The Salem Horror

By Henry Kuttner

WEIRD TALES, MAY 1937

THE SALEM HORROR

First published: Weird Tales, May 1937.

Cover: Samson and Delilah, Albrecht Altdorfer, 1506, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This story is in the public domain. Copy it, print it, pass it on. More at gaslight.neocities.org.

A Gaslight zine from HOUDINI Magazine.

When Carson first noticed the sounds in his cellar, he ascribed them to the rats. Later he began to hear the tales which were whispered by the superstitious Polish mill workers in Derby Street regarding the first occupant of the ancient house, Abigail Prinn. There was none living today who could remember the diabolical old hag, but the morbid legends which thrive in the "witch district" of Salem like rank weeds on a neglected grave gave disturbing particulars of her activities, and were unpleasantly explicit regarding the detestable sacrifices she was known to have made to a worm-eater, crescent-horned image of dubious origin. The oldsters still muttered of Abbie Prinn and her monstrous boasts that she was high priestess of a fearfully potent god which dwelt deep in the hills. Indeed, it was the old witch's reckless boasting which had led to her abrupt and mysterious death in 1692, about the time of the famous hangings on Gallows Hill. No one liked to talk about it, but occasionally a toothless crone would mumble fearfully that the flames could not burn her, for her whole body had taken on the peculiar anesthesia of her witch-mark.

Abbie Prinn and her anomalous statue had long since vanished, but it was still difficult to find tenants for her decrepit, gabled house, with its overhanging second story and curious diamond-paned casement windows. The house's evil notoriety had spread throughout Salem. Nothing had actually happened there of recent years which might give rise to the inexplicable tales, but those who rented the house had a habit of moving out hastily, generally with vague and unsatisfactory explanations connected with the rats.

And it was a rat which led Carson to the Witch Room. The squealing and muffled pattering within the rotting walls had disturbed Carson more than once during the nights of his first week in the house, which he had rented to obtain the solitude that would enable him to complete a novel for which his publishers had been asking—another light romance to add to

Carson's long string of popular successes. But it was not until some time later that he began to entertain certain wildly fantastic surmises regarding the intelligence of the rat that scurried from under his feet in the dark hallway one evening.

The house had been wired for electricity, but the bulb in the hall was small and gave a dim light. The rat was a misshapen, black shadow as it darted a few feet away and paused, apparently watching him.

At another time Carson might have dismissed the animal with a threatening gesture and returned to his work. But the traffic on Derby Street had been unusually noisy, and he had found it difficult to concentrate upon his novel. His nerves, for no apparent reason, were taut; and somehow it seemed that the rat, watching just beyond his reach, was eyeing him with sardonic amusement.

Smiling at the conceit, he took a few steps toward the rat, and it rushed away to the cellar door, which he saw with surprize was ajar. He must have neglected to close it the last time he had been in the cellar, although he generally took care to keep the doors shut, for the ancient house was drafty. The rat waited in the doorway.

Unreasonably annoyed, Carson hurried forward, sending the rat scurrying down the stairway. He switched on the cellar light and observed the rat in a corner. It watched him keenly out of glittering little eyes.

As he descended the stairs he could not help feeling that he was acting like a fool. But his work had been tiring, and subconsciously he welcomed any interruption. He moved across the cellar to the rat, seeing with astonishment that the creature remained unmoving, staring at him. A strange feeling of uneasiness began to grow within him. The rat was acting abnormally, he felt; and the unwinking gaze of its cold shoe-button eyes was somehow disturbing.

Then he laughed to himself, for the rat had suddenly whisked aside and disappeared into a little hole in the cellar wall. Idly he scratched a cross with his toe in the dirt before the burrow, deciding that he would set a trap there in the morning.

* * *

The rat's snout and ragged whiskers protruded cautiously. It moved forward and then hesitated, drew back. Then the animal began to act in a singular and unaccountable manner—almost as though it were dancing, Carson thought. It moved tentatively forward, retreated again. It would give a little dart forward and be brought up short, then leap back hastily, as though—the simile flashed into Carson's mind—a snake were coiled before the burrow, alert to prevent the rat's escape. But there was nothing there save the little cross Carson had scratched in the dust.

