

spectre

"The Prince of Lechery"

Story by
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Undated Treatment

Norway Productions, Inc.

Dr. Hamilton Well, M.D., is - as usual - a bit drunk. It serves to ease the hard pangs of sorrow and regret inside him, but it also softly blurs his surroundings as well as his memories. The flight from England was uneventful, which made it harder, for it gave Ham too much time to think, to remember - and to drink. His mission was a personal one, a tribute to a man he had once considered his greatest friend, not that paying his final respects would ease any of the double hurt inside him. The tragic death of William Sebastian in highly mysterious circumstances, according to the London papers, had added to the numbness that the loss of his wife and child had instilled inside him. They had died in the crash of a jetliner while on holiday, and Ham wished with all his heart that he had perished with them. And in the year since that terrible event, he had often thought of Sebastian, and wished their parting had been more amicable, that he might once again call upon their long friendship. Now it was too late, and Ham could only say his goodbyes to a corpse that could not respond. He sighed, heavily, in the taxi carrying him to Sebastian's secluded Boston estate.

Returning, Ham found, was a journey into the past; he had spent many exciting years here, amid Sebastian's incredible collection of self-indulgent extravagances. Sebastian's family inheritance - he was the last of his line - included the estate, an incredible assortment of heirlooms, ranging from the high of museum-quality, priceless art objects and books, to the ridiculous low of esoteric mumbo-jumbo objects representing every form of primitive superstition and magical belief, including Voodoo of Haiti, Ju-Ju of Africa, and grotesque Eskimo artifacts. They represented the esoteric interests of Sebastian's ancestors - and, still a thorn in Ham's side - as well as those of Sebastian, himself. A bloody pack rat, Ham had once named him, he recalled, both with amusement and regret, living beyond his means, totally unwilling to be realistic, and part with some of the useless treasures he had inherited, or to cease buying more!

The taxi deposited Ham at the huge, carved front doors of the old mansion house, he paid the fare from the airport, watched the red taillights of the cab flicker away, then turned to the door, and finding it swinging slightly ajar, stepped - into a nightmare!

The entry hall was dark - and at the distant far end, flickering firelight sent writhing shadows along the walls. The far door - the library door, Ham remembered - was standing open; he could hear the sound of a fierce struggle, saw the fighting shadows of a man - and a woman? - move across the wall of books beyond the doorway. A woman was screeching, her voice high, shrill, animal-like; and the

man's harsh breathing and gasped words were muffled. Ham stood rooted there for an instant, then ran forward - to confront a scene he would never forget!

In the library, lighted by a roaring, smoking fire in the fireplace, a man and a woman fought desperately, reeling together across the room, upsetting furniture, shouting incoherent curses. The woman was tall and strikingly beautiful, with long hair, now tangled and snarled, her shining dress torn half from her voluptuous body. They were fighting to the death, the man's powerful hands locked about the woman's throat, her beautiful, snarling face upturned to his, her claw-like fingers scratching at his eyes, as he bent her over a leather armchair. Shouting something, Ham sprang forward. Until this minute the man's back had been to him, but now the man turned to snarl at him to get away - and then he looked into the set, hard face of William Sebastian - the face of a man he knew to be dead...!

The shock of recognition rooted Ham there, then the powerful arm of Sebastian sent him reeling against the bookshelves as he tried to interfere. The woman was screeching, her face darkening under the remorseless pressure of Sebastian's fingers. Ham stared in horror. The woman sank across the huge chair, her strength failing her - and instantly Sebastian grabbed up something from the floor, something torn from his grasp in the fierce struggle. The woman lunged up - then suddenly fell back - and before Ham's stunned gaze, she crumbled, visibly, like some ancient statue, suddenly losing cohesiveness, and returning to dust. One instant a living, breathing, incredibly beautiful woman had been there - then was only a spill of ugly gray ash, amid which sparkled and gleamed the jewels the woman had worn...!

As Ham stared, William Sebastian turned to face him - and the object in his hand was an ancient, hand-carved silver crucifix, which he now tossed atop the gray ashes. Sebastian smiled, and held out his hand. As casually, despite his still-harsh breathing, as if just returning from a stroll in the garden, he said: "It was nice of you to come to my funeral, Ham..."

