

A Cthulhu Mythos Story

DAGON MANOR

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WHEN I lie dying, I will remember my first view of Dagon Manor, the accursed. A cold grey sky arched above it where it loomed in the lonely desolation of the fens. Behind its sullen dark bulk the somber crimson of the sunset throbbed upon the foothills.

On all sides the moors sloped away, dim and drear, the long sere grass ripping under a chill wind. And as far as we could see, there was no other sign of human habitation—only that somber unlighted house rearing stark against the cold solitude.

Conrad shivered involuntarily.

"What a desolate waste! Why should the man choose such an unholy spot for his habitation?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"You should know Tavarel of old, Conrad. He was always a morose, taciturn soul, something of the recluse, something of the misanthrope, something of the mystic. This dreary and lonely setting is just such as would appeal to him, since his heritage from his uncle has made him financially able to carry out his wildest whims. Look!"

A light had sprung up in the silent house.

"Let's go in."

The heavy, old-fashioned knocker resounded spectrally throughout the house. The heavy oaken door opened, and a familiar figure was framed in the dim light from within the great cavernous hall. The fellow was Ketric, Tavarel's single servant, a gaunt, silent cadaverous man whose past not even Tavarel knew. I never liked the fellow. There was something about his bare, high skull, his cold light eyes and thin hooded nose which was unpleasantly reminiscent of a vulture or some foul bird of prey. And I knew Conrad shared this feeling.

Suddenly, I was again filled with the dread that had settled in me on our way to Tavarel's that evening. We had been hard pressed to find someone to take us from the main village to our host's estate. The only driver with heart enough to transport us was a lumbering, superstitious oaf whose courage was half bluster and half alcohol.

He had whipped his sullen nags throughout the trip, spurring them with curse and lash, until finally in their mad dash through the black night they bounced the fool's antique buggy one time too many. Conrad and I had been forced to walk the last pair of miles to Tavarel's, listening to the carriage-man's foul curses behind us in the distance. His raging screeches haunted us for half of our march, filling me with a most irrational dread. Now, the sight of Ketric before me flushed my body with that same terror.

We had seen him last in Conrad's home, when he had "accidentally" struck his master's mutual friend, and ours, John O'Donnell, a near-crushing blow with an antique flint mallet. O'Donnell had been quiet, near to death, after the blow, until he bolted upright and made to strangle Ketric. He would have succeeded as well, if the entire assembly had not been there to pull them apart. At the time, amid the pandemonium, I had not noted Ketric's look as unusual. He wore the same look now, though, and it chilled me through my soul like a look in a demon mirror.

Half-stumbling, I acknowledged the manservant, gripping my irrational fears and making bid to enter. Conrad followed close. None of us had seen Tavarel since he had left for England the year before to claim his inheritance. Now, we were inside the oppressive bulk, being ushered into its new lord's presence. Ketric moved us into the main foyer, asking for our coats and wraps. He indicated a heavy, dark wood door, "All the others are here."

With that, he turned away, moving to some room hidden from our view. Grasping the door handle, I pulled, allowing Conrad and myself to join a gathering quite well known to us. Tavarel, sitting at the head of a long oaken table, stood and bellowed, "Conrad! Kirowan! About time. The hour is almost high—what happened to the pair of you? No matter, though; no time now. Best now you take to the bar and fetch yourselves a stout bracer!"

Waving his hands over the assembly, he urged, "Best we all find a fresh broth to warm our courage with."

Heeding our host's advice, those around the table advanced toward us and the bar beyond. Clemants joined us first, claiming our company from the others by sweeping us forward with a shove at each of our backs. Like many another artist, his fierce struggles with poverty in his youth had lined his face beyond his years. He was a tall, lean man, usually silent to the point of taciturnity. That night was different, though.

"Well," he asked, "are you ready for this evening's adventure?"

As I poured myself a brandy, I confessed, "In all truth, neither Conrad nor I really know what is behind all this."

Clemants turned to Harris and Singer

next to him at the bar. Singer confirmed, "Nor do any here, save our host and his serving man, apparently. I think Tavarel has relied on our own driving curiosities to drag us here to his doorstep."

"And who wouldn't have been curious with a message such as yours to greet us in the afternoon mail?" The speaker was O'Donnell. He was always the quickest to act amongst us. Standing from the table, he spoke evenly, but with a tone which meant his patience had ended. He pointed his finger at Tavarel.

"We are all of us, I am sure, tired of waiting. You've put us off all evening, saying you wanted to await Conrad and Kirowan's arrival before you explained your message. Well, they're here. Forget drinks and your promised dinner, and the cigars and brandy to follow."

Reaching inside his jacket pocket, O'Donnell pulled forth a telegram I was sure was a mate to the ones Conrad and I had received. "You brought us here with these words,

*October, thirty-first—
I shall slide the bit in
God's mouth. Join me.
Tavarel*

"Now I think you had better explain them."

Tavarel spread his large palms apart, gesturing acquiescence. Looking from one of our faces to another, he could see we all shared O'Donnell's enthusiasm to learn why we had gathered. Tavarel motioned us to the table, asking us to take seats. With strong drink in hand, Conrad and I joined the others as our host began his story.

"A number of people we have known, or known of, have lost their lives due to something none of us here has quite understood. Joseph Roe-locke and John Grimlan were two. Conrad, your brother's 'suicide' was another. Hah, suicide, indeed. We all know better than that."

Tavarel was correct. James Conrad had faced something nightmarish, and there was no doubt he had been shaken by it. I had been the only one of us in contact with James at the time of his death. He had been troubled; at moments he could appear nearly mad, but he was maddened with anger and shame. What had happened to him in that house in old Dutchtown, I would never be able to say, but I do know he returned to it to destroy it, not himself. The fact his body had been found in the charred ruins proved suicide only to the local mayor and his sleepy, fearful council, no one else. Tavarel continued;

"Justin Geoffrey, that poor lunatic, he committed suicide—driven to it by the sight of a delirious dimension beyond ours. Geoffrey, like Conrad's brother, was given a glimpse of another world, an insane plane past logic or science or any other discipline we might choose to wrap ourselves within, and the sight of it made the crude normalities of our everyday existence too dry and laughable to bear."

Tavarel stood then, towering over the end of the table like some long lost Celtic war chief. His eyes shone with a red hue gluing us to his every word. Pointing down the table past us all, through the doorway beyond, down through the floors, he told us, "In this place left in my care by great goddess Chance, there is a doorway to that other place; beneath us is a chamber which acts as a veil between our sphere of life and that other.

"Tonight, for those willing, there is a chance to tear back that veil. A chance to remove the barrier and for once allow men prepared to act to capture and slay whatever it is beyond, which has come here one time too many."

We all sat in shallow quiet, none daring to stir. Conrad and I had seen the demon-thing Tavarel spoke of when it had carried John Grimlan back beyond its dimensional drapings. We watched, frozen in horror as flames turned Grimlan's home into a crimson inferno with appalling swiftness. Our eyes did not seek the licking tongues consuming his mansion, however. We stared instead at a great mass swirling in the sky over us. A gigantic black shadow, like a monstrous bat hovered above the holocaust. From its dark clutch, a small white thing dangled limply; that the thing was John Grimlan neither Conrad nor I had ever doubted.

Conrad stared at me, and I knew that night was before his eyes. It had flashed into his brain at Tavarel's mention of Grimlan as had another night into O'Donnell's when our host had spoken the name of Joseph Roelocke.

I was with O'Donnell when the same kind of monstrous shadow claimed Roelocke, blotting him out in one brain-shattering instant. I took O'Donnell's arm and we fled the accursed chamber, blind with horror.

Looking at O'Donnell's face now, though, looking from it to Conrad's, to Clemants's, to Tavarel's, to Beardsley's and the others', I wondered if our host was not right, and that maybe it was indeed finally the time to act. It was only the matter of a few moments' discussion to discover that all our party felt the same.

Tavarel stood in the glow of the fire-

place, shards of light glancing off his back. Though older by far than any present, his form radiated assurance and confidence to the rest of us. He was cut from the same cloth as O'Donnell; despite his age he was a fighting man, rough chopped from a solid block of muscle and determination that refused to acknowledge fear or defeat. He smiled at our acceptance of his mad defiance. And mad it was, for without scarcely a thought, the seven of us had determined to throw in with our old friend, determined to aid him in his attempt to destroy the thing which had so casually trampled through all our lives.

At Tavarel's order, we headed for the doorway, following him like schoolboys promised their first view of a lion. We were excited and yet apprehensive, for we knew the beast in question might easily reach out from its confines and snare us all for a savage lunch.

Our host led us to the stairway descending to the manor's subterranean levels. Electric lantern in hand, Tavarel led the way into the infinite darkness stretching before us down the massive stone stairs. We stumbled along in single file, feeling the deep cold of the walls as we fingered our way through the descent. Although the stairway was a short one, the darkness combined with our purpose to strike us all with dread. Even after Tavarel brought the electric lights into being, none of us spoke, or expected any other to speak.

We stared about the massive subroom, taking its contents in at a glance. The only permanent fixture was a massive oil heater. Sitting in the corner, it made its own quiet noises, churning steam through the manor. Other than the furnace, however, the huge chamber was filled with nothing but war materials. Tavarel explained the stores as provisions left behind after the Great War.

Dagon Manor had been used as a storage center, the army reluctant to build a supply dump in such a remote outpost. Tavarel's uncle had volunteered the premises to the military, who had bunked fifty men in his halls and filled his cellar with powder, shells, machine oil, and fuel. That the leaving of such supplies years after the war seemed quite unorthodox, Tavarel agreed most vigorously. He said the enlisted men stationed in his home had reported many disturbing feelings and emotions, in both rumor and reports. There had been more than one argument amongst the soldiers that ended in blood-letting, and one murder which had never been solved.

The army abandoned the post as quickly as they could at the war's end, but no one had yet come to cart out the explosives, even though Tavarel's uncle had written about it more than once. It was not this our host wanted us to see, though. Leading us through the twisting maze of barrels, sacks, and crates, Tavarel brought us to a large gash in the flagstones of the sub-chamber's floor.

Peering in, one could see a slope of packed dirt, falling away into blackness. Tavarel told us, "Ketric discovered this hole some months ago. Apparently the flooring gave out one day and collapsed into the tunnel you can see below. That the manor is built atop these catacombs there is no record, at least not one I have been able to uncover. But they are here, and they are most extensive. Ketric and I have explored them, finding much that beggars description, and more which begs not to be mentioned. We also discovered the room to which I shall now take you."

So saying, our host grabbed hold of a support rope, previously strung and anchored, and began making his way to the floor of the tunnel below. One by one we followed, our nerves reaching out into the pitch around us, searching for the source of the fear sneaking its way into our hearts.

As O'Donnell hit the floor, Tavarel had already powered the set of electric lights strung down the center of the cavern roof. "Had workmen put them in—damn cowards—charged me five times their worth, half the sluggards carrying guns and clubs the whole time, the other half warding bags and crucifixes, as if any of that could have stopped what was giving them the willies."

Tavarel spoke as he led us deeper into the tunnels. He estimated the eldritch age of the moss-clung walls around us, telling us the meaning of many of the hieroglyphs covering them. The chill of the subterranean passage crept into everyone, setting arms to slapping and teeth to chattering up and down our line. Before anyone made to complain, however, we arrived at our destination.

We came into a huge, half-natural, half-tooled cavern. At once one could see inhuman rites of an unexplainable nature had been performed within it. Bones, human and animal, were swept back against the walls, hundreds upon hundreds of varied skeletal pieces all jammed one into the other, creating a circle of bone around the center of the room nearly knee high. Tavarel explained that no time had existed in which to remove the bones. His work-

men had been troublesome enough over clearing as much area as they did; no amount of money or threats were able to convince them to remove the debris altogether.

But, more startling, more spell-binding than the bones themselves, were the object they had surrounded. An altar, for it could be no other thing, planted meanly in the center of the cavern, drew our eyes like an evening campfire on the desert. It was a beastly thing of dark origin; carved from a frightening, solid piece of red and black marbled rock, it beckoned to us all.

Even now I find it hard to put into words, but the altar was possessed of a physical presence, much beyond its mere base structure as a block of stone. Its surface gleamed as we approached in a way only describable as hungrily. The ground to all sides of it were a much darker shade than that on which we stood—a condition we could only attribute to its having been soaked in the blood of countless victims.

Tavarel's workmen had cut the haunting sight off from the rest of the cavern with a series of thickly wrought iron rods sunk several yards into the ground. These restraints extended upward into the ceiling, all of them seemingly as well-secured into place. In the center of the wall of bars stood open a reinforced door which Tavarel headed for, beckoning to us to follow.

The nagging dread I had been feeling continued to cling to me as I stepped through the entrance, coming closer to the altar. The dampness of the cavern added to it, drawing my eyes to the puddles of condensation smearing the walls and ceiling. At our feet, we saw that the darkness around the altar was indeed no one would ever know how many centuries' worth of blood, sponged up by the ground in such quantities that at some time in the past it must have pooled in the cavern, leaving staining on the walls nearly a foot in height.

It was that last image of brute violence which finally fired our anger. On this night, the thing that had feasted on the emotions and sanity and flesh of humanity for far too many eons, sluffing back and forth beyond the drapes of reality, dragging its bloated, evil frame with it would be within our grasp. Somehow, without words between us, we knew all assembled meant to put an end to such a routine, even though it might mean all our deaths.

Tavarel's voice boomed behind us, listing the means he meant for us to use in the destruction of our foe. Elec-

tricity had been harnessed for the purpose, as had many hundreds of gallons of a liquid poison—a concentrated form of death which had turned men to leather during the Great War, leaving their dried corpses behind like rotted apples on the floor of some forgotten orchard. He pointed out the delivery points of each of our weapons, showing how each blow would be administered.

It was all quite clever, and there was not a man among us who was not sure of our friend's plan's chances for success. As we prepared to exit Tavarel's ingenious chamber, however, we discovered other forces had been planning as well.

On crossing back to the doorway through the bars, we found it closed, ourselves locked within. Tavarel struggled with the door furiously, throwing all the strength of his old but broad shoulders to the task. We all crowded around, trying to reach the lock in front, pushing, pounding, hammering at the bars with a fury that went beyond expedience. Sudden laughter broke our attention. Looking up beyond the grill, we saw Tavarel's servant leading a host of others.

"Ketric! Explain yourself."

Grinning like an animate skull, the man stood before us looking as a sight from a forgotten time. Gone were the pinched black suit, white shirt and small, servitor's dark bow tie. Now his gangly reed figure stood half-naked in a costume scarce imaginable.

All his body was awash in thick muddy paints—reds and greens and blacks smeared in noxious patterns over his limbs and chest and face. He wore a loin cloth made of rodent pelts, his shoulders and arms adrape in a tangle of snake skins which flapped and rustled as he walked. Those behind him were costumed in equally bizarre fashion. Where they might have come from, we had no idea, for Tavarel had always supposed himself alone in the manor with his servant.

Stepping forward, Ketric pointed a long nailed finger at us, his yellow vulture's visage twisted with loathing. "Fools spawned of fools and a witless faith in only what you can explain. My people have fed your like to the protector since before a time we can remember. While you have admired your most modern toys, I have set the workings in motion to call forth That Which Is To Come to consume you all!"

We stood, staring hopelessly, frozen immobile by our seeming fate. "This place was found by no cave-in," Ketric sneered at Tavarel. "I indentured myself to you twenty years ago because

we knew this day would come. We arranged your uncle's death so this land would be in your hands at the proper time—and thus ours.

"But—the time grows nigh—pray to your white god, children, for now, we pray to ours!"

And then, Ketric clapped his hands, spurring his followers into action. As a group, they took what seemed assigned places, moving with an attractive and yet repugnant precision which showed more than simple practice. All the crowd, men and women, gave off a feel of sensual brutishness. Several of them set a tune with drums and pipes, a terrifying and repelling music which sent a continual beat of madness throughout the cavern.

The rhythm of the swaying bodies grew faster. Ketric's followers danced with lashing hair and blazing eyes, spinning dizzily on their toes, leaping about the chamber, every moment building their fever to a greater height.

Oddly, O'Donnell seemed nearly uninterested. Calmly and methodically, he tore at his jacket lining, pulling the bunched cotton from within. Quietly he handed some to each of us, indicating that we should stuff it into our ears as he had done. I might have thought him mad as those beyond the bars, had not his demeanor suggested that he was instead waiting for something I simply could not imagine. While we complied with his instructions, O'Donnell eyed our captors continually, gauging the lengths of their madness until finally deciding it was time to act.

Instantly it was made clear to me—a man much traveled in the western reaches of America, O'Donnell never went anywhere unarmed. Always suspicious of the worst, mayhap more so after Tavarel's telegrams, he had secreted a revolver beneath his jacket. Distracted by their ritual, our foes did not notice as he suddenly crossed to the doorway. Packing his jacket against the lock, he reduced it to scrap with five rapid but muffled blasts!

In truth, the noise was scarce heard over the mad dance in the cavern beyond. Ketric's followers had taken to flailing themselves—gyrating beyond control, frothing spittle mixed with blood bubbling from their lips and draining from their noses. Stepping out into the open between two poles of electric lights, O'Donnell raised his revolver, growling, "One for you, devil!"

The bullet sang across the chamber, cutting the red fogged air, tearing into Ketric's throat. Even through our stuffed ears, the noise was hellish. The cultists' frenzied dance ceased as most

grabbed for their ears in pain. Crimson pulsed free in blowing arcs from Ketric, splashing across the heights on which he stood, and those below him. Clutching his neck, he held fast his throbbing jugular, clamping back the rebellious blood, shouting at us,

"Too late, Mr. O'Donnell—a grand effort, but too late! For now, nothing can stop the entrance to our world by Gol-Goroth—the forgotten Old One!"

So screeching, Ketric raised his hands to the cavern roof, his released blood throbbing out over all the scene as his followers moved toward us. Rapidly fitting new shells into his revolver, O'Donnell cautioned, "Careful, they're trying to herd us back into the cage."

Tavarel sneered. Stooping to pull a thick, wicked looking jawbone from the heap surrounding us, he hefted it grimly, stepping forward in measured steps.

"Let them try."

So speaking, he feigned and swung, tearing the face away from the closest of the painted devils. Gory tendrils of flesh slid free, but the victim's companions pushed him aside and swarmed forward. O'Donnell again emptied his weapon, the accompanying reverberations doing as much damage to the cultists as the bullets.

We all lay into them then, fighting with fist and bone, fear and desperation driving us into a berserk animation which pushed our foe men back to regroup.

Singer was already done, his thinly haired head rent open and his eyes staring in futile helplessness. Clemants had busied himself lashing a length of electrical cable about the doorway bars, trying to once again secure the cell. As his head had been bent to its work, so had ours, but now that the cultists had fled back a space, several of us had turned to look about the chamber. It was Conrad that saw it first.

"Kirowan!"

His scream was the desperation of the walking dead—a pierce that rent brain and soul like flame through gauze. We whirled at the sound, and saw as he saw, and were taken with the same madness.

Within the chamber, oozing upon the altar like some beached sea creature, lay Gol-Goroth, a sight of such horrible nature that we were fixed like birds before a snake. Its call sang to us, and we listened, each of us seeing its monstrous bulk in our own way.

To some, it appeared as a large, loathsome toad-shape, a webbed bloat-ed sack of moving green which retched upon the block of stone, filling the chamber with noxious sounds.

To others it was crab-like in nature, possessed of claws and hooves at the same time, all of it running with long strands of red jellied pus, hanging from it loosely.

No matter what its appearance, however, all stood mute and watched as it reached out from its perch on the altar, and then sent its forward appendages through the bars to wrap around Harris. It plucked him forward, smashing him against the bars, pulling him through in pieces, cramming him into its puckered maw a piece at a time.

The sight of such horror snapped something in Tavarel. Shaking his head, he turned to his side and slapped Conrad mightily across the face, spinning him from the sight in the cage. Conrad in turn freed Clemants as Tavarel moved to myself.

O'Donnell, twisting himself free, brought Beardsley around. Shaken, the group of us conferred quickly. The cultists had all fallen to their knees, their faces buried in the ground. They had no notion of what was happening, all of their satisfied attention directed to the noises coming from beyond the bars. Silently, Tavarel waved us to follow him.

Mounting the ancient carved stone stairs which led upward to his devices, Tavarel plucked up the dull-eyed remains of Ketric which blocked our path. Gripping the corpse in both hands, he hurled it from the ledge into the again approaching tendrils of the obscenity below. Gol-Goroth greedily closed on the limp form, whipping it through the air, breaking its bones to pull it between the bars.

As we all attained the uppermost ledge, O'Donnell cautioned, "Hurry up. That thing's nearly done with its ju-ju boss."

Tavarel snapped open the first restraint on a large tin. Cursing to himself, he whispered, "Then grab hold and get one of these open before it comes looking for more of us."

O'Donnell and Conrad immediately began to work on another while I assisted Tavarel with the one he had started. Beardsley worked to keep Clemants quiet. The sight of Gol-Goroth had been beyond the artist, twisting his notions of reality too severely for him to be able to function. His hair had gone shock white, standing away from his head in sweat-dripping strands like a bizarre crown. The rest of us tore furiously at the catches of the drums, hurrying to open them as Conrad shuddered, "Damn, we're too late!"

Again the snaking tentacled claws were reaching forward. At Conrad's

shout, however, several of the cultists looked up, spotting us on the ledge. Forgetting about their god for a moment, they stood, several reaching for their bludgeons. Doing so brought them within Gol-Goroth's red-rimmed sight, though, and they were snatched up like handfuls of chestnuts.

Their bleats of terror attracted their fellows, however, and suddenly, the entire chamber was shot through with screaming echoes. Before anything could be done to prevent it, a dozen or so of the swarthy painted figures began mounting the stairs. Beardsley dragged Clemants upward out of their range, even as O'Donnell and Conrad rolled their half-opened tin to the edge of the stair and then tipped it over. The heavy drum bounced once and then tore open, splashing the ascending cultists with a force which sent them sliding away.

Instantly those covered with the freed liquid tore at their skin, howling with a pain beyond reason. And then, without warning, the seeking arms caught hold of several of the blinded cultists, dragging them toward the bloody, flesh-slimed bars. With no concern, or even understanding, Gol-Goroth happily slammed its captives to death against the bars and again began its process of dragging forth the pieces it desired.

Scarce attention could be paid it, however, as more of the howling cultists came at us. Tavarel rolled our tin forward, sending them scattering again, the death within washing over the floor of the chamber. O'Donnell took aim and fired, cutting down several more, their bodies falling and twitching in the burning moistness soaking into the dirt floor.

And then, maybe in reaction to the noise, or maybe in response to some long forgotten urging, Gol-Goroth slid from its perch and moved forward. We tore at the remaining tins, opening and emptying them as quickly as possible.

Reaching the cell wall, the green bulk pondered it dully, and then, began moving against it, shoving with an impossible strength. Great bulges of green flesh squirmed through the bars, stretching tight from the pressure. Tavarel shouted, "Judas priest! Quickly, topple all the drums. Hurry!"

We rolled the remaining tins over the edge, listening to them splash open as they hit the rocks below. The cultists had all fled the chamber screaming by this point, their nightmarish howls long gone and forgotten. As the air began to thicken from the released poison, Tavarel flung gas masks at us, yelling instructions as to their proper fit. After getting his own on, Beardsley

turned to struggle one onto Clemants, but it was too late.

The artist had descended the stairs, approaching Gol-Goroth's cage. Already the bars had begun to bend, powder from the stone ceiling grinding free from the pressure. Ignoring the seering hiss which came each time his shoes came in contact with the thin pool of liquid we had spilled over all the cavern, he reached forward, grabbing the end of the electrical cable he had threaded through the bars.

As he turned toward the generator, Beardsley made to cry out, but Tavarel stopped him. "It's the only way. We can't help Clemants now, but he might be able to help us." Our old friend looked down at Clemants as he began wiring the connections to the generator in the corner, and then said, "Quickly, we'd best be out of the chamber before he finishes."

Scrambling down the stairs, we dashed for the exit, trying not to watch the ever-bending bars, or the obscene, green shape staggering them. Several of the thick rods had already buckled, hanging loosely from the ceiling and jutting from the floor like the splintered fangs of some ancient nightmare.

We reached the edge of the pool, getting well back into the tunnel from which we first emerged when Clemants's voice reached us.

"Now thing—now, we'll see." Without tremble or quiver, his normally thin voice echoed strongly. "Come, thing. Feast on me!"

Compelled by a curiosity beyond reason, I looked back into the cavern. There I could see Tavarel's cage now completely shattered, and beyond, Clemants standing defiantly in the poison pool, wrapped in coil from the generator. In each hand he held a sparking live wire. As he taunted the god-thing before him, he stared wide-eyed, the slightest trace of foam brewing past his lips. Blood-smeared extensions grabbed out for him. Smiling, Clemants dropped the wires into the poison, setting the cavern crackling in blue light.

Gol-Goroth made to drop its captive, but could not. Clemants fried away before my eyes, his body juicing into flame and cinders. Current flew through the shambler's great bulk, the lashing flying lengths of it thrashing wildly. A dark, burning stench filled the chamber and tunnel, followed by a vomitous billow of gagging black coulds.

A ponderous blinding holler, a noise beyond human reckoning thundered around and through us. Gol-Goroth screamed in a killing, murderous throttle of tones which sent us all

stumbling through the tunnel like deer in a forest fire. It was the uncomprehending wail of despair in agony—the bleeding shriek of madness incarnate, inarticulate and brutal.

We were assailed by smoke and stench and noise in quantities to make a stranger to the types of abnormalities we had known crumple to a mind-shattering death. How we survived the never-ending pain of the thing we had sought to destroy I cannot say. When I finally realized that its screams had ended, I knew they had been done for some time.

Smoke still hung in the tunnel, reeking of the smell of Gol-Goroth's burnt flesh, and its pain. I staggered to my feet, throwing my arm about Conrad, dragging him to his feet. O'Donnell did the same for Tavarel, helping the older man to a place against the wall. Beardsley pulled himself up, mumbling beneath his breath about things I could not hear.

The tunnel lights, powered from the mansion above, were still working, but dimmed by the smoke in the tunnel. Walking back to the mouth of the



chamber, Beardsley peered in to view the remains of our other-dimensional foe. It was the last thing he was destined to ever do.

Without warning, Gol-Goroth's still burning tentacles whipped into view, crushing the life from our friend instantly. The sound of his breaking bones echoed rudely, chasing and passing us in the halls as we stumbled blindly in terror from the thing behind us.

We ran without plan or thought, fleeing with the insane frenzy of fish in a net. We bounced from the walls, tearing our hands and faces, blood sluicing from our wounds, trailing behind us. Gol-Goroth followed.

The thing's noise gnawed at us, clutching through the tunnel at our heels. Through the gas masks, through the wadding in our ears, still we gagged with nausea at the smell and sound of the beast. Strangely, even as we ran, a small pool of logic within the storm-tossed workings of my mind wondered at how our pursuer could still live.

It had soaked into itself hundreds of gallons of Tavarel's poison; it had swal-

lowed the fury of the heavens, charred inside and out until the air was heavy with the stink of its burning flesh, but still it came. Dogging us with an unfazed power, it came oozing through the halls behind us, snorting its mind-twisting static at us as if to ridicule our efforts.

Blind in the smoking insanity of the tunnel, I stumbled on behind the vague form of Tavarel, wondering at what we had done. I was sure the others had the same thought as I; would Gol-Goroth track us upward into the mansion—into the outside world? Had we, in our attempt to rid the world of this occasional nightmare, brought it permanently to our plane?

I shuddered with the thought, realizing in that moment that there was nothing left for us to do. In truth, I near gave up hope then, for I had come to believe that nothing of man's science could injure, or even turn, the rampaging bulk at our heels.

And then, suddenly, the exit to the surface loomed before me. O'Donnell was already scrambling up into the manor cellar, followed haltingly by a dazed Tavarel. Conrad and I stumbled to the support rope and began dragging ourselves to the surface. Clambering up through the shattered flagstones, I saw O'Donnell, smashing open numerous of the packing crates which sat about the chamber.

"Take Tavarel upstairs—quickly!!" he roared, tearing free his gas mask, "We've one last chance to halt this damned thing, and I've the mind to take it."

Offers on our part to assist him were met with mad snarls. O'Donnell screamed at us to go, and then turned his back on us. Breaking the old abandoned war crates apart, he scattered blasting powder about himself in all directions, his black mane whipping arcs of sweat into the air with every swing.

Afraid to interfere with his plan, aware that the madness of our ordeal had affected us all, I took Conrad by the tattered edge of his sleeve and pulled him to where Tavarel lay, heaving great breaths in and out. Each taking an arm over our shoulders, Conrad and I lifted our friend to his feet, practically dragging him up the stairs.

We staggered up and out into the main hall, all the three of us carrying the others. Upon reaching the foyer, though, I told my comrades, "Keep going. Outside. Get away."

They sought to restrain me, but I escaped their grasp and plunged back into the house—my brain refusing to surrender one more human being to the monstrosity below without a price.

Whatever O'Donnell's plan, he would not face Gol-Goroth alone.

Upon reaching the stairs to the cellar, however, I found he had no intentions of facing the thing at all. His rational, fighting instinct had taken over, cutting through the shock and insanity of what we had seen to force him to proper action. As I started down the stairs, I found him starting upward, dragging a large burlap of blasting powder behind him. Shaking the last of it free, I watched him reach into his pocket and pull forth a small match case.

Before he could strike one, though, he looked forward into the cellar, and suddenly he froze. Without thinking I knew Gol-Goroth had ascended from the tunnel.

Knowing O'Donnell in the thing's power, I dashed back down the dark stairwell, somehow shoving aside my fear, realizing only that the world's one chance was to be weighed by my actions. Grabbing my friend's arm, I swung him away from the cellar and then struck him as sound an open-hand blow as I might, staggering him back a step. As his eyes began to blink, I shouted.

"Don't look at it—don't even think, O'Donnell! Just do it!"

Reacting from instinct, he struck the match still frozen in his hand and then dropped it into the heap of powder mounded at the base of the stair. Instantly the doorway filled with the harsh black of hissing powder sputter. The obscene presence of Gol-Goroth disappeared from view as the blanket of explosive grains ignited, flame racing throughout the cellar. O'Donnell and I reeled headily up the stairs, pulling and pushing each other as we went.

As we topped the landing, we could hear the thing's form scrapping at the stairwell, seeking to rise behind us. Giddy with desperation, the pair of us ran for the front door; O'Donnell's hand took the knob of it as the first explosions rang free.

We were thrown to our knees—then our faces. Plaster sprang from the walls; the chandeliers came crashing. Smoke curled through the floorboards. Dragging each other up, we pushed open the doors, a rush of wind from outside beckoning the flames beneath us upward into the walls.

We hurried onto the porch, able to see Conrad and Tavarel awaiting us in the distance. We stumbled for the stairs, but then, even as safety called to the fore, some mad impulse caught me, damning me to stop and look backward into the burning reek of Dagon Manor.

More explosions rocked the mansion,

but they could not turn me from the dragging horror of Gol-Goroth, covered in dark slag and ruin, moving through the hanging, serpentine billows of smoke toward me. Noxious tentacles flung themselves forward, and I felt my doom nearing, only then to be plucked from such an end by the fruition of O'Donnell's plan. Before the elder beast could enfold me unto its being, suddenly the floor buckled beneath it, a rushing grey scorch of fiery destruction consuming the horrific terror as it fell back to the cellar below.

Taking the chance offered, I flung myself from the porch, hitting the fen beyond with an impact which shattered ribs, but saved the rest of me. For, in that instant, the greater part of the explosives which lay beneath Dagon Manor shattered the mansion's massive boiler, cutting the night with an explosion of untold force. All of us were thrown like so many leaves in a gale across the carpet of grasses toward the road beyond.

Flaming board and glass showered us; brick and stone sent skyward as if by cannon rained on the countryside, some bits coming down more than a mile away. Flame raged across the sere grasses, wildly shot by the force of the main explosion, only to quickly die against the fall soak of the fens.

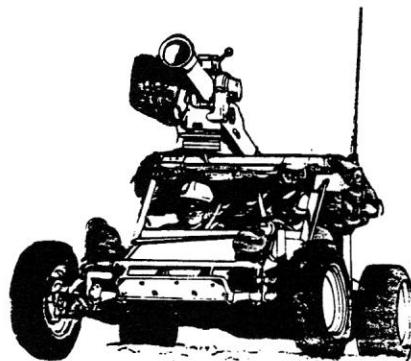
Little trace was found of our friends' remains. Their bodies perished in the holocaust, as did those of Ketric and his followers, and that of their god. Gol-Goroth did not return to its foul altar, nor did it live through the night. Bits and pieces of it were discovered over the days that followed. Where it fell, life died out. Ponds were poisoned, fields rendered barren—but the thing was no more, and would never come again.

From our recovery beds, Tavarel and I learned that O'Donnell and Conrad had tracked down all the torn scraps of Gol-Goroth and consigned them to the pyre.

In the end we had proved to be nothing more than men, and Gol-Goroth nothing more than beast. At times, delirious in morphine dreams, I would question whether our struggle and the loss of life resultant was worth our efforts. In more rational moments, however, I would remember the heaps of human bones surrounding the thing's altar, the thousands of crushed and bloodied breastbones and skulls of women and child, and the dark red stain to the yards of ground we stood upon, then the answer comes much clearer.

—The End—

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