No doubt it was Carson himself who blocked the rat's escape, for he was standing within a few feet of the burrow. He moved forward, and the animal hurriedly retreated out of sight.

His interest piqued, Carson found a stick and poked it exploringly into the hole. As he did so his eye, close to the wall, detected something strange about the stone slab just above the rat burrow. A quick glance around its edge confirmed his suspicion. The slab was apparently movable.

Carson examined it closely, noticed a depression on its edge which would afford a handhold. His fingers fitted easily into the groove, and he pulled tentatively. The stone moved a trifle and stopped. He pulled harder, and with a sprinkling of dry earth the slab swung away from the wall as though on hinges.

A black rectangle, shoulder-high, gaped in the wall. From its depths a musty, unpleasant stench of dead air welled out, and involuntarily Carson retreated a step. Suddenly he remembered the monstrous tales of Abbie Prinn and the hideous secrets she

was supposed to have kept hidden in her house. Had he stumbled upon some hidden retreat of the long-dead witch?

Before entering the dark gap he took the precaution of obtaining a flashlight from upstairs. Then he cautiously bent his head and stepped into the narrow, evil-smelling passage, sending the flashlight's beam probing out before him.

He was in a narrow tunnel, scarcely higher than his head, and walled and paved with stone slabs. It ran straight ahead for perhaps fifteen feet, and then broadened out into a roomy chamber. As Carson stepped into the underground room—no doubt a hidden retreat of Abbie Prinn's, a hiding-place, he thought, which nevertheless could not save her on the day the fright-crazed mob had come raging along Derby Street—he caught his breath in a gasp of amazement. The room was fantastic, astonishing.

It was the floor which held Carson's gaze. The dull gray of the circular wall gave place here to a mosaic of varicolored stone, in which blues and greens and purples predominated—indeed, there were none of the warmer colors. There must have been thousands of bits of colored stone making up that pattern, for none was larger than a walnut. And the mosaic seemed to follow some definite pattern, unfamiliar to Carson; there were curves of purple and violet mingled with angled lines of green and blue, intertwining in fantastic arabesques. There were circles, triangles, a pentagram, and other, less familiar, figures. Most of the lines and figures radiated from a definite point: the center of the chamber, where there was a circular disk of dead black stone perhaps two feet in diameter.

It was very silent. The sounds of the cars that occasionally went past overhead in Derby Street could not be heard. In a shallow alcove in the wall Carson caught a glimpse of markings on the walls, and he moved slowly in that direction, the beam of his light traveling up and down the walls of the niche.

The marks, whatever they were, had been daubed upon the stone long ago, for what was left of the cryptic symbols was indecipherable. Carson saw several partly-effaced hieroglyphics which reminded him of Arabic, but he could not be sure. On the floor of the alcove was a corroded metal disk about eight feet in diameter, and Carson received the distinct impression that it was movable. But there seemed no way to lift it.

He became conscious that he was standing in the exact center of the chamber, in the circle of black stone where the odd design centered. Again he noticed the utter silence. On an impulse he clicked off the ray of his flashlight. Instantly he was in dead blackness.

At that moment a curious idea entered his mind. He pictured himself at the bottom of a pit, and from above a flood was descending, pouring down the shaft to engulf him. So strong was this impression that he actually fancied he could hear a muffled thundering, the roar of the cataract. Then, oddly shaken, he clicked on the light, glanced around swiftly. The drumming, of course, was the pounding of his blood, made audible in the complete silence—a familiar phenomenon. But, if the place was so still——

The thought leaped into his mind, as though suddenly thrust into his consciousness. This would be an ideal place to work. He could have the place wired for electricity, have a table and chair brought down, use an electric fan if necessary—although the musty odor he had first noticed seemed to have disappeared completely. He moved to the tunnel mouth, and as he stepped from the room he felt an inexplicable relaxation of his muscles, although he had not realized that they had been contracted. He ascribed it to nervousness, and went upstairs to brew black coffee and write to his landlord in Boston about his discovery.

* * *

The visitor stared curiously about the hallway after Carson had opened the door, nodding to himself as though with satisfaction. He was a lean, tall figure of a man, with thick steel-gray eyebrows overhanging keen gray eyes. His face, although strongly marked and gaunt, was unwrinkled.