I

A tall, darkly lithe woman enters the library, as the two men stand there, Ham still in a state of shock, and offers them brandy. Ham gulps his. The woman - Sebastian's housekeeper, named Lilith - acts as if nothing untoward had occurred, and quietly whisks the gray ash - and jewels - into a small, silver box. Ham stares at Sebastian; he's still too stunned to ask questions. Sebastian paces in front of the fireplace, and the fire that has receded to normal dimensions; Sebastian's voice is taut, and curt: Ham has witnessed the opening act in what promises to be a strange - and dangerous - affair... But the woman, Ham gasps out. She was not a woman - and not human, Sebastian replies harshly; a filthy succubus, sent to him, to snare him, to weaken him... Ham gulps more brandy, then shakes his head in disbelief; Sebastian is still involved with the same ridiculous mumbo-jumbo nonsense. Sebastian eyes him with amusement: How would Ham explain what he saw, then? Hallucination, delusion, induced by drugs - something in the smoke from the fireplace, perhaps - but certainly not real! Then Ham frowns, uncertainly; but Sebastian, himself: he read of his death, there was no doubt...

Sebastian laughs; of course not. In a medical sense, he had died, impaled on a ski-pole that had pierced his heart. Sebastian opens his shirt to reveal a monstrous scar, still inflamed, but healing rapidly. An implant, he says, smiling; science, not mumbo-jumbo, this time. An artificial heart, driven by an atomic-powered pump, controlled by the small, silver projection on his chest. Relieved, Ham examines the scar, then shakes his head; he hadn't realized that heart implants had progressed this far. Sebastian nods; the atomic motor is one of his inventions, and the implant is the first of its kind. Ham nods; that, at least, should show Sebastian practical monetary return. Sebastian shakes his head; hardly, since he has given his patent to the hospital in return for saving his life.

He is as impractical as ever, Ham says; but it is still good to see him, and to be there with him. Sebastian says as much; since Ham is here, he must stay on. He hesitates; then, almost brusquely, says he heard about Ham's wife and child. Ham frowns. His hand is trembling. He drinks more brandy. Stay with him, Sebastian urges, quietly; he can offer something better than alcohol to occupy Ham's life... He smiles; and, besides, he needs a medical man to keep a check on the artificial heart. And a practical mind to keep a check on his affairs... which are as confused as ever...

It is a return to their old arrangement, their old friendship, Ham realizes; and senses, too, that it is more, a mutual sharing, a mutual need for each other...

Finally, Ham nods in agreement. But the frightening scene he witnessed, and Sebastian's remark about being the start of something sinister...? Sebastian nods, his face suddenly grim. More than sinister - evil incarnate, he says. But what? Ham asks. Sebastian shakes his head; he doesn't know, yet; but he is certain that it has begun. Ham grins, suddenly; this is like old times, he says, Sebastian speaking in mysterious riddles, and spooks closing in about them... His tone is almost bantering, as he is a non-believer in the supernatural.

Not spooks, Sebastian says, quietly. Something more frightening than any superstition or haunt; something totally, absolutely evil, in the biblical sense. The devil? Ham asks, smiling; a devil, is Sebastian's reply. Something that has been aroused - awakened - from the incredibly distant past, something that threatens every man, something that seeks to dominate the world of men...

Despite himself, Ham shivers at Sebastian's tone. A man - Qualus - whom Sebastian knows and respects as a psychic investigator in London, has stumbled across the manifestations, and he is frightened by what they imply. Whatever his suspicions, and he has not made them clear, they involve Geoffrey Cyon. The industrialist? Ham asks. The swinging playboy of the jet set? Ham smiles; Sir Geoffrey Cyon's reputation may have its darker side, but certainly not evil in the biblical sense, although the term might apply to Cyon's morals - or lack of them...! Ham chuckles; Cyon has been labeled by certain pure-minded critics of his lifestyle The Devil Himself, but it isn't because of any supernatural hocus-pocus. Cyon may be a throwback to the wild, free-living Regency Bucks of the Hellfire Club days, but that hardly makes him an evil necromancer!

