

Chapter III

ON the morrow Satan and I set out for the store-room, whither we daily hied for meat and sustenance. It was a dismal day, with a dark sky, from which the rain fell in thick sheets, so that we ate more than we needed and drank our fill, aye, and more than our fill, of the wine in the cellar below. I remember well that I emptied a flask of red and a flask of yellow, and yet another flask of red; for the leaden sky had made me sorrowful and the warm wine brought me comfort. By noon I had driven all care from my heart, and I was singing ribald songs and a-sitting on the floor with Satan, whom I had made to drink his fill of wine from a platter.

"Satan, old crow," I cried, "'tis a goodly tavern; wilt pay the reckoning?"

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He came towards me, yet not in a straight line but in a curve: the face he wore was not his own, 'twas more like the face of a stupid sheep; for the liquor had reached his brain, and his head and limbs were unsteady.

"Thou drunken knave," I cried, "get thee hence; no denier hast thou with which to pay what glasses thou hast burst! Out, thou black tinker!" and with that we fell into each other's arms and rolled on the floor, together and wondrous happy.

'Twas then that I bethought me of the turret and the silver moonlight I had seen on its window these last three nights.

"Friend Beelzebub," said I to my companion, "We two will venture to the tower and see what it holds—perchance a duplicate moon; marry, thou roistering puss, up on to thy four legs, and do thou lead the way!"

Together we struggled out into the

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hall and then upstairs till we came to a doorway that opened on to a winding staircase that, as I rightly surmised, led to the chamber in the turret.

Well I remember how we wound round this last flight; the steps were of stone, and we held on to the damp walls, muttering to ourselves and ever and anon laughing aloud; for the wine was hot in our heads, and our legs went one way and our bodies another. At length we reached the stairway head, and I threw open a brass-studded door. Before us was a round apartment, the floor littered with huge folios, while a red curtain of heavy silk hung from floor to ceiling at the further end. On entering this chamber we were greeted by a cry, shrill and uncanny as the shriek of a night bird. I looked about me, and there rose from a low chair an aged crone, bent well-nigh double, with a lifeless face, and long wisps of hair that were a pale yel-

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low from age. Two long teeth, brown as toasted almonds, projected on either side of her mouth, while on her chin sprouted a fine beard that I plucked as I looked into her face and drew her toward me. Her eyes were small, malevolent, and like beads of glass.

“What make you up here, old hag?” I said, holding tight to her beard so as to make sure of her face, for most things that were about me I could see double, aye, and some three-fold. She laid her hand—’twas dry and lean, with thick black veins—on my arm, and hissed with rage as does a serpent, trying with feeble force to disengage her beard.

“What make you up here, old witch, spells and sorcery?” I asked once more. Then I turned to Satan that had dwelt with the witch: “Knowest thou this lady?” I said, with a thick voice. The black cat shrunk to my side, marvellous steady

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and sober. "Satan, thou that I bought of a witch, thou that knowest the ways of sorcerers, is it safe to let this old crone live, or shall I hurl her from the turret window?" And with that I drew the hag yet closer towards me, and made as if to execute my threat.

"Indeed, kind sir, 'twas not I," she whined.

"Dost speak the English tongue?—aye, I forgot thou art a witch and speak all tongues."

"Indeed, sweet sir, I have done thee no harm; prithee release my beard!"

"'Twas not you?" I burst out. "You have done me no harm? Then you know what devil's work has gone forward under this roof, Hag of the Turret? Was the sword that flashed under my heels of thy forging?"

"Indeed, kind sir," she whimpered, "I had no power over that blade, nor

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over the bronze hand on the gateway. I fear these things even as you fear them. I am but an old woman, and no witch; pray, kind sir, release your hold on my beard, for the pain is great."

"Heaven help you, if you lie," I said, and I loosed my hold.

She fell back muttering to herself in a strange tongue, and her glance was that evil and malevolent that I shuddered at sight of so terrible a visage.

I turned to friend Satan, who, in spite of temporary calmness, was heavy with wine. He lay now on the floor of the chamber asleep and breathing hard from his nostrils, so that I could see his moustachios bend and sway.

