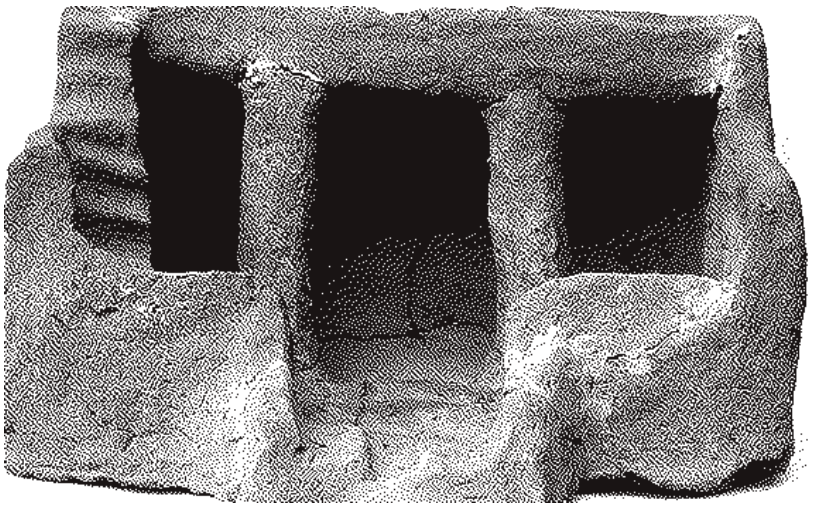

The Ninth Skeleton

By Clark Ashton Smith

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THE NINTH SKELETON

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It was beneath the immaculate blue of a morning in April that I set out to keep my appointment with Guenevere. We had agreed to meet on Boulder Ridge, at a spot well known to both of us, a small and circular field surrounded with pines and full of large stones, midway between her parents' home at Newcastle and my cabin on the northeastern extremity of the Ridge, near Auburn.

Guenevere is my fiancée. It must be explained that at the time of which I write, there was a certain amount of opposition on the part of her parents to the engagement—an opposition since happily withdrawn. In fact, they had gone so far as to forbid me to call, and Guenevere and I could see each other only by stealth, and infrequently,

The Ridge is a long and rambling moraine, heavily strewn in places with boulders, as its name implies, and with many outcroppings of black volcanic stone. Fruit-ranches cling to some of its slopes, but scarcely any of the top is under cultivation, and much of the soil, indeed, is too thin and stony to be arable. With its twisted pines, often as fantastic in form as the cypresses of the California coast, and its gnarled and stunted oaks, the landscape has a wild and quaint beauty, with more than a hint of the Japanesque in places.

It is perhaps two miles from my cabin to the place where I was to meet Guenevere. Since I was born in the very shadow of Boulder Ridge, and have lived upon or near it for most of my thirty-odd years, I am familiar with every rod of its lovely and rugged extent, and, previous to that April morning, would scarcely have refrained from laughing if anyone had told me I could possibly lose my way ... Since then—well, I assure you, I should not feel inclined to laugh ...

Truly, it was a morning made for the trysts of lovers. Wild bees were humming busily in the patches of clover and in the ceanothus bushes with their great masses of white flowers, whose strange and heavy perfume intoxicated the air. Most of the spring blossoms were abroad: cyclamen, yellow violet, poppy, wild hyacinth, and woodland star; and the green of the fields was opalescent with their colouring. Between the emerald of the buckeyes, the grey-

green of the pines, the golden and dark and bluish greens of the oaks, I caught glimpses of the snow-white Sierras to the east, and the faint blue of the Coast Range to the west, beyond the pale and lilac levels of the Sacramento valley. Following a vague trail, I went onwards across open fields where I had to thread my way among clustering boulders.

My thoughts were all of Guenevere, and I looked only with a casual and desultory eye at the picturesqueness and vernal beauty that environed my path. I was halfway between my cabin and the meeting-place, when I became suddenly aware that the sunlight had darkened, and glanced up, thinking, of course, that an April cloud, appearing unobserved from beyond the horizon, had passed across the sun. Imagine, then, my surprise when I saw that the azure of the entire sky had turned to a dun and sinister brown, in the midst of which the sun was clearly visible, burning like an enormous round red ember. Then, something strange and unfamiliar in the nature of my surroundings, which I was momentarily at a loss to define, forced itself upon my attention, and my surprise became a growing consternation. I stopped and looked about me, and realized, incredible as it seemed, that I had lost my way; for the pines on either hand were not those that I had expected to see. They were more gigantic, more gnarled, than the ones I remembered; and their roots writhed in wilder and more serpentine contortions from a soil that was strangely flowerless, and where even the grass grew only in scanty tufts. There were boulders large as druidic monoliths, and the forms of some of them were such as one might see in a nightmare. Thinking, of course, that it must all be a dream, but with a sense of utter bewilderment which seldom if ever attends the absurdities and monstrosities of nightmare, I sought in vain to orient myself and to find some familiar landmark in the bizarre scene that lay before me.

A path, broader than the one I had been following, but running in what I judged to be the same direction, wound on among the trees. It was covered with a grey dust, which, as I went forward, became deeper and displayed footprints of a singular form—footprints that were surely too attenuate, too fantastically slender, to

be human, despite their five toe-marks. Something about them, I know not what, something in the nature of their very thinness and elongation, made me shiver. Afterwards, I wondered why I had not recognized them for what they were; but at the time, no suspicion entered my mind—only a vague sense of disquietude, an indefinable trepidation.

As I proceeded, the pines amid which I passed became momentarily more fantastic and more sinister in the contortions of their boughs and boles and roots. Some were like leering hags; others were obscenely crouching gargoyles; some appeared to writhe in an eternity of hellish torture; others were convulsed as with a satanic merriment. All the while, the sky continued to darken slowly, the dun and dismal brown that I had first perceived turning through almost imperceptible changes of tone to a dead funereal purple, wherein the sun smouldered like a moon that had risen from a bath of blood. The trees and the whole landscape were saturated with this macabre purple, were immersed and steeped in its unnatural gloom. Only the rocks, as I went on, grew strangely paler; and their forms were somehow suggestive of headstones, of tombs and monuments. Beside the trail, there was no longer the green of vernal grass—only an earth mottled by drying algae and tiny lichens the colour of verdigris. Also there were patches of evil-looking fungi with stems of a leprous pallor and blackish heads that drooped and nodded loathsomely.

The sky had now grown so dark that the whole scene took on a semi-nocturnal aspect, and made me think of a doomed world in the twilight of a dying sun. All was airless and silent; there were no birds, no insects, no sighing of the pines, no lisping of leaves: a baleful and preternatural silence, like the silence of the infinite void.

The trees became denser, then dwindled, and I came to a circular field. Here, there was no mistaking the nature of the monolithal boulders—they were headstones and funeral monuments, but so enormously ancient that the letterings or figures upon them were well-nigh effaced; and the few characters that I could distinguish were not of any known language. About them there the hoariness

and mystery and terror of incomputable Eld. It was hard to believe that life and death could be as old as they. The trees around them were inconceivably gnarled and bowed as with an almost equal burden of years. The sense of awful antiquity that these stones and pines all served to convey increased the oppression of my bewilderment, confirmed my disquietude. Nor was I reassured when I noticed on the soft earth about the headstones a number of those attenuate footprints of which I have already spoken. They were disposed in a fashion that was truly singular, seeming to depart from and return to the vicinity of each stone.

Now, for the first time, I heard a sound other than the sound of my own footfalls in the silence of this macabre scene. Behind me, among the trees, there was a faint and evil rattling. I turned and listened; there was something in these sounds that served to complete the demoralization of my unstrung nerves; and monstrous fears, abominable fancies, trooped like the horde of a witches' sabbat through my brain.

The reality that I was now to confront was no less monstrous! There was a whitish glimmering in the shadow of the trees, and a human skeleton, bearing in its arms the skeleton of an infant, emerged and came towards me! Intent as on some ulterior cryptic purpose, some charnel errand not to be surmised by the living, it went by with a tranquil pace, an effortless and gliding tread in which, despite my terror and stupefaction, I perceived a certain horrible and feminine grace. I followed the apparition with my eyes as it passed among the monuments without pausing and vanished in the darkness of the pines on the opposite side of the field. No sooner had it gone, than a second, also bearing in its arms an infant skeleton, appeared, and passed before me in the same direction and with the same abominable and loathsome grace of movement.

A horror that was more than horror, a fear that was beyond fear, petrified all my faculties, and I felt as if I were weighted down by some ineluctable and insupportable burden of nightmare, Before me, skeleton after skeleton, each precisely like the last, with the same macabre lightness and ease of motion, each carrying its piti-

ful infant, emerged from the shadow of the ancient pines and followed where the first had disappeared, intent as on the same cryptic errand. One by one they came, till I had counted eight! Now I knew the origin of the bizarre footprints whose attenuation had disturbed and troubled me.

When the eighth skeleton had passed from sight, my eyes were drawn as by some irresistible impulsion to one of the nearer headstones, beside which I was amazed to perceive what I had not noticed before: a freshly opened grave, gaping darkly in the soft soil. Then, at my elbow, I heard a low rattling, and the fingers of a fleshless hand plucked lightly at my sleeve. A skeleton was beside me, differing only from the others through the fact that it bore no infant in its arms. With a lipless and ingratiating leer, it plucked again at my sleeve, as if to draw me towards the open grave, and its teeth clicked as if it were trying to speak. My senses and my brain, aswirl with vertiginous terror, could endure no more: I seemed to fall and fall through deeps of infinite eddying blackness with the clutching terror of those fingers upon my arm, till consciousness was left behind in my descent.

When I came to, Guenevere was holding me by the arm, concern and puzzlement upon her sweet oval face, and I was standing among the boulders of the field appointed for our rendezvous.

"What on earth is the matter with you, Herbert?" she queried anxiously. "Are you ill? You were standing here in a daze when I came, and didn't seem to hear or see me when I spoke to you. And I really thought you were going to faint when I touched your arm."

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