"About the Witch Room, I suppose?" Carson said ungraciously. His landlord had talked, and for the last week he had been unwillingly entertaining antiquaries and occultists anxious to glimpse the secret chamber in which Abbie Prinn had mumbled her spells. Carson's annoyance had grown, and he had considered moving to a quieter place; but his inherent stubbornness had made him stay on, determined to finish his novel in spite of interruptions. Now, eyeing his guest coldly, he said, "I'm sorry, but it's not on exhibition any more."

The other looked startled, but almost immediately a gleam of comprehension came into his eyes. He extracted a card and offered it to Carson.

"Michael Leigh ... occultist, eh?" Carson repeated. He drew a deep breath. The occultists, he had found, were the worst, with their dark hints of nameless things and their profound interest in the mosaic pattern on the floor of the Witch Room. "I'm sorry, Mr. Leigh, but—I'm really quite busy. You'll excuse me."

Ungraciously he turned back to the door.

"Just a moment," Leigh said swiftly.

Before Carson could protest he had caught the writer by the shoulders and was peering closely into his eyes. Startled, Carson drew back, but not before he had seen an extraordinary expression of mingled apprehension and satisfaction appear on Leigh's gaunt face. It was as though the occultist had seen something unpleasant—but not unexpected.

"What's the idea?" Carson asked harshly. "I'm not accustomed——"

"I'm very sorry," Leigh said. His voice was deep, pleasant. "I must apologize. I thought—well, again I apologize. I'm rather

excited, I'm afraid. You see, I've come from San Francisco to see this Witch Room of yours. Would you really mind letting me see it? I should be glad to pay any sum——"

Carson made a deprecatory gesture.

"No," he said, feeling a perverse liking for this man growing within him—his well-modulated, pleasant voice, his powerful face, his magnetic personality. "No, I merely want a little peace—you have no idea how I've been bothered," he went on, vaguely surprized to find himself speaking apologetically. "It's a frightful nuisance. I almost wish I'd never found the room."

Leigh leaned forward anxiously. "May I see it? It means a great deal to me—I'm vitally interested in these things. I promise not to take up more than ten minutes of your time."

Carson hesitated, then assented. As he led his guest into the cellar he found himself telling the circumstances of his discovery of the Witch Room. Leigh listened intently, occasionally interrupting with questions.

"The rat—did you see what became of it?" he asked.

Carson looked surprized. "Why, no. I suppose it hid in its burrow. Why?"

"One never knows," Leigh said cryptically as they came into the Witch Room.

* * *

Carson switched on the light. He had had an electrical extension installed, and there were a few chairs and a table, but otherwise the chamber was unchanged. Carson watched the occultist's face, and with surprize saw it become grim, almost angry.

Leigh strode to the center of the room, staring at the chair that stood on the black circle of stone.

"You work here?" he asked slowly.

"Yes. It's quiet—I found I couldn't work upstairs. Too noisy. But this is ideal—somehow I find it very easy to write here. My

mind feels"—he hesitated—"free; that is, disassociated with other things. It's quite an unusual feeling."

Leigh nodded as though Carson's words had confirmed some idea in his own mind. He turned toward the alcove and the metal disk in the floor. Carson followed him. The occultist moved close to the wall, tracing out the faded symbols with a long forefinger. He muttered something under his breath—words that sounded like gibberish to Carson.

"*Nyogtha ... k'yarnak....*"

He swung about, his face grim and pale. "I've seen enough," he said softly, "Shall we go?"

Surprized, Carson nodded and led the way back into the cellar.

Upstairs Leigh hesitated, as though finding it difficult to broach his subject. At length he asked, "Mr. Carson—would you mind telling me if you have had any peculiar dreams lately."

Carson stared at him, mirth dancing in his eyes. "Dreams?" he repeated. "Oh—I see. Well, Mr. Leigh, I may as well tell you that you can't frighten me. Your compatriots—the other occultists I've entertained—have already tried it."

Leigh raised his thick eyebrows. "Yes? Did they ask you whether you'd dreamed?"

"Several did—yes."

"And you told them?"

"No." Then as Leigh leaned back in his chair, a puzzled expression on his face, Carson went on slowly, "Although, really, I'm not quite sure."

"You mean?"

"I *think*—I have a vague impression—that I have dreamed lately. But I can't be sure. I can't remember anything of the dream, you see. And—oh, very probably your brother occultists put the idea into my mind!"

"Perhaps," Leigh said non-committally, getting up. He hesitated. "Mr. Carson, I'm going to ask you a rather presumptuous

question. Is it necessary for you to live in this house."

Carson sighed resignedly. "When I was first asked that question I explained that I wanted a quiet place to work on a novel, and that any quiet place would do. But it isn't easy to find 'em. Now that I have this Witch Room, and I'm turning out my work so easily, I see no reason why I should move and perhaps upset my program. I'll vacate this house when I finish my novel, and then you occultists can come in and turn it into a museum or do whatever you want with it. I don't care. But until the novel is finished I intend to stay here."

Leigh rubbed his chin. "Indeed. I can understand your point of view. But—is there no other place in the house where you can work?"

He watched Carson's face for a moment, and then went on swiftly.

"I don't expect you to believe me. You are a materialist. Most people are. But there are a few of us who know that above and beyond what men call science there is a greater science that is built on laws and principles which to the average man would be almost incomprehensible. If you have read Machen you will remember that he speaks of the gulf between the world of consciousness and the world of matter. It is possible to bridge that gulf. The Witch Room is such a bridge! Do you know what a whispering-gallery is?"

"Eh?" Carson said, staring. "But there's no——"

"An analogy—merely an analogy. A man may whisper a word in a gallery—or a cave—and if you are standing in a certain spot a hundred feet away you will hear that whisper, although someone ten feet away will not. It's a simple trick of acoustics—bringing the sound to a focal point. And this principle can be applied to other things besides sound. To any wave impulse—*even to thought*!"

Carson tried to interrupt, but Leigh kept on.

"That black stone in the center of your Witch Room is one of those focal points. The design on the floor—when you sit on the black circle there you are abnormally sensitive to certain vibrations—certain thought commands—dangerously sensitive! Why do you suppose your mind is so clear when you are working there? A deception, a false feeling of lucidity—for you are merely an instrument, a microphone, tuned to pick up certain malign vibrations the nature of which you could not comprehend!"

Carson's face was a study in amazement and incredulity. "But—you don't mean you actually *believe*——"

Leigh drew back, the intensity fading from his eyes, leaving them grim and cold. "Very well. But I have studied the history of your Abigail Prinn. She, too, understood this super-science of which I speak. She used it for evil purposes—the black art, as it is called. I have read that she cursed Salem in the old days—and a witch's curse can be a frightful thing. Will you——" He got up, gnawing at his lip. "Will you, at least, allow me to call on you tomorrow?"

Almost involuntarily Carson nodded. "But I'm afraid you'll be wasting your time. I don't believe—I mean, I have no——" He stumbled, at a loss for words.

"I merely wish to assure myself that you—oh, another thing. If you dream tonight, will you try to remember the dream? If you attempt to recapture it immediately after waking, it is often possible to recall it."

"All right. If I dream——"

* * *

That night Carson dreamed. He awoke just before dawn with his heart racing furiously and a curious feeling of uneasiness. Within the walls and from below he could hear the furtive scurryings of the rats. He got out of bed hastily, shivering in the

cold grayness of early morning. A wan moon still shone faintly in a paling sky.

Then he remembered Leigh's words. He *had* dreamed—there was no question of that. But the content of his dream—that was another matter. He absolutely could not recall it to his mind, much as he tried, although there was a very vague impression of running frantically in darkness.

He dressed quickly, and because the stillness of early morning in the old house got on his nerves, went out to buy a newspaper. It was too early for shops to be open, however, and in search of a news-boy he set off westward, turning at the first corner. And as he walked a curious and inexplicable feeling began to take possession of him: a feeling of—familiarity! He had walked here before, and there was a dim and disturbing familiarity about the shapes of the houses, the outline of the roofs. But—and this was the fantastic part of it—to his knowledge he had never been on this street before. He had spent little time walking about this region of Salem, for he was indolent by nature; yet there was this extraordinary feeling of remembrance, and it grew more vivid as he went on.

He reached a corner, turned unthinkingly to the left. The odd sensation increased. He walked on slowly, pondering.

No doubt he *had* traveled by this way before—and very probably he had done so in a brown study, so that he had not been conscious of his route. Undoubtedly that was the explanation. Yet as Carson turned into Charter Street he felt a nameless uneasy waking within him. Salem was rousing; with daylight impassive Polish workers began to hurry past him toward the mills. An occasional automobile went by.

Before him a crowd was gathered on the sidewalk. He hastened his steps, conscious of a feeling of impending calamity. With an extraordinary sense of shock he saw that he was passing the Charter Street Burying Ground, the ancient, evilly fa-

mous "Burying Point." Hastily he pushed his way into the crowd.

Comments in a muffled undertone came to Carson's ears, and a bulky blue-clad back loomed up before him. He peered over the policeman's shoulder and caught his breath in a horrified gasp.

A man leaned against the iron railing that fenced the old graveyard. He wore a cheap, gaudy suit, and he gripped the rusty bars in a clutch that made the muscles stand out in ridges on the hairy back of his hands. He was dead, and on his face, staring up at the sky at a crazy angle, was frozen an expression of abysmal and utterly shocking horror. His eyes, all whites, were bulging hideously; his mouth was a twisted, mirthless grin.

A man at Carson's side turned a white face toward him. "Looks as if he was scared to death," he said somewhat hoarsely. "I'd hate to have seen what he saw. Ugh—look at that face!"

Mechanically Carson backed away, feeling an icy breath of nameless things chill him. He rubbed his hand across his eyes, but still that contorted, dead face swam in his vision. He began to retrace his steps, shaken and trembling a little. Involuntarily his glance moved aside, rested on the tombs and monuments that dotted the old graveyard. No one had been buried there for over a century, and the lichen-stained tombstones, with their winged skulls, fat-cheeked cherubs, and funereal urns, seemed to breathe out an indefinable miasma of antiquity. What had frightened the man to death?

* * *

Carson drew a deep breath. True, the corpse had been a frightful spectacle, but he must not allow it to upset his nerves. He could not—his novel would suffer. Besides, he argued grimly to himself, the affair was obvious enough in its explanation. The dead man was apparently a Pole, one of the group of

immigrants who dwell about Salem Harbor. Passing by the graveyard at night, a spot about which eldritch legends had clung for nearly three centuries, his drink-befuddled eyes must have given reality to the hazy phantoms of a superstitious mind. These Poles were notoriously unstable emotionally, prone to mob hysteria and wild imaginings. The great Immigrant Panic of 1853, in which three witch-houses had been burned to the ground, had grown from an old woman's confused and hysterical statement that she had seen a mysterious white-clad foreigner "take off his face." What else could be expected of such people, Carson thought?

Nevertheless he remained in a nervous state, and did not return home until nearly noon. When on his arrival he found Leigh, the occultist, waiting, he was glad to see the man, and invited him in with cordiality.

Leigh was very serious. "Did you hear about your friend Abigail Prinn?" he asked without preamble, and Carson stared, pausing in the act of siphoning charged water into a glass. After a long moment he pressed the lever, sent the liquid sizzling and foaming into the whisky. He handed Leigh the drink and took one himself—neat—before answering the question.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Has—what's she been up to?" he asked, with an air of forced levity.

"I've been checking up the records," Leigh said, "and I find Abigail Prinn was buried on December 14th, 1690, in the Charter Street Burying Ground—with a stake through her heart. What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Carson said tonelessly. "Well?"

"Well—her grave's been opened and robbed, that's all. The stake was found uprooted near by, and there were footprints all around the grave. Shoe-prints. Did you dream last night, Carson?" Leigh snapped out the question, his gray eyes hard.

"I don't know," Carson said confusedly, rubbing his forehead. "I can't remember. I was at the Charter Street graveyard this

morning."

"Oh. Then you must have heard something about the man who——"

"I saw him," Carson interrupted, shuddering. "It upset me."

He downed the whisky at a gulp.

Leigh watched him. "Well," he said presently, "are you still determined to stay in this house?"

Carson put down the glass and stood up.

"Why not?" he snapped. "Is there any reason why I shouldn't? Eh?"

"After what happened last night——"

"After *what* happened? A grave was robbed. A superstitious Pole saw the robbers and died of fright. Well?"

"You're trying to convince yourself," Leigh said calmly. "In your heart you know—you must know—the truth. You've become a tool in the hands of tremendous and terrible forces, Carson. For three centuries Abbie Prinn has lain in her grave—*undead*—waiting for someone to fall into her trap—the Witch Room. Perhaps she foresaw the future when she built it, foresaw that some day someone would blunder into that hellish chamber and be caught by the trap of the mosaic pattern. It caught you, Carson—and enabled that undead horror to bridge the gulf between consciousness and matter, to get *en rapport* with you. Hypnotism is child's play to a being with Abigail Prinn's frightful powers. She could very easily force you to go to her grave and uproot the stake that held her captive, and then erase the memory of that act from your mind so that you could not remember it even as a dream!"

Carson was on his feet, his eyes burning with a strange light. "In God's name, man, do you know what you're saying?"

Leigh laughed harshly. "God's name! The devil's name, rather—the devil that menaces Salem at this moment; for Salem is in danger, terrible danger. The men and women and children of the town Abbie Prinn cursed when they bound her

to the stake—and found they couldn't burn her! I've been going through certain secret archives this morning, and I've come to ask you, for the last time, to leave this house."

"Are you through?" Carson asked coldly. "Very well. I shall stay here. You're either insane or drunk, but you can't impress me with your poppycock."

"Would you leave if I offered you a thousand dollars?" Leigh asked. "Or more, then—ten thousand? I have a considerable sum at my command."

"No, damn it!" Carson snapped in a sudden blaze of anger. "All I want is to be left alone to finish my novel. I can't work anywhere else—I don't want to, I won't——"

"I expected this," Leigh said, his voice suddenly quiet, and with a strange note of sympathy. "Man, you can't get away! You're caught in the trap, and it's too late for you to extricate yourself so long as Abbie Prinn's brain controls you through the Witch Room. And the worst part of it is that she can only manifest herself with your aid—she drains your life forces, Carson, feeds on you like a vampire."

"You're mad," Carson said dully.

"I'm afraid. That iron disk in the Witch Room—I'm afraid of that, and what's under it. Abbie Prinn served strange gods, Carson—and I read something on the wall of that alcove that gave me a hint. Have you ever heard of Nyogtha?"

Carson shook his head impatiently. Leigh fumbled in a pocket, drew out a scrap of paper. "I copied this from a book in the Kester Library," he said, "a book called the *Necronomicon*, written by a man who delved so deeply into forbidden secrets that men called him mad. Read this."

* * *

Carson's brows drew together as he read the excerpt:

Men know him as the Dweller in Darkness, that brother of the Old Ones called Nyogtha, the Thing that should not be. He

can be summoned to Earth's surface through certain secret caverns and fissures, and sorcerers have seen him in Syria and below the black tower of Leng; from the Thang Grotto of Tartary he has come ravening to bring terror and destruction among the pavilions of the great Khan. Only by the looped cross, by the Vach-Viraj incantation and by the Tikkoun elixir may he be driven back to the nighted caverns of hidden foulness where he dwelleth.

Leigh met Carson's puzzled gaze calmly. "Do you understand now?"

"Incantations and elixirs!" Carson said, handing back the paper. "Fiddlesticks!"

"Far from it. That incantation and that elixir have been known to occultists and adepts for thousands of years. I've had occasion to use them myself in the past on certain—occasions. And if I'm right about this thing——" He turned to the door, his lips compressed in a bloodless line. "Such manifestations have been defeated before, but the difficulty lies in obtaining the elixir—it's very hard to get. But I hope ... I'll be back. Can you stay out of the Witch Room until then?"

"I'll promise nothing," Carson said. He had a dull headache, which had been steadily growing until it obtruded upon his consciousness, and he felt vaguely nauseated. "Good-bye."

He saw Leigh to the door and waited on the steps, with an odd reluctance to return to the house. As he watched the tall occultist hurry down the street, a woman came out of the adjoining house. She caught sight of him, and her huge breasts heaved. She burst into a shrill, angry tirade.

Carson turned, staring at her with astonished eyes. His head throbbed painfully. The woman was approaching, shaking a fat fist threateningly.

"Why you scare my Sarah?" she cried, her swarthy face flushed. "Why you scare her wit' your fool tricks, eh?"

Carson moistened his lips.

"I'm sorry," he said slowly. "Very sorry. I didn't frighten your Sarah. I haven't been home all day. What frightened her?"

"T'e brown t'ing—it ran in your house, Sarah say——"

The woman paused, and her jaw dropped. Her eyes widened. She made a peculiar sign with her right hand—pointing her index and little fingers at Carson, while her thumb was crossed over the other fingers. "T'e old witch!"

She retreated hastily, muttering in Polish in a frightened voice.

Carson turned, went back into the house. He poured some whisky into a tumbler, considered, and then set it aside untasted. He began to pace the floor, occasionally rubbing his forehead with fingers that felt dry and hot. Vague, confused thoughts raced through his mind. His head was throbbing and feverish.

At length he went down to the Witch Room. He remained there, although he did not work; for his headache was not so oppressive in the dead quiet of the underground chamber. After a time he slept.

* * *

How long he slumbered he did not know. He dreamed of Salem, and of a dimly-glimpsed, gelatinous black thing that hurtled with frightful speed through the streets, a thing like an incredibly huge, jet-black ameba that pursued and engulfed men and women who shrieked and fled vainly. He dreamed of a skull-face peering into his own, a withered and shrunken countenance in which only the eyes seemed alive, and they shone with a hellish and evil light.

He awoke at last, sat up with a start. He was very cold.

It was utterly silent. In the light of the electric bulb the green and purple mosaic seemed to writhe and contract toward him, an illusion which disappeared as his sleep-fogged vision cleared. He glanced at his wrist-watch. It was two o'clock. He

had slept through the afternoon and the better part of the night.

He felt oddly weak, and a lassitude held him motionless in his chair. The strength seemed to have been drained from him. The piercing cold seemed to strike through to his brain, but his headache was gone. His mind was very clear—expectant, as though waiting for something to happen. A movement near by caught his eye.

A slab of stone in the wall was moving. He heard a gentle grating sound, and slowly a black cavity widened from a narrow rectangle to a square. There was something crouching there in the shadow. Stark, blind horror struck through Carson as the thing moved and crept forward into the light.

It looked like a mummy. For an intolerable, age-long second the thought pounded frightfully at Carson's brain: *It looked like a mummy!* It was a skeleton-thin, parchment-brown corpse, and it looked like a skeleton with the hide of some great lizard stretched over its bones. It stirred, it crept forward, and its long nails scratched audibly against the stone. It crawled out into the Witch Room, its passionless face pitilessly revealed in the white light, and its eyes were gleaming with charnel life. He could see the serrated ridge of its brown, shrunken back....

Carson sat motionless. Abysmal horror had robbed him of the power to move. He seemed to be caught in the fetters of dream-paralysis, in which the brain, an aloof spectator, is unable or unwilling to transmit the nerve-impulses to the muscles. He told himself frantically that he was dreaming, that he would presently awaken.

The withered horror arose. It stood upright, skeleton-thin, and moved to the alcove where the iron disk lay embedded in the floor. Standing with its back to Carson it paused, and a dry and sere whisper rustled out in the dead stillness. At the sound Carson would have screamed, but he could not. Still the dreadful whisper went on, in a language Carson knew was not of

Earth, and as though in response an almost imperceptible quiver shook the iron disk.

It quivered and began to rise, very slowly, and as if in triumph the shriveled horror lifted its pipestem arms. The disk was nearly a foot thick, but presently as it continued to rise above the level of the floor an insidious odor began to penetrate the room. It was vaguely reptilian, musky and nauseating. The disk lifted inexorably, and a little finger of blackness crept out from beneath its edge. Abruptly Carson remembered his dream of a gelatinous black creature that hurtled through the Salem streets. He tried vainly to break the fetters of paralysis that held him motionless. The chamber was darkening, and a black vertigo was creeping up to engulf him. The room seemed to rock.

Still the iron disk lifted; still the withered horror stood with its skeleton arms raised in blasphemous benediction; still the blackness oozed out in slow ameboid movement.

There came a sound breaking through the sere whisper of the mummy, the quick patter of racing footsteps. Out of the corner of his eye Carson saw a man come racing into the Witch Room. It was the occultist, Leigh, and his eyes were blazing in a face of deathly pallor. He flung himself past Carson to the alcove where the black horror was surging into view.

* * *

The withered thing turned with dreadful slowness. Leigh carried some implement in his left hand, Carson saw, a *crux ansata* of gold and ivory. His right hand was clenched at his side. His voice rolled out, sonorous and commanding. There were little beads of perspiration on his white face.

"*Ya na kadishtu nilgh'ri ... stell'hsna kn'aa Nyogtha ... k'yarnak phlege-thor....*"

The fantastic, unearthly syllables thundered out, echoing from the walls of the vault. Leigh advanced slowly, the *crux*

ansata held high. And from beneath the iron disk black horror came surging!

The disk was lifted, flung aside, and a great wave of iridescent blackness, neither liquid nor solid, a frightful gelatinous mass, came pouring straight for Leigh. Without pausing in his advance he made a quick gesture with his right hand, and a little glass tube hurtled at the black thing, was engulfed.

The formless horror paused. It hesitated, with a dreadful air of indecision, and then swiftly drew back. A choking stench of burning corruption began to pervade the air, and Carson saw great pieces of the black thing flake off, shriveling as though destroyed with corroding acid. It fled back in a liquescent rush, hideous black flesh dropping as it retreated.

A pseudopod of blackness elongated itself from the central mass and like a great tentacle clutched the corpse-like being, dragged it back to the pit and over the brink. Another tentacle seized the iron disk, pulled it effortlessly across the floor, and as the horror sank from sight, the disk fell into place with a thunderous crash.

The room swung in wide circles about Carson, and a frightful nausea clutched him. He made a tremendous effort to get to his feet, and then the light faded swiftly and was gone. Darkness took him.

* * *

Carson's novel was never finished. He burned it, but continued to write, although none of his later work was ever published. His publishers shook their heads and wondered why such a brilliant writer of popular fiction had suddenly become infatuated with the weird and ghastly.

"It's powerful stuff," one man told Carson, as he handed back his novel, *Black God of Madness*. "It's remarkable in its way, but it's morbid and horrible. Nobody would read it. Carson, why

don't you write the type of novel you used to do, the kind that made you famous?"

It was then that Carson broke his vow never to speak of the Witch Room, and he poured out the entire story, hoping for understanding and belief. But as he finished, his heart sank as he saw the other's face, sympathetic but skeptical.

"You dreamed it, didn't you?" the man asked, and Carson laughed bitterly.

"Yes—I dreamed it."

"It must have made a terribly vivid impression on your mind. Some dreams do. But you'll forget about it in time," he predicted, and Carson nodded.

And because he knew that he would only be arousing doubts of his sanity, he did not mention the thing that was burned indelibly on his brain, the horror he had seen in the Witch Room after awakening from his faint. Before he and Leigh had hurried, white-faced and trembling, from the chamber, Carson had cast a quick glance behind him. The shriveled and corroded patches that he had seen slough off from that being of insane blasphemy had unaccountably disappeared, although they had left black stains upon the stones. Abbie Prinn, perhaps, had returned to the hell she had served, and her inhuman god had withdrawn to hidden abysses beyond man's comprehension, routed by powerful forces of elder magic which the occultist had commanded. But the witch had left a memento behind her, a hideous thing which Carson, in that last backward glance, had seen protruding from the edge of the iron disk, as though raised in ironic salute—*a withered, claw-like hand*!

■ ■ ■

GASLIGHT

Free to read and print. More stories at

gaslight.neocities.org

HOUDINI Magazine
houdinimagazine.com

HOUDINI.TV
houdini-tv.neocities.org

Support Gaslight:
ko-fi.com/A0A81D040N

Rest in Peace Chris // Grim Dark (Half Off) - This Page Dedicated to Your Contributions to the Culture