"Arouse thee, friend Satan," I cried, treading with my foot on his back. "And thou, old hag, beware!"

I strode several times round the chamber, turning over the huge volumes that were strewn about and of which I could understand no word,

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though I be a good scholar, having been intended as a boy for the priesthood, and I had studied hard till the day that I quitted the monastery for the ocean that had the greater attraction for me. I stood before the circular window that I had gazed on from below, and on the other side of the turret was another window of the same shape and size. We were high up above the earth, and I could see across wood and meadow-land far away to the sea, and wherever I looked stretched the blue of the distant ocean.

“ ’Tis an island, this land of brazen idols and bearded hags, eh, old snake? and what may be its name? ” I cried.

“ It hath no name, ” she said.

“ And thy name? ”

“ I have none. ”

“ Then, Hag of the Turret shalt thou be called henceforth. Come thou below to the cellar and we will celebrate thy christening. ”

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I laid my hand on her shoulder, and I felt that she was shaking with fear under my palm. I am not of a cruel disposition and I was moved.

“ Have no dread, ” I cried; “ so long as thy conduct is harmless and of good report thou art safe. I am neither witch nor sorcerer; naught but a plain seaman, Silas Fordred, master-mariner of Hythe. ”

She scowled at me most bad-humouredly.

“ I love seamen, they are brave and free as the ocean, ” said the witch.

“ Aye, thou lovest them as did the Syrens. I know thy love and will none of it. ”

“ You mock me because I am old and withered; ’tis not generous, Silas Fordred, master-mariner of Hythe,— ’tis not generous, nor is it brave. ”

“ Get thee back to thy spells and incantations, ” and I looked at the great tomes that were spread about the

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room. "Yet stay," I continued: "whence comes the patch of moon-light that I see nightly on thy window-pane?"

For answer she pressed a spring in the wall, and, as I live, there burnt in a globe of glass above our heads a pale thread of light, white as a moon-ray.

"A strange lamp is this, aye, and another of thy sorcerer's tricks; take care that it works no harm."

"An innocent device," she protested, "and simple."

"'Tis well; mark what I have said, and now good-day, and mind thou keepest to thy turret; for should I meet thee below, I will spit thee like a woodcock on one of thine own swords."

She scowled most evilly, the thin lips curling inward over her toothless gums, while the two fangs at the corners pressed down on her withered chin.

"Come, friend Satan," said I, stir-

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ring the weary cat with my foot, "let us away."

Together we descended the stairway, and the brass-studded door closed over our heads; then downhill to the stream that bordered the wood, to idle through the long afternoon as best we might.

Thus, stretched at our ease, we thought over the day's events, and what they might bode. The hairy man of the yesterday came not within our ken, nor did we see further trace or sign of thing human, so there was naught to disturb our reflections. In the night-time the pale light glowed on the round window-pane as before, and not many hours after sunset we slept, greatly tired from the wine and the day's excitements, till late into the next day.

After our usual meal, and we drank sparingly this time, we again ascended to the turret and held converse with

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the witch. This we did for lack of other employment and because the time hung heavy on our hands. We stayed and spoke with her till both Satan and I were wearied with fruitless discourse; then downstairs again wishing we had kept to our own company.

Our condition was most lonesome, and, after awhile, we wandered in the forsaken garden, for 'twas much like ourselves, and there is a wondrous sympathy 'twixt things animate and things inanimate be they in a like plight and condition. Yea, and even though we were silent and without power of comforting the other with speech, I saw in this neglected garden much that spoke to me in sympathy and tried hard to soothe my heavy heart; for it seemed to me as though the uncared plants felt what I felt, and, had they had utterance, they would have voiced my own thoughts. Even

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the insects and bugs that crawled from leaf to leaf were in a less pitiable plight than this forsaken garden and myself, and, when I had thought and pitied myself awhile, there were tears on my cheek that rolled onto the fur of Satan, my friend, and made round spots on his coat that were more shiny than what was dry.

As I sat thus thinking of gloomy things, I bethought me of the three buildings with the closed doors, and I resolved once more to visit them; for anything was a distraction in my present plight, and I saw no danger in this survey of stones and mortar.