Sebastian disregards Ham's amused tone, as he mutters, "The Devil Himself, eh?" Then adds, "They may be more right than they dream...!"

Before Ham can react, Lilith re-enters to announce that Mitri Cyon is there, to see Sebastian. Cyon! Ham starts with surprise. Sebastian nods; he was expecting young Cyon, and asks Lilith to show him in. Sebastian glances at Ham's startled expression and smiles, thinly: Mitri is Sir Geoffrey Cyon's only son, he says, and adds, thoughtfully, the woman - the succubus - he destroyed had called herself Anitra Cyon...!

Mitri Cyon is very young, in his early 20s, and a cleanly handsome type; but his face is pale, and tired, with hollowed eyes, and enormous strain written plain across it. His first words are a jolter: In a trembling, shaken, but

deadly earnest voice, he asks Sebastian to kill his father - or the thing that his father has become...

II

For an instant Sebastian and Ham stare at the distraught Mitri in shock. Mitri half-falls into the big leather armchair - and as he does so, his arm strikes the little silver chest in which Lilith has placed the ugly gray ashes, and it upsets, spilling out the beautiful diamond necklace. Mitri reaches in a vague gesture to clean up the mess, as Sebastian shouts, and leaps forward; the silver crucifix has fallen from the ashes, and he bends to pick it up. In that same instant, as Ham gapes in disbelief, the diamond necklace flares into living, terrible red flames - and encircles Mitri's neck. The boy jerks erect, clawing at the flaming hand choking him, then his strength fails him and he sinks to his knees. Ham tries to jerk the flaming jewels away - and his hands are burned! Then Sebastian has the crucifix, and touches the necklace, which instantly dulls to black rocks, then crumbles to the same ugly ash. The red welts on Mitri's neck fade away, quickly, as do the blisters of Ham's hands! Ham's disbelief is badly shaken.

Mitri has collapsed into the big leather chair, unconscious. Ham bends over him, but the boy does not revive, even when brandy is forced between his lips. Sebastian tugs Ham away; it's easier this way, he says. Lilith appears, and pours water from a silver urn into a large, shallow, silver dish that is inscribed with strange hieroglyphics. The lights in the study dim; the shallow dish of water begins to glow, brighter and brighter - and on the rippling surface, silvery as a mirror, appears a scene. Ham looks at Sebastian, who gestures for silence. He speaks commandingly to Mitri - why has he come here? Why has he asked that Sebastian kill his father?

We see answers visualized on the water: Qualus has sent Mitri here to Sebastian, to get his help. For what purpose? They see in the shining water; and Mitri's gentle voice whispers the story: It began two years before. Sir Geoffrey Cyon had torn down the ancient family-owned warehouse that covered an area beside the Thames, and built a multi-storey tower to house the world headquarters of Cyon Industries, including the great Cyon shipping concern, crowned with an elaborate penthouse for his own private living quarters. Until then, Geoffrey had been a quiet, hard-working man, who had immersed himself in business activities after the death of his wife in childbirth. He spent much time with his son, and their relationship was based upon mutual love and respect. Then something happened and Geoffrey's whole lifestyle changed, drastically - and not for the better...

In digging the foundations for the new tower on the ancient site of the warehouse, they dug down into history - and prehistory... The warehouse had been built following the

London Great Fire in 1666; prior to that, the Cyon ancestral townhouse had stood on the embankment; and beneath that, they found parts of the ancient Roman Wall that once encircled the city. The workers had dug deeper still - and tumbled into a long-forgotten maze of tunnels, of pre-Roman construction. They were long-since crumbled away and fallen in sections - but clearing away debris they had found the Bronze Door. It blocked the tunnel; the door was incredibly massive, and bound shut with gigantic iron chains, fixed with a golden seal, inscribed with strange, runic characters, glowing in the light of the workers' lamps. Qualus had been summoned to decipher the strange inscription on the seal, and had called it an extremely ancient form of ideographic Celtic writing, and had translated it partially - enough to indicate that something evil - incredibly evil - had been shut off from the world of men behind the bronze doors, and held there by the power of the incantation on the seal. All men, at peril of their souls, were warned against tampering with the seal, and freeing the demon...

