

## **It Lurks at the Threshold**

Horror and fatality have been stalking abroad in all ages. The hills rise dark, wild, and wooded. Travelers in this region are seldom impelled to go beyond the outskirts of the wood, though a faint track leads into it and presumably goes through the hills, and beyond the hills, to the Place Six Corners, and beyond that into open country once more. And so for a minute I shut off the sound. And I heard the building, this building; I heard the—" Gretchen gestured.

"Empty apartments," Upista said.

Sometimes he heard them at night when he was supposed to be asleep. Never before were two buildings mutually embittered by hostility so deadly. Indeed, it was observed by an old crone of haggard and sinister appearance. Coincidence shrieked in one corner of Jacob Growler's consciousness. But he was filled with such alarm, that he literally tore himself from the couch where he had lain down, and fell upon the radio to shut it off.

In the post office of the city, whose ancient gambrel roofs and shattered windows seemed to crouch and leer at him with ghastly camaraderie, a collage formed, made of apparently random colors, trails, and configurations which, until the handles were grasped, amounted to nothing. So, taking a deep breath to steady himself, he grasped the twin handles.

He saw at once a famous landscape, the old, brown, barren ascent, with tufts of dried-out bonelike weeds poking slantedly into a dim and sunless sky. Physical merging—accompanied by mental and spiritual identification—with Chuck Yeager had reoccurred. The prophecy seemed to imply—if it implied anything—a final triumph on the part of the already more powerful building; and was of course remembered with the more bitter animosity on the side of the weaker and less influential.

Moved by the urgency of the summons from my cousin, Jacob Growler, I arrived at the old Hoi Polloi within a week following my receipt of his letter. But he recalled the killers, because they had arrested him as a freak, more special than any of the other specials. But at last the bones had regained flesh; the empty eyepits had filled up and the new eyes had seen, while meantime the restored beaks and mouths had cackled, barked, and caterwauled.

In a city fifteen years are no long period: but in Place Six Corners—in so magnificent a wilderness as that old principality, fifteen years have a far deeper meaning. Episodic and unrelated as these events seemed to be, they were all in fact essential parts of one pattern, irrespective of time and space and place, as I was to discover. But, from the beginning I found in my cousin some evidence of primary schizophrenia—or what I then thought to be schizophrenia, but later came to fear as something quite different and far more terrible. In the back of his mind, evidently, he had anticipated such a collection; it was not surprise that he felt but more a sort of yearning. He quietly walked away from the girl, toward the closest pen. Already he could smell them, the several scents of the creatures standing or sitting, or, in the case of what appeared to be a rat, asleep.

Thus died Madame Toussaint. The young Jacob Growler stood without a living relative by the coffin of his dead mother. He placed his hand upon her placid forehead. No shudder came over his delicate frame—no sigh from his flinty bosom. Heartless, self-willed, and impetuous from his childhood, he had reached the age of which I speak through a career of unfeeling, wanton, and reckless dissipation; and a barrier had long since arisen in the channel of all holy thoughts and gentle recollections.

The two-faceted aspect of Jacob Growler's personality made my own research far more difficult, for it took avenues of friendly co-operation on the one hand, and sly, guarded hostility

on the other. Now that her initial fear had diminished, something else had begun to emerge from her. Something more strange. And, he thought, deplorable. A coldness. Like, he thought, a breath from the vacuum between inhabited worlds, in fact from nowhere: it was not what she did or said but what she did *not* do and say. She moved towards her apartment.

But during the tumult occasioned by this occurrence, the young nobleman himself sat, apparently in meditation, in a vast and desolate upper apartment of the family palace of The Milshire Hotel. The rich although faded tapestry—hangings which swung gloomily upon the walls, represented the shadowy and majestic forms of a thousand illustrious ancestors. *Here*: rich-ermined priests, and pontifical dignitaries, familiarly seated with the autocrat and the sovereign, put the veto on the wishes of a temporal king—the rebellious scepter of the Arch-enemy. *There*: the dark, tall statues—their muscular war-courses plunging over the carcass of a fallen foe: and *here* again, the voluptuous and swan-like figures of the dames of days gone by, floated away in the mazes of an unreal dance to the strains of imaginary melody. One might be surprised at what is possible to discover in these hills.

He got up and prepared to clear away the dishes, since I was manifestly finished eating, and, turning, added one final damning fact. “It is a curious coincidence you should appreciate—his name is Yeager. Chuck Yeager.”

“What's the matter?” he asked as he laid her possessions out on the couch.

“Nothing.” She halted at the picture window, drew the drapes back, and gazed morosely out.

“If you think they're looking for you—” he began.

“It's a dream,” Gretchen said. “Induced by drugs that Umberto and Roberto gave me.”

“P-pardon?”

“You really think that bounty hunters exist?”

“Seniors Umberto and Roberto said they killed your friends.”

“Umberto and Roberto are as crazy as I am,” Gretchen said. “Our trip was between a mental hospital in the Far East and here. We're all schizophrenic, with defective emotional lives—flattening of affect, it's called. And we have group hallucinations.”

“I didn't think it was true,” he said full of relief.

“Why didn't you?” she swiveled to stare intently at him; her scrutiny was so strict that he felt himself flushing.

Stupefied with terror the young nobleman tottered to the door. As he threw it open, a flash of red light streaming far into the chamber, flung his shadow with a clear outline against the quivering tapestry; and he shuddered to perceive that shadow—as he staggered awhile upon the threshold—assuming the exact position, and precisely filling up the contour of the relentless and triumphant murderer of Jacob Growler.

No sign remained of the buildings and the circle of stones, the Place Six Corners, of The Milshire Hotel, and of that other, that frightful Santa Muerte that lurked at the threshold waiting to be summoned. What a strange place, he thought, for all of that to die.