The sun was high in the afternoon sky, that was a deep hard blue, and so clear was the air that each leaf and flower stood clear-cut and separate, as though hewn in coloured stone.

When we reached the open space where stood the three chambers, we found that they were as before, with

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but one slight difference. The doors of the first two were closed, but the third door stood open to my gaze. I bethought me of the Hag of the Turret, and wondered greatly whether the open door was her doing. I looked into the chamber, for there was naught to hinder me, and before my eyes was spread a rich feast laid out in vessels of beaten gold, such vessels as the ones that I had brought from thence, and that I have shewn you at my house in Stade Street. There were broad dishes and platters, and flasks and goblets, yellow and ashine, that made my fingers to itch and ache. It was foolish of me to wish for gold at that time; for what use had I for wealth in a land where there was none to buy or sell with but a bent crone and a man all hairy?

On one dish was a boar's head, on another a swan, and there were all manner of rich meats and fair jellies

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and fruits, that called to mind the dainties that I have heard tell are eaten by the Lord Mayor of London and his Aldermen each ninth day of November.

Satan too looked at the rich feast, and, without more ado, he ran inside and began to eat from a huge pasty, and he coming to no harm, I lost fear and followed, for I had eaten no cooked food for many days, and the banquet enticed me greatly.

Boldly I entered and laid my hand on a fine peach. As I touched it the fruit crumbled to dust in my fingers; while behind me the door closed fast with a thud, and I was in black darkness, with only Satan's eyes for a lamp. The air about me, which at first was sweet and pure, grew thick and noxious, and there pressed a great weight on my chest so that it was hard to breathe, and I stood there in the darkness thinking that my last hour was come, and wondering whether I

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had best bestir myself and see if there was no chance of escape. I gathered together all my strength, and breathed but rarely and through my nostrils; while Satan, the cat, whined piteously at my side. I tore at the walls with my hands, but they were firm and pitiless; and vainly I sought to find the door that had closed and shut out all the light, for there were no windows to this chamber, and the darkness was black and endless.

The thick nauseous air grew heavier and heavier, and now my eyes burnt fit to drop from out my head, while my tongue clove to my mouth and felt parched and dry, like to a piece of smoked meat. My limbs grew heavy and without strength, and the great vein on my forehead beat like a Nuremberg time-dial. I was afraid to pray, for the thick air would have entered at my lips and choked me the faster. Satan, the cat, had ceased to whine,

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the green light in his eyes glowed no longer, and, as my foot stirred him, I felt that he was as lead, heavy and without life. All was silent, save for the noises in my head, and the low hiss of the rank gas that issued from somewhere under my feet. On a sudden; a long shrill laugh, fiendish and diabolic, pierced the silence, and then another and yet another. I ceased my efforts to escape, and stood still and intent, trying to gather from whence came this burst of merriment. The sound was somewhat distant, and as I listened, the laughter ceased, and the shrill voice burst into a cackling chant, that it intoned in some strange tongue.

"It must be someone in the garden without," I thought; "most likely it is the Hag of the Turret;" whereupon I resolved, should I outlive this hour, to strangle her with my thumbs and fingers, aye, and without speech or question.

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Quick these thoughts and many others galloped through my brain, and all the time I was sinking, slowly sinking. My heart still beat, and wondrous loud too; but my body was weary and without strength. I swayed and I staggered, for I could breathe no more, and my head was going round and round like the wheel of a cart; then I fell, clutching on my way the carving of a stone that projected some inches from the wall at my side. Well I remember that fall and the hopeless sense of the end of all things that came with it; then I recollect, even better and with a greater zest, how I reached that thrice blessed piece of carving, that for one moment stayed my fall, and how stone and carving moved under my hand, making a crevice in the wall, so that there cut through the darkness a thin blade of light, while a million dust atoms danced merrily in line 'twixt the cleft and the paving.

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The stone that I held was loose, and the mortar about it decayed; the cool draught of air played on my face, giving me fresh courage, so that with might and main I pulled and pushed at that heaven-sent stone so that at last it fell to the ground outside the chamber, whilst the daylight and God's own blessed air did enter like unto two glorious angels.

As the stone fell to earth with a thud I heard yet another sound, a cry of rage and lamentation. I put my head through the hole I had made so that I might breathe more freely and rid my entrails of the nauseous gas, and the garden was around me as before. I was too busy with my own bodily affairs to pay much heed to the cry that I had heard and the anger that was in the voice, yet, as once more I felt alive and somewhat vigorous, I looked hard about me, and through the bushes and tangle of the garden I made

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out the aged crone of the turret hobbling homewards, a-shaking of her staff and muttering in her beard.

As the air from without rushed into the dark chamber, behold, and I have sworn it, the door once more opened wide, and without help from me or human being, and again there was light in the room, so that I could see the body of Satan, the cat, that was quite dead; also could I see the feast and the vessels of gold. Now, with all haste I seized four goblets, a great flask, six broad dishes, and nine platters, these being all that I could carry, I being then a weak man and overweary; and with these I ran into the open and sank down on my knees, praying a prayer of my own making that rose to my lips from out my heart of hearts. Afterwards I bethought me of the black cat that I had left behind me, and further, it seemed unwise were I to return for his body, he being

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dead and beyond the reach of human aid.

As I thought of my friend, Satan, the cat, a great rage seized upon me, for he had been to me a dear companion during some of the longest days that I have ever lived through—trusting and large-hearted he had been, of unchanging mood and warm affections, and the Hag of Turret it was that had wrought this murder! I was athirst for revenge, yet somewhat feeble from my recent adventure, and, though my first impulse was to run straight up to the turret and fling the curst witch from the window, yet I thought I would wait till the morrow ere I wrought this justice. I was greatly weary both in mind and body, so that taken unawares my wits would have been too feeble to meet cunning by cunning, and my body too weary to bear any encounter that called for overmuch exertion.

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Alone and by myself back to the wood I hied with my golden dishes, and these I hid secure in a spot that I could well remember, 'twas under the roots of a great tree. I was on my knees engaged in this business, when suddenly I looked about me, and behold, the hairy man of two days before was a-watching of me with much curiosity. Straightway I arose and advanced towards him, but he stepped back as at our first meeting. I stood still and waited for him to speak. There was no great fear on his face as there had been when we had first encountered the other, yet no one word did he say, only clenched his hairy fist and pointed with his other arm in the direction of the castle, uttering strange sounds and grinding his teeth together till the noise pained me.

"Thou too knowest the witch?" I asked, and I bent my back as the Hag of the Turret bent her back, and I

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pulled at my beard and pointed to the sides of my mouth so as to call to his mind the two fangs of the witch.

He understood my meaning, for he smiled and shook his head up and down; then he sprang high into the air and trod hard with his feet on the earth, as if to stamp the life out of some prostrate body.

"Aye, we will trample her to death, and worse, far worse!" I cried.

For answer this hairy man neighed like a horse, and then ran away into the wood without sign or word.

I turned to my gold platters, that were still where I had placed them, and I marvelled much at the strange conduct of this hairy heathen that ran all naked in the wood, and hated the witch with as great a hatred as mine own. All the while my head ached sore and my eyes smarted, and, had I possessed a mirror, I would have seen that they were red. I was not easily rid of the

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noxious gas that I had breathed, and at sunset I laid me down to rest, somewhat sick of body and greatly weary and worn out.

It was yet more lonesome than before to lie thus lone and companionless, and often in the night I awoke, and, wondering at the emptiness of my arms and missing the familiar breathing at my side, I cried aloud: "Satan, old friend, where stay you?" till I remembered that he had been slain by black magic, and that on the morrow I would up to the turret and slay the hag that dwelt there, without question or other word.

Chapter IV

THERE was little of mercy and little of sweetness in my heart when I next ascended the stairway that led to the chamber where dwelt the Hag of the Turret. Three steps did I take at a time, and in my right hand was a sword of good steel, the best of those that hung on the walls in the great hall below. Carefully I had sharpened and ground the edge, and there was little flesh that was human that the keen blade would not divide.

Well I remember how my eyeballs were aflame with hatred and lust of blood, how my throat was hard and dry and my teeth firm set. There was no softness in me as I thought of the