It was a strange, eerie scene, there in the dank, rock-walled tunnel, the workers' bright electric lights sending shadows lurching along the walls, the great bronze doors green with corrosion, and the golden seal gleaming brightly. Mitri was there, and Qualus, his white head bowed as he rubbed away the corrosion to study the deeply-carved door, which was decorated with writhing nude figures, suggestive, almost lewd, almost obscene, and dominated by a central male figure, with blazing red eyes marked by some fiery stones, and horns atop the hawk-like, proud face, incredibly evil, the likeness of a demon from hell, the nude figures writhing before him in some terrible ritual... And beside Qualus, looming huge, stood Sir Geoffrey Cyon, his face frowning. Then he shook his head - and picking up a pick-axe, he pried away the golden seal. Qualus jerks erect to stop him, but too late. The seal is torn loose - and almost instantly there is a terrible, blinding explosion. The huge bronze doors are sent crashing apart - men yell and scream - then from the darkness beyond the doorway explodes a thick, clogging blackness that blots out the electric torches, and wipes away the scene on the gleaming surface of the water. Mitri's voice drones on, as the scene in the water changes, to a succession of impressions, of Sir Geoffrey, drinking, loving, gambling; three men died in the tunnel explosion, which scientists blamed on an underground deposit of gas, but which Qualus felt had a darker significance... Sir Geoffrey Cyon had changed, that was certain; and it was this change that led to his being branded the Devil Himself. Sir Geoffrey now dedicated himself to sensual pleasures as assiduously as he had once worked to build his industrial empire; and somehow he had the devil's own luck, for his neglect did not result in business reverses; on the

contrary, the huge company prospered, at the expense of its business rivals.

The penthouse became Sir Geoffrey's private preserve; he attracted a growing number of associates, men and women, who were publicly branded as depraved. They renewed the dissolute practices once made notorious by the Hellfire Club; instead of racing thoroughbreds through the crowded streets, now they drove fast sports cars; but their amusements, their endless search for evil in all its most enjoyable forms, were the same... And every attempt by his sister, Anitra, or his son, Mitri, to reason with Sir Geoffrey is laughed away. At a loss to understand what has happened to him, they have appealed to Qualus, who has continued his investigations. And it is Qualus who has convinced them that the bronze door and the golden seal had confined the demon Asmodeus, himself - and that in breaking the seal, Sir Geoffrey has released an incredible, ancient evil on the world, an evil that has changed him, and will in time destroy him - but not before others - many others - have been destroyed...

Sebastian straightens, slowly, frowning, then gestures, and the great silver bowl becomes - just a shallow bowl with water. Mitri stirs, and sits up, then shakes his head. He has remembered nothing of what has occurred. He smiles, dazedly; then remembers his mission, and starts to speak to Sebastian, who cuts him off. He knows why he has come here, and he is prepared to help in whatever way he can...

Aboard the Cyon private jet, Sebastian and Ham fly toward London. Mitri, fully recovered, is at the controls with his co-pilot. A beautiful black girl, wearing very little, serves as hostess, and offers them a drink. Ham accepts, eagerly. Sebastian smiles. The drinks are brought; Sebastian watches Ham. The doctor lifts his glass, then holds, staring into it. His face is shocked and half-angry - and we see the supremely ugly body of a toad in his glass, the eyes shining up through the liquor. Ham indignantly holds up the glass to the black girl - but it is only a glass of whiskey with nothing else in it. Ham's hand trembles; he looks confused. But every time he starts to drink, the ugly toad stares up at him. Ham sets his glass down, un-tasted, and glares at Sebastian. Another of his mumbo-jumbo longer needs. Ham sighs, not quite resignedly. He frowns at Sebastian. Surely he doesn't believe in all this nonsense?

Sebastian looks away, out into the darkness over the stormy Atlantic, far below. He speaks half to himself as he outlines, briefly, his basic philosophy. His need for a challenge, a quest for truth, if you will, that can test even his powers of reasoning, his knowledge, his strength of

will. In the strange threatening world of the Unknown, he has found that challenge.

Further discussion is interrupted as the jet suddenly lurches; and one engine is out, the other behaving erratically. Ham grips the arms of his seat, but Sebastian remains quietly unconcerned. Ham stares at him; has the man no fear? Sebastian laughs and touches the strange metal connector beneath his clothes, embedded in the flesh of his chest, and shakes his head. While in the cockpit, Mitri and the co-pilot struggle to keep the jet flying, as it drops sickeningly down toward the raging Atlantic far below..

Ham controls his panic with an effort. Sebastian speaks without stress; it is but one more test, just as the succubus was a test. To probe the strength of an adversary, nothing more.

But if it isn't, if it's just plain damned mechanical failure? Ham demands. Sebastian laughs again; in that case there is no need to worry - as there isn't a damned thing they can do about it, anyway!

And as Ham stares at them, the jet continues its sickening plunge toward the stormy ocean below.

III

The engine-crippled jet somehow recovers, and the flight continues. They land at London in a thick, blinding fog and rain. The power of the Cyon name is evident as they are whisked through customs. Sebastian has cabled Qualus of their coming, and they leave Mitri at the airport, with the promise to see him the following day; but first Sebastian wants to check with Qualus...

A shouting newsboy, in bedraggled raincoat, his face streaming moisture, is hawking the newest tabloid sensation, and the sandwich-board proclaims in bright red headlines: VICIOUS KILLER - VICTIM MANGLED - THIRD TERRIBLE TRAGEDY. A Rolls limousine belonging to the Cyons whisks them silently away, through the cottony fog, rain runneling down the windows. It is late as they step from the limousine in front of one of the huge, curving-walled apartment houses. The street is dark and hidden by the writhing mist; the apartment house is dark-faced, save for a patch of blurred light on the top floor. The limousine moves away into the fog. They ring Qualus' bell; but there is no answer. Then there is a fog-muffled sound - Sebastian looks up - and through the mist they can see reddish light flickering - flames and smoke bursting out.

Sebastian turns to the door; he tosses some powder from a tiny silver box - gestures powerfully - and the locked entrance door flies inward, the lock shattering of its own accord! Then Sebastian is running up the stairs, three at a time, Ham puffing along behind him. On the top floor, they are met by sullen red flames and thick, pungent smoke. A massive oak door with an inlaid pentacle design is standing ajar, the outer surface scarred by deep, tearing claw marks! Steel-hard claws have ripped and shredded it! And inside the large apartment is absolute chaos - furniture ripped and shredded by some mad beast, walls torn, everything smashed. And from the electric fireplace wells flames and smoke. Sebastian jerks free the thick electrical cord, and the flames die away. He opens a window to clear the smoke. And sprawled in the middle of the bare oak floor, half in and half out of a painted pentacle, with cabalistic symbols in bright colors, lies the body of Qualus. He is dead, his body literally torn apart with incredible strength and insensate anger...! But beneath him, protected by his body, is a leather-bound journal in his handwriting, stained now by his blood...

Sebastian kneels beside Qualus, makes certain he is dead, and finds the journal. He straightens it with his hand. Ham is looking around. Suddenly the door, the heavy oak door, slams shut. The window closes. They see nothing, but can hear the heavy breathing of a monstrous beast in the smoke-

filled room. Sebastian grabs Ham, and jerks him inside the pentacle, and they stand there, close together. The heavy breathing becomes a vicious, animal snarling sound, but still they can see nothing - then invisible claws rip down a wall, leaving deep, ugly claw- marks, and something evil howls in the room, howls its frustration! Within the pentacle they are safe. And through the thickening smoke they can glimpse a vague, contorted outline, of something prowling about them, something monstrous, and evil... Then they are pelted with debris from the wrecked room. Sebastian holds there - then suddenly whips out the solid silver crucifix, and holds it up. Bright, blue flames seem to dance from it - the growling of the invisible beast changes to an anguished howling. Sebastian chants some strange words - then suddenly hurls the crucifix from him. It strikes something - and instantly there is a blinding explosion, and a terrible howl of pain - then they are alone. Alone in the savagely wrecked apartment, with the dead, mutilated body of Qualus. In the street below resounds the chiming bells of a police car, drawing near.

IV

Inspector Cabell is a flint-faced man with hard, direct eyes, and a non-committal way of saying very little. But he knew Qualus, and has worked with Sebastian before. He regards the destroyed apartment and Qualus' body without expression; he has seen the like before. As for Qualus' blood-soaked handwritten journal, the effect of human blood on ordinary ink is completely erosive; he'll have the Scotland Yard lab work on it, but he has little confidence in being able to decipher what Qualus may have written...

Sebastian smiles, holds the journal in one hand, and, staring at one scarred wall of the flat, "projects" an astral image, much as a projector would. And on the wall is depicted the journal, and Qualus' hand, writing: It is an account of the discovery in the stone tunnels beneath the Cyon Tower, and of the release by Sir Geoffrey of a demon, whom Qualus has identified as Asmodeus - the Prince of Lechery, who destroys men's souls by indulging their carnal appetites to the point where they assume the characteristics of savage beasts, losing all semblance to humanity. And Asmodeus' human "control" which he uses as his own body, sharing it with the human owner, Qualus is convinced is Sir Geoffrey Cyon... Sir Geoffrey's strange change of character, and his subsequent career of orgiastic indulgence, and his growing group of "friends" who share his erotic interests, all follow the legendary pattern of the devil, Asmodeus, The Corrupter of Souls. More frightening, to Qualus, is the fact that Sir Geoffrey is a powerful, influential man - and every member of his select group of companions is likewise of important standing, in military, financial, and political fields... Already they represent a considerable number of the men who control England, and their number is growing rapidly! Asmodeus, the schemer, is free once again, and lusting for power over human destiny. As each of his followers, his sycophants, becomes more sodden, more degraded by his own fleshly indulgences, he loses human characteristics, eventually devolving into a murderous animal, completely owned, body and soul, by Asmodeus...

In that time and place, in modern, swinging London, with the rattle of ordinary life about them, the three men in the destroyed flat are touched by an evil dating back to the earliest memories of mankind... The astral projection ceases, and Sebastian drops the blood-stained journal to the floor. He looks at Inspector Cabell, whose granite face is visibly shaken. "My God, Sebastian," Cabell whispers, "those other murders - butchered by some maniacal beast - each victim was associated with one of the men named in Qualus' journal...!"

Outside the flat they hear voices, then a policeman brings in Mitri Cyon, who stares around, his youthful face

reflecting the horror he feels. He sees Qualus' covered body, and shudders. Then he faces Sebastian. He is palely intense. Obviously they cannot stay here - so they will please accept Sir Geoffrey Cyon's invitation to stay at the Tower...? Ham and Sebastian react; Sir Geoffrey has invited them, he knows why they are here? Mitri nods, slowly, his face grim; Sir Geoffrey, he whispers, has a way of knowing everything... Perhaps he even knew that Sebastian would find his friend, Qualus, dead here, too...

The stark, ultra-modern outlines of the Cyon Tower stand out against the ancient sky of London Town, now muted by fog, sleet and darkness. There is a scattering of lighted windows, the dagger-line of the elevator shaft, and the top floors are ablaze with lights. Mitri drives his four-placer down the concrete ramp to the garage, overhead lights going on automatically. He pulls into a stall, amidst a gathering of glistening, very expensive cars. A drunken, laughing group, two middle-aged men with three luscious young girls, are departing; the driver backs into the side of another car, and the group laugh insanely, then the car lurches away, up the ramp, heedless of danger, horn shrieking. Ham smiles; must be a party going on, he says. Mitri gives him a dark look and replies, it is the same every night, since - since Sir Geoffrey changed...

On the drive over, they have discussed why Sir Geoffrey had invited them, and the answer is obvious: If he senses that they are a threat to him - or to what he may represent - then he wants them here, where he can watch them. It has been easy, in the darkness and the wet-dripping fog, and the ugly destruction of Qualus and his apartments, to accept the presence of something ancient and supremely evil, but here, in this modern, