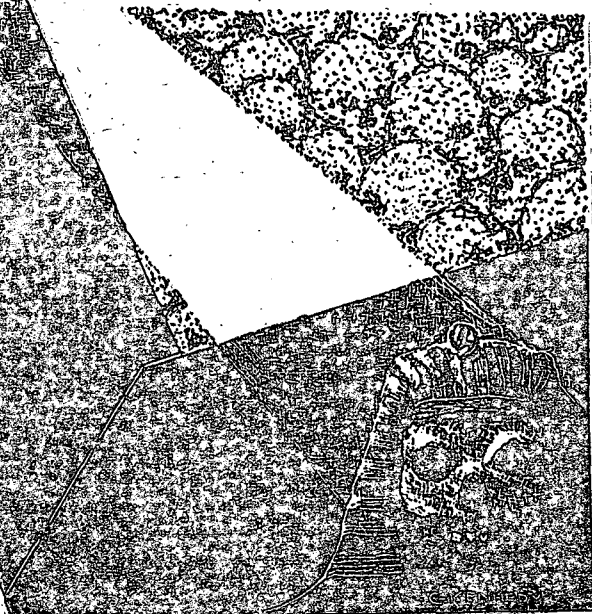
The Shadow From the Steeple

BY ROBERT BLOCH

WILLIAM HURLEY was born an Irishman and grew up to be a taxicab driver—therefore it would be redundant, in the face of both of these facts, to say that he was garrulous.

The minute he picked up his passenger in downtown Providence that warm summer evening, he began talking. The passenger, a tall thin man in his early thirties, entered the cab and sat back, clutching a briefcase. He gave an address on Benefit Street and Hurley started out, shifting both taxi and tongue into high gear.

Hurley began what was to be a one-



Heading by
Charles A. Kennedy

...emeshed in a horror greater than any envisioned by his imagination.

sided conversation by commenting on the afternoon performance of the New York Giants. Unperturbed by his passenger's silence, he made a few remarks about the weather—recent, current, and expected. Since he received no reply, the driver then proceeded to discuss a local phenomenon; namely the reported escape, that morning, of two black panthers or leopards from the traveling menagerie of Langer Brothers Circus, currently appearing in the city. In response to a direct inquiry as to whether he had seen the beasts roaming at large, Hurley's customer shook his head.

The driver then made several complimentary remarks about the local police force and their inability to capture the beasts. It was his considered opinion that a given platoon of law enforcement officers would be unable to catch a cold if immersed in an ice-box for a year. This witicism failed to amuse his passenger, and before Hurley could continue his monologue they had arrived at the Benefit Street address. Eighty-five cents changed hands, passenger and briefcase left the cab, and Hurley drove away.

He could not know it at the time, but he thus became the last man who could or would testify to seeing his passenger alive.

The rest is conjecture, and perhaps that is for the best. Certainly it is easy enough to draw certain conclusions as to what happened that night in the old house on Benefit Street, but the weight of those conclusions is hard to bear.

One minor mystery is easy enough to clear up—the peculiar silence and aloofness of Hurley's passenger. That passenger, Edmund Fiske, of Chicago, Illinois, was meditating upon the fulfilment of fifteen years of questing; the cab-trip represented the last stage of this long journey, and he was reviewing the circumstances as he rode.

Edmund Fiske's quest had begun, on August 8, 1935, with the death of his close friend, Robert Harrison Blake, of Milwaukee.

Like Fiske himself at the time, Blake had been a precocious adolescent interested in fantasy-writing, and as such be-

came a member of the "Lovecraft circle"—a group of writers maintaining correspondence with one another and with the late Howard Phillips Lovecraft, of Providence.

It was through correspondence that Fiske and Blake had become acquainted; they visited back and forth between Milwaukee and Chicago, and their mutual preoccupation with the weird and the fantastic in literature and art served to form the foundation for the close friendship which existed at the time of Blake's unexpected and inexplicable demise.

Most of the facts—and certain of the conjectures—in connection with Blake's death have been embodied in Lovecraft's story, *The Hunter of the Dark*, which was published more than a year after the younger writer's passing.

Lovecraft had an excellent opportunity to observe matters, for it was on his suggestion that young Blake had journeyed to Providence early in 1935, and had been provided with living-quarters on College Street by Lovecraft himself. So it was both as friend and neighbor that the elder fantasy-writer had acted in narrating the singular story of Robert Harrison Blake's last months.

In his story, he tells of Blake's efforts to begin a novel dealing with a survival of New England witch-cults, but modestly omits his own part in assisting his friend to secure material. Apparently Blake began work on his project and then became enmeshed in a horror greater than any envisioned by his imagination.

For Blake was drawn to investigate the crumbling black pile on Federal Hill—the deserted ruin of a church that had once housed the worshippers of an esoteric cult. Early in spring he paid a visit to the shunned structure and there made certain discoveries which (in Lovecraft's opinion) made his death inevitable.

BRIEFLY, Blake entered the boarded-up Free Will Church and stumbled across the skeleton of a reporter from the *Providence Telegram*, one Edwin M. Lillibridge, who had apparently attempted a similar investigation in 1893. The fact that

his death was not explained seemed alarming enough, but more disturbing still was the realization that no one had been bold enough to enter the church since that date and discover the body.

Blake found the reporter's notebook in his clothing, and its contents afforded a partial revelation.

A certain Professor Bowen, of Providence, had traveled widely in Egypt, and in 1843, in the course of archeological investigations of the crypt of Nephren-Ka, had made an unusual find.

Nephren-Ka is the "forgotten pharaoh," whose name has been cursed by the priests and obliterated from official dynastic records. The name was familiar to the young writer at the time, due largely to the work of another Milwaukee author who had dealt with the semi-legendary ruler in his tale, *Fane of the Black Pharaoh*. But the discovery Bowen made in the crypt was totally unexpected.

The reporter's notebook said little of the actual nature of that discovery, but it recorded subsequent events in a precise, chronological fashion. Immediately upon unearthing his mysterious find in Egypt, Professor Bowen abandoned his research and returned to Providence, where he purchased the Free-Will Church in 1844 and made it the headquarters of what was called the "Starry Wisdom" sect.

Members of this religious cult, evidently recruited by Bowen, professed to worship an entity they called the "Haunter of the Dark." By gazing into a crystal they summoned the actual presence of this entity and did homage with blood sacrifice.

Such, at least, was the fantastic story circulated in Providence at the time—and the church became a place to be avoided. Local superstition fanned agitation, and agitation precipitated direct action. In May of 1877 the sect was forcibly broken up by the authorities, due to public pressure, and several hundred of its members abruptly left the city.

The church itself was immediately closed, and apparently individual curiosity could not overcome the widespread fear which resulted in leaving the structure un-

disturbed and unexplored until the reporter, Lillibridge, made his ill-fated private investigation in 1893.

Such was the gist of the story unfolded in the pages of his notebook. Blake read it, but was nevertheless undeterred in his further scrutiny of the environs. Eventually he came upon the mysterious object Bowen had found in the Egyptian crypt—the object upon which the Starry Wisdom worship had been founded—the asymmetrical metal box with its curiously hinged lid, a lid that had not been closed for countless years. Blake thus gazed at the interior, gazed upon the four-inch red-black crystal polyhedron hanging suspended by seven supports. He not only gazed at but also *into* the polyhedron; just as the cult-worshippers had purportedly gazed, and with the same results. He was assailed by a curious psychic disturbance; he seemed to "see visions of other lands and the gulfs beyond the stars," as superstitious accounts had told.

And then Blake made his greatest mistake. He closed the box.

Closing the box—again, according to the superstitions annotated by Lillibridge—was the act that summoned the alien entity itself, the Haunter of the Dark. It was a creature of darkness and could not survive light. And in that boarded-up blackness of the ruined church, the thing emerged by night.

Blake fled the church in terror, but the damage was done. In mid-July, a thunderstorm put out the lights in Providence for an hour, and the Italian colony living near the deserted church heard bumping and thumping from inside the shadow-shrouded structure.

Crowds with candles stood outside in the rain and played candles upon the building, shielding themselves against the possible emergence of the feared entity by a barrier of light.

Apparently the story had remained alive throughout the neighborhood. Once the storm abated, local newspapers grew interested, and on the 17th of July two reporters entered the old church, together with a policeman. Nothing definite was found,

although there were curious and inexplicable smears and stains on the stairs and the pews.

Less than a month later—at 2:35 a.m. on the morning of August 8th, to be exact—Robert Harrison Blake met his death during an electrical storm while seated before the window of his room on College Street.

During the gathering storm, before his death occurred, Blake scribbled frantically in his diary, gradually revealing his innermost obsessions and delusions concerning the Haunter of the Dark. It was Blake's conviction that by gazing into the curious crystal in its box he had somehow established a linkage with the non-terrestrial entity. He further believed that closing the box had summoned the creature to dwell in the darkness of the church steeple, and that in some way his own fate was now irrevocably linked to that of the monstrosity.

All this is revealed in the last messages he set down while watching the progress of the storm from his window.

Meanwhile, at the church itself, on Federal Hill, a crowd of agitated spectators gathered to play lights upon the structure. That they heard alarming sounds from inside the boarded-up building is undeniable; at least two competent witnesses have testified to the fact. One, Father Merluzzo of the Spirito Santo Church, was on hand to quiet his congregation. The other, Patrolman (now Sergeant) William J. Monahan, of Central Station, was attempting to preserve order in the face of growing panic. Monahan himself saw the blinding "blur" that seemed to issue, smokelike, from the steeple of the ancient edifice as the final lightning-flash came.

Flash, meteor, fireball—call it what you will—erupted over the city in a blinding blaze; perhaps at the very moment that Robert Harrison Blake, across town, was writing, "Is it not an avatar of Nyarlathotep, who in antique and shadowy Khem even took the form of man?"

A few moments later he was dead. The coroner's physician rendered a verdict attributing his demise to "electrical shock"

although the window he faced was unbroken. Another physician, known to Lovecraft, quarreled privately with that verdict and subsequently entered the affair the next day. Without legal authority, he entered the church and climbed to the windowless steeple where he discovered the strange asymmetrical—was it golden?—box and the curious stone within. Apparently his first gesture was to make sure of raising the lid and bringing the stone into the light. His next recorded gesture was to charter a boat, take box and curiously-angled stone aboard, and drop them into the deepest channel of Narragansett Bay.

There ended the admittedly fictionalized account of Blake's death as recorded by H. P. Lovecraft. And there began Edmund Fiske's fifteen-year quest.

Fiske, of course, had known some of the events outlined in the story. When Blake had left for Providence in the spring, Fiske had tentatively promised to join him the following autumn. At first, the two friends had exchanged letters regularly, but by early summer Blake ceased correspondence altogether.

At the time, Fiske was unaware of Blake's exploration of the ruined church. He could not account for Blake's silence, and wrote Lovecraft for a possible explanation.

Lovecraft could supply little information. Young Blake, he said, had visited with him frequently during the early weeks of his stay; had consulted with him about his writing, and had accompanied him on several nocturnal strolls through the city.

But during the summer, Blake's neighborliness ceased. It was not in Lovecraft's reclusive nature to impose himself upon others, and he did not seek to invade Blake's privacy for several weeks.

When he did so—and learned from the almost hysterical adolescent of his experiences in the forbidding, forbidden church on Federal Hill—Lovecraft offered words of warning and advice. But it was already too late. Within ten days of his visit came the shocking end.

Fiske learned of that end from Lovecraft on the following day. It was his task

to break the news to Blake's parents. For a time he was tempted to visit Providence immediately, but lack of funds and the pressure of his own domestic affairs forestalled him. The body of his young friend duly arrived and Fiske attended the brief ceremony of cremation.

Then Lovecraft began his own investigation—an investigation which ultimately resulted in the publication of his story. And there the matter might have rested.

But Fiske was not satisfied.

His best friend had died under circumstances which even the most skeptical must admit were mysterious. The local authorities summarily wrote off the matter with a fatuous and inadequate explanation.

Fiske determined to ascertain the truth.

BEAR in mind one salient fact—all three of these men, Lovecraft, Blake and Fiske—were professional writers and students of the supernatural or the supranormal. All three of them had extraordinary access to a bulk of written material dealing with ancient legend and superstition. Ironically enough, the use to which they put their knowledge was limited to excursions into so-called "fantasy fiction" but none of them, in the light of their own experience, could wholly join their reading audience in scoffing at the myths of which they wrote.

For, as Fiske wrote to Lovecraft, "the term, myth, as we know, is merely a polite euphemism. Blake's death was not a myth, but a hideous reality. I implore you to investigate fully. See this matter through to the end, for if Blake's diary holds even a distorted truth, there is no telling what may be loosed upon the world."

Lovecraft pledged cooperation, discovered the fate of the metal box and its contents, and endeavored to arrange a meeting with Doctor Ambrose Dexter, of Benefit Street. Doctor Dexter, it appeared, had left town immediately following his dramatic theft and disposal of the "Shining Trapezehedron," as Lovecraft called it.

Lovecraft then apparently interviewed Father Merluzzo and Patrolman Monahan, plunged into the files of the *Bulletin*, and

endeavored to reconstruct the story of the Starry Wisdom sect and the entity they worshipped.

Of course he learned a good deal more than he dared to put into his magazine story. His letters to Edmund Fiske in the late fall and early spring of 1936 contain guarded hints and references to "menaces from Outside." But he seemed anxious to reassure Fiske that if there had been any menace, even in the realistic rather than the supernatural sense, the danger was now averted because Doctor Dexter had disposed of the Shining Trapezehedron which acted as a summoning talisman. Such was the gist of his report, and the matter rested there for a time.

Fiske made tentative arrangements, early in 1937, to visit Lovecraft at his home, with the private intention of doing some further research on his own into the cause of Blake's death. But once again, circumstances intervened. For in March of that year, Lovecraft died. His unexpected passing plunged Fiske into a period of mental despondency from which he was slow to recover; accordingly, it was not until almost a year later that Edmund Fiske paid his first visit to Providence, and to the scene of the tragic episodes which brought Blake's life to a close.

For somehow, always, a black undercurrent of suspicion existed. The coroner's physician had been glib, Lovecraft had been tactful, the press and general public had accepted matters completely—yet Blake was dead, and there had been an entity abroad in the night.

Fiske felt that if he could visit the accursed church himself, talk to Doctor Dexter and find out what had drawn him into the affair, interrogate the reporters, and pursue any relevant leads or clues he might eventually hope to uncover the truth and at least clear his dead friend's name of the ugly shadow of mental unbalance.

ACCORDINGLY, Fiske's first step after arriving in Providence and registering at a hotel was to set out for Federal Hill and the ruined church.

The search was doomed to immediate,

irremediable disappointment. For the church was no more. It had been razed the previous fall and the property taken over by the city authorities. The black and baleful spire no longer cast its spell over the Hill.

Fiske immediately took pains to see Father Merluzzo, at Spirito Santo, a few squares away. He learned from a courteous housekeeper that Father Merluzzo had died in 1936, within a year of young Blake.

Discouraged but persistent, Fiske next attempted to reach Doctor Dexter, but the old house on Benefit Street was boarded up. A call to the Physician's Service Bureau produced only the cryptic information that Ambrose Dexter, M.D., had left the city for an indeterminate stay.

Nor did a visit with the city editor of the *Bulletin* yield any better result. Fiske was permitted to go into the newspaper's morgue and read the aggravatingly short and matter-of-fact story on Blake's death, but the two reporters who had covered the assignment and subsequently visited the Federal Hill church had left the paper for berths in other cities.

There were, of course, other leads to follow, and during the ensuing week Fiske ran them all to the ground. A copy of *Who's Who* added nothing significant to his mental picture of Doctor Ambrose Dexter. The physician was Providence born, a life-long resident, 40 years of age, unmarried, a general practitioner, member of several medical societies—but there was no indication of any unusual "hobbies" or "other interests" which might provide a

clue as to his participation in the affair.

Sergeant William J. Monahan of Central Station was sought out, and for the first time Fiske actually managed to speak to some one who admitted an actual connection with the events leading to Blake's death. Monahan was polite, but cautiously noncommittal.

Despite Fiske's complete unburdening, the police officer remained discreetly reticent.

"There's really nothing I can tell you," he said. "It's true, like Mister Lovecraft said, that I was at the church that night, for there was a rough crowd out and there's no telling what some of them ones in the neighborhood will do when riled up. Like the story said, the old church had a bad name, and I guess Sheeley could have given you many's the story."

"Sheeley?" interjected Fiske.

"Bert Sheeley—it was his beat, you know, not mine. He was ill of pneumonia at the time and I substituted for two weeks. Then, when he died—"

Fiske shook his head. Another possible source of information gone. Blake dead, Lovecraft dead, Father Merluzzo dead, and now Sheeley. Reporters scattered, and Doctor Dexter mysteriously missing. He sighed and persevered.

"That last night, when you saw the blur," he asked, "can you add anything by way of details? Were there any noises? Did anyone in the crowd say anything? Try to remember—whatever you can add may be of great help to me."

Monahan shook his head. "There were

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noises aplenty," he said. "But what with the thunder and all, I couldn't rightly make out if anything came from inside the church, like the story has it. And as for the crowd, with the women wailing and the men muttering, all mixed up with thunderclaps and wind, it was as much as I could do to hear myself yelling to keep in place let alone make out what was being said."

"And the blur?" Fiske persisted.

"It was a blur, and that's all. Smoke, or a cloud, or just a shadow before the lightning struck again. But I'll not be saying I saw any devils, or monsters, or whatchamacallits as Mister Lovecraft would write about in those wild tales of his."

Sergeant Monahan shrugged self-righteously and picked up the desk-phone to answer a call. The interview was obviously at an end.

And so, for the nonce, was Fiske's quest. He didn't abandon hope, however. For a day he sat by his own hotel phone and called up every "Dexter" listed in the book in an effort to locate a relative of the missing doctor; but to no avail. Another day was spent in a small boat on Narragansett Bay, as Fiske assiduously and painstakingly familiarized himself with the location of the "deepest channel" alluded to in Lovecraft's story.

But at the end of a futile week in Providence, Fiske had to confess himself beaten. He returned to Chicago, his work, and his normal pursuits. Gradually the affair dropped out of the foreground of his consciousness, but he by no means forgot it completely or gave up the notion of eventually unravelling the mystetry—if mystery there was.

IN 1941, during a three-day furlough from Basic Training, Pvt. First Class Edmund Fiske passed through Providence on his way to New York City and again attempted to locate Dr. Ambrose Dexter, without success.

During 1942 and 1943, Sgt. Edmund Fiske wrote, from his stations overseas, to Dr. Ambrose Dexter, c/o General Delivery, Providence, R. I. His letters were

never acknowledged, if indeed they were received.

In 1945, in a U.S.O. library lounge in Honolulu, Fiske read a report in—of all things—a journal on astro-physics which mentioned a recent gathering at Princeton University, at which the guest speaker, Dr. Ambrose Dexter, had delivered an address on "Practical Applications in Military Technology."

Fiske did not return to the States until the end of 1946. Domestic affairs, naturally, were the subject of his paramount consideration during the following year. It wasn't until 1948 that he accidentally came upon Dr. Dexter's name again—this time in a listing of "investigators in the field of nuclear physics" in a national weekly news-magazine. He wrote the editors for further information, but received no reply. And another letter, dispatched to Providence, remained unanswered.

But in 1949, late in autumn, Dexter's name again came to his attention through the news columns; this time in relation to a discussion of work on the secret H-Bomb.

Whatever he guessed, whatever he feared, whatever he wildly imagined, Fiske was impelled to action. It was then that he wrote to a certain Ogden Purvis, a private investigator in the city of Providence, and commissioned him to locate Doctor Ambrose Dexter. All that he required was that he be placed in communication with Dexter, and he paid a substantial retainer fee. Purvis took the case.

The private detective sent several reports to Fiske in Chicago and they were, at first, disheartening. The Dexter residence was still untenanted. Dexter himself, according to the information elicited from governmental sources, was on a special mission. The private investigator seemed to assume from this that he was a person above reproach, engaged in confidential defense work.

Fiske's own reaction was panic.

He raised his offer of a fee and insisted that Ogden Purvis continue his efforts to find the elusive doctor.

Winter of 1950 came, and with it, an-

other report. The private investigator had tracked down every lead Fiske suggested, and one of them led, eventually to Tom Jonas.

Tom Jonas was the owner of the small boat which had been chartered by Doctor Dexter one evening in the late summer of 1935—the small boat which had been rowed to the “deepest channel of Narragansett Bay.”

Tom Jonas had rested his oars as Dexter threw overboard the dully-gleaming, asymmetrical metal box with the hinged lid open to disclose the Shining Trapezehedron.

The old fisherman had spoken freely to the private detective; his words were reported in detail to Fiske via confidential report.

“Mighty peculiar” was Jonas’ own reaction to the incident. Dexter had offered him “twenty smackers to take the boat out in the middle o’ midnight and heave this funny-lookin’ contraption overboard. Said there was no harm in it; said it was just an old keepsake he wanted to git rid of. But all the way out he kep’ starin’ at the sort of jewel-thing set in some iron bands inside the box, and mumblin’ in some foreign language, I guess. No, ’tweren’t French or German or Italian talk either. Polish, mebbe. I don’t remember any words, either. But he acted sort-of drunk. Not that I’d say anything against Doctor Dexter, understand; comes of a fine old family, even if he ain’t been around these parts since, to my knowing. But I figgered he was a bit under the influence, you might say. Else why would he pay me twenty smackers to do a crazy stunt like that?”

There was more to the verbatim transcript of the old fisherman’s monologue, but it did not explain anything.

“He sure seemed glad to git rid of it, as I recollect. On the way back he told me to keep mum about it, but I can’t see no harm in telling at this late date; I wouldn’t hold anythin’ back from the law.”

Evidently the private investigator had made use of a rather unethical stratagem—posing as an actual detective in order to get Jonas to talk.

This did not bother Fiske, in Chicago. It was enough to get his grasp on something tangible at last; enough to make him send Purvis another payment, with instructions to keep up the search for Ambrose Dexter. Several months passed in waiting.

Then, in late spring, came the news Fiske had waited for. Doctor Dexter was back; he had returned to his house on Benefit Street. The boards had been removed, furniture vans appeared to discharge their contents, and a manservant appeared to answer the door, and to take telephone messages.

Doctor Dexter was not at home to the investigator, or to any one. He was, it appeared, recuperating from a severe illness contracted while in government service. He took a card from Purvis and promised to deliver a message, but repeated calls brought no indication of a reply.

Nor did Purvis, who conscientiously “cased” the house and neighborhood, ever succeed in laying eyes upon the doctor himself or in finding anyone who claimed to have seen the convalescent physician on the street.

Groceries were delivered regularly; mail appeared in the box; lights glowed in the Benefit Street house nightly until all hours.

As a matter of fact, this was the only concrete statement Purvis could make regarding any possible irregularity in Doctor Dexter’s mode of life—he seemed to keep electricity burning twenty-four hours a day.

FISKE promptly dispatched another letter to Doctor Dexter, and then another. Still no acknowledgment or reply was forthcoming. And after several more unenlightening reports from Purvis, Fiske made up his mind. He would go to Providence and see Dexter, somehow, come what may.

He might be completely wrong in his suspicions; he might be completely wrong in his assumption that Doctor Dexter could clear the name of his dead friend; he might be completely wrong in even surmising any connection between the two—but for fifteen years he had brooded and wondered,

and it was time to put an end to his own inner conflict.

Accordingly, late that summer, Fiske wired Purvis of his intentions and instructed him to meet him at the hotel upon his arrival.

Thus it was that Edmund Fiske came to Providence for the last time; on the day that the Giants lost, on the day that the Langer Brothers lost their two black panthers, on the day that cabdriver William Hurley was in a garrulous mood.

Purvis was not at the hotel to meet him, but such was Fiske's own frenzy of impatience that he decided to act without him and drove, as we have seen, to Benefit Street in the early evening.

As the cab departed, Fiske stared up at the panelled doorway; stared at the lights blazing from the upper windows of the Georgian structure. A brass name-plate gleamed on the door itself, and the light from the windows played upon the legend, Ambrose Dexter, M.D.

Slight as it was, this seemed a reassuring touch to Edmund Fiske. The doctor was not concealing his presence in the house from the world, however much he might conceal his actual person. Surely the blazing lights and the appearance of the name-plate augured well.

Fiske shrugged, rang the bell.

The door opened quickly. A small, dark-skinned man with a slight stoop appeared and made a question of the word, "Yes?"

"Doctor Dexter, please."

"The Doctor is not in to callers. He is ill."

"Would you take a message, please?"

"Certainly." The dark-skinned servant smiled.

"Tell him that Edmund Fiske of Chicago wishes to see him at his convenience for a few moments. I have come all the way from the Middle West for this purpose, and what I have to speak to him about would take only a moment or two of his time."

"Wait, please."

The door closed. Fiske stood in the gathering darkness and transferred his briefcase from one hand to the other.

Abruptly, the door opened again. The servant peered out at him.

"Mr. Fiske—are you the gentleman who wrote the letters?"

"Letters—oh, yes, I am. I did not know the doctor ever received them."

The servant nodded. "I could not say. But Doctor Dexter said that if you were the man who had written him, you were to come right in."

Fiske permitted himself an audible sigh of relief as he stepped over the threshold. It had taken him fifteen years to come this far, and now—

"Just go upstairs, if you please. You will find Doctor Dexter waiting in the study, right at the head of the hall."

EDMUND FISKE climbed the stairs, turned at the top to a doorway, and entered a room in which the light was an almost palpable presence, so intense was its glare.

And there, rising from a chair beside the fireplace, was Doctor Ambrose Dexter.

Fiske found himself facing a tall, thin, immaculately dressed man who may have been fifty but who scarcely looked thirty-five; a man whose wholly natural grace and elegance of movement concealed the sole incongruity of his aspect—a very deep suntan.

"So you are Edmund Fiske."

The voice was soft, well-modulated, and unmistakably New England—and the accompanying handclasp warm and firm. Doctor Dexter's smile was natural and friendly. White teeth gleamed against the brown background of his features.

"Won't you sit down?" invited the doctor. He indicated a chair and bowed slightly. Fiske couldn't help but stare; there was certainly no indication of any present or recent illness in his host's demeanor or behavior. As Doctor Dexter resumed his own seat near the fire and Fiske moved around the chair to join him, he noted the bookshelves on either side of the room. The size and shape of several volumes immediately engaged his rapt attention—so much that he hesitated before taking a seat, and instead inspected the titles of the tomes.

For the first time in his life, Edmund Fiske found himself confronting the half-legendary *De Vermis Mysteriis*, the *Liber Ivonis*, and the almost mythical Latin version of the *Necronomicon*. Without seeking his host's permission, he lifted the bulk of the latter volume from the shelf and riffled through the yellowed pages of the Spanish translation of 1622.

Then he turned to Doctor Dexter, and all traces of his carefully-contrived composure dropped away. "Then it must have been you who found these books in the church," he said. "In the rear vestry room beside the apse. Lovecraft mentioned them in his story, and I've always wondered what became of them."

Doctor Dexter nodded gravely. "Yes, I took them. I did not think it wise for such books to fall into the hands of authorities. You know what they contain, and what might happen if such knowledge were wrongfully employed."

Fiske reluctantly replaced the great book on the shelf and took a chair facing the doctor before the fire. He held his briefcase on his lap and fumbled uneasily with the clasp.

"Don't be uneasy," said Doctor Dexter, with a kindly smile. "Let us proceed without fencing. You are here to discover what part I played in the affair of your friend's death."

"Yes, there are some questions I wanted to ask."

"Please." The doctor raised a slim brown hand. "I am not in the best of health and can give you only a few minutes. Allow me to anticipate your queries and tell you what little I know."

"As you wish." Fiske stared at the bronzed man, wondering what lay behind the perfection of his poise.

"I met your friend Robert Harrison Blake only once," said Doctor Dexter. "It was on an evening during the latter part of July, 1935. He called upon me here, as a patient."

Fiske leaned forward eagerly. "I never knew that!" he exclaimed.

"There was no reason for anyone to know it," the doctor answered. "He was

merely a patient. He claimed to be suffering from insomnia. I examined him, prescribed a sedative, and acting on the merest surmise, asked if he had recently been subjected to any unusual strain or trauma. It was then that he told me the story of his visit to the church on Federal Hill and of what he had found there. I must say that I had the acumen not to dismiss his tale as the product of a hysterical imagination. As a member of one of the older families here, I was already acquainted with the legends surrounding the Starry Wisdom sect and the so-called Haunter of the Dark.

"Young Blake" confessed to me certain of his fears concerning the Shining Trapezehedron—intimating that it was a focal point of primal evil. He further admitted his own dread of being somehow linked to the monstrosity in the church.

"Naturally, I was not prepared to accept this last premise as a rational one. I attempted to reassure the young man, advised him to leave Providence and forget it. And at the time I acted in all good faith. And then, in August, came news of Blake's death."

"So you went to the church," Fiske said.

"Wouldn't you have done the same thing?" parried Doctor Dexter. "If Blake had come to you with this story, told you of what he feared, wouldn't his death have moved you to action? I assure you, I did what I thought best. Rather than provoke a scandal, rather than expose the general public to needless fears, rather than permit the possibility of danger to exist, I went to the church. I took the books. I took the Shining Trapezehedron from under the noses of the authorities. And I chartered a boat and dumped the accursed thing in Narragansett Bay, where it could no longer possibly harm mankind. The lid was up when I dropped it—for as you know, only darkness can summon the Haunter, and now the stone is eternally exposed to light.

"BUT that is all I can tell you. I regret that my work in recent years has prevented me from seeing or communicating

with you before this. I appreciate your interest in the affair and trust my remarks will help to clarify, in a small way, your bewilderment. As to young Blake, in my capacity as examining physician, I will gladly give you a written testimony to my belief in his sanity at the time of his death. I'll have it drawn up tomorrow and send it to your hotel if you give me the address. Fair enough?"

The doctor rose, signifying that the interview was over. Fiske remained seated, shifting his briefcase.

"Now if you will excuse me," the physician murmured.

"In a moment. There are still one or two brief questions I'd appreciate your answering."

"Certainly." If Doctor Dexter was irritated, he gave no sign.

"Did you by any chance see Lovecraft before or during his last illness?"

"No. I was not his physician. In fact, I never met the man, though of course I knew of him and his work."

"What caused you to leave Providence so abruptly after the Blake affair?"

"My interests in physics superseded my interest in medicine. As you may or may not know, during the past decade or more, I have been working on problems relative to atomic energy and nuclear fission. In fact, starting tomorrow, I am leaving Providence once more to deliver a course of lectures before the faculties of eastern universities and certain governmental groups."

"That is very interesting to me, Doctor," said Fiske. "By the way, did you ever meet Einstein?"

"As a matter of fact, I did, some years ago. I worked with him on—but no matter. I must beg you to excuse me, now. At another time, perhaps, we can discuss such things."

His impatience was unmistakable now. Fiske rose, lifting his briefcase in one hand and reaching out to extinguish a table-lamp with the other.

Doctor Dexter crossed swiftly and lighted the lamp again.

"Why are you afraid of the dark, Doctor?" asked Fiske, softly.

"I am not af—"

For the first time the physician seemed on the verge of losing his composure. "What makes you think that?" he whispered.

"It's the Shining Trapezehedron, isn't it?" Fiske continued. "When you threw it into the bay you acted too hastily. You didn't remember at the time that even if you left the lid open, the stone would be surrounded by darkness there at the bottom of the channel. Perhaps the Haunter didn't want you to remember. You looked into the stone just as Blake did, and established the same psychic linkage. And when you threw the thing away, you gave it into perpetual darkness, where the Haunter's power would feed and grow."

"That's why you left Providence—because you were afraid the Haunter would come to you, just as it came to Blake. And because you knew that now the thing would remain abroad forever."

Doctor Dexter moved towards the door. "I must definitely ask that you leave now," he said. "If you're implying that I keep the lights on because I'm afraid of the Haunter coming after me, the way it did Blake, then you're mistaken."

FISKE smiled wryly. "That's not it at all," he answered. "I know you don't fear that. Because it's too late. The Haunter must have come to you long before this—perhaps within a day or so after you gave it power by consigning the Trapezehedron to the darkness of the Bay. It came to you, but unlike the case of Blake, it did not kill you."

"It used you. That's why you fear the dark. You fear it as the Haunter itself fears being discovered. I believe that in the darkness you look *different*. More like the old shape. Because when the Haunter came to you, it did not kill but instead, *merged*. You are the Haunter of the Dark!"

"Mr. Fiske, really—"

"There is no Doctor Dexter. There hasn't been any such person for many years, now. There's only the outer shell, possessed by an entity older than the world; an entity that is moving quickly

and cunningly to bring destruction to all mankind. It was you who turned 'scientist' and insinuated yourself into the proper circles, hinting and prompting and assisting foolish men into their sudden 'discovery' of nuclear fission. When the first atomic bomb fell, how you must have laughed! And now you've given them the secret of the hydrogen bomb, and you're going on to teach them more, show them new ways to bring about their own destruction.

"It took me years of brooding to discover the clues, the keys to the so-called wild myths that Lovecraft wrote about. For he wrote in parable and allegory, but he wrote the truth. He has set it down in black and white time and again, the prophecy of your coming to earth—Blake knew it at the last when he identified the Haunter by its rightful name."

"And that is?" snapped the doctor.

"Nyarlathotep!"

The brown face creased into a grimace of laughter. "I'm afraid you're a victim of the same fantasy-projections as poor Blake and your friend Lovecraft. Everyone knows that Nyarlathotep is pure invention—part of the Lovecraft myths."

"I thought so, until I found the clue in his poem. That's when it all fitted in; the Haunter of the Dark, your fleeing, and your sudden interest in scientific research. Lovecraft's words took on a new meaning:

And at last from inner Egypt came
The strange dark one to whom the
fellas bowed."

Fiske chanted the lines, staring at the dark face of the physician.

"Nonsense—if you must know, this dermatological disturbance of mine is the result of exposure to radiation at Los Alamos."

Fiske did not heed; he was continuing Lovecraft's poem:

"—That wild beasts followed him and
licked his hands.
Soon from the sea a noxious birth
began;

Forgotten lands with weedy spires
of gold.

The ground was cleft and mad
auroras rolled

Down on the quaking cities of man.

Then crushing what he chanced to
mould in play

The idiot Chaos blew Earth's dust
away."

Doctor Dexter shook his head. "Ridiculous on the face of it," he asserted. "Surely, even in your—er—upset condition, you can understand that, man! The poem has no literal meaning. Do wild beasts lick my hands? Is something rising from the sea? Are there earthquakes and auroras? Nonsense! You're suffering from a bad case of what we call 'atomic jitters'—I can see it now. You're preoccupied, as so many laymen are today, with the foolish obsession that somehow our work in nuclear fission will result in the destruction of the earth. All this rationalization is a product of your imaginings."

FISKE held his briefcase tightly. "I told you it was a parable, this prophecy of Lovecraft's. God knows what he *knew* or *feared*; whatever it was, it was enough to make him cloak his meaning. And even then, perhaps, *they* got to him because he knew too much."

"*They*?"

"They from Outside—the ones you serve. You are their Messenger, Nyarlathotep. You came, in linkage with the Shining Trapezehedron, out of inner Egypt, as the poem says. And the fellahs—the common workers of Providence who became converted to the Starry Wisdom sect—bowed before the 'strange dark one' they worshipped as the Haunter.

"The Trapezehedron was thrown into the Bay, and soon from the sea came this noxious birth—your birth, or incarnation in the body of Doctor Dexter. And you taught men new methods of destruction; destruction with atomic bombs in which the 'ground was cleft and mad auroras rolled down on the quaking cities of man.' Oh, Lovecraft knew what he was writing,

and Blake recognized you, too. And they both died. I suppose you'll try to kill me now, so you can go on. You'll lecture, and stand at the elbows of the laboratory men urging them on and giving them new suggestions to result in greater destruction. And finally you'll blow earth's dust away."

"Please." Doctor Dexter held out both hands. "Control yourself—let me get you something! Can't you realize this whole thing is absurd?"

Fiske moved towards him, hands fumbling at the clasp of the briefcase. The flap ~~flipped~~ ^{opened}, and Fiske reached inside, then withdrew his hand. He held a revolver now, and he pointed it quite steadily at Doctor Dexter's breast.

"Of course it's absurd," Fiske muttered. "No one ever believed in the Starry Wisdom sect except a few fanatics and some ignorant foreigners. No one ever took Blake's stories or Lovecraft's, or mine for that matter as anything but a rather morbid form of amusement. By the same token, no one will ever believe there is anything wrong with you, or with so-called scientific investigation of atomic energy, or the other horrors you plan to loose on the world to bring about its doom. And that's why I'm going to kill you now!"

"Put down that gun!"

FISKE began suddenly to tremble; his whole body shook in a spectacular spasm. Dexter noted it and moved forward. The younger man's eyes were bulging, and the physician inched towards him.

"Stand back!" Fiske warned. The words were distorted by the convulsive shuddering of his jaws. "That's all I needed to know. Since you are in a human body, you can be destroyed by ordinary weapons. And so I do destroy you—Nyarlathept!"

His finger moved.

So did Doctor Dexter's. His hand went swiftly behind him, to the wall master-lightswitch. A click and the room was plunged into utter darkness.

Not utter darkness—for there was a glow.

The face and hands of Doctor Ambrose

Dexter glowed with a phosphorescent fire in the dark. There are presumably forms of radium poisoning which can cause such an effect, and no doubt Doctor Dexter would have so explained the phenomenon to Edmund Fiske, had he the opportunity.

But there was no opportunity. Edmund Fiske heard the click, saw the fantastic flaming features, and pitched forward to the floor.

Doctor Dexter quietly switched on the lights, went over to the younger man's side and knelt for a long moment. He sought a pulse in vain.

Edmund Fiske was dead.

The doctor sighed, rose, and left the room. In the hall downstairs he summoned his servant.

"There has been a regrettable accident," he said. "That young visitor of mine—a hysteric—suffered a heart attack. You had better call the police, immediately. And then continue with the packing. We must leave tomorrow, for the lecture tour."

"But the police may detain you."

Doctor Dexter shook his head. "I think not. It's a clear-cut case. In any event, I can easily explain. When they arrive, notify me. I shall be in the garden."

The doctor proceeded down the hall to the rear exit and emerged upon the moonlit splendor of the garden behind the house on Benefit Street.

The radiant vista was walled off from the world, utterly deserted. The dark man stood in moonlight and its glow mingled with his own aura.

At this moment two silken shadows leaped over the wall. They crouched in the coolness of the garden, then slithered forward towards Doctor Dexter. They made panting sounds.

In the moonlight, he recognized the shapes of two black panthers.

Immobile, he waited as they advanced, padding purposefully towards him, eyes aglow, jaws slavering and agape.

Doctor Dexter turned away. His face was turned in mockery to the moon as the beasts fawned before him and licked his hands.

The Mirror

BY MILDRED JOHNSON



*The old man
had an obsession
for locks. . . .*

WHILE Richard was locking the car, Margaret stood in the driveway looking up the ascending lawn to the house, sprawling, heavy with piazzas, ornamented with gingerbread and a dominant cupola, and thought how little

it had changed in twenty-five years. Had it ever been painted? Undoubtedly so, she mused, but in the same dun yellow characteristic of the dignity and sombre respectability of the Thornbers, from Robert Thornber who built it in 1855 down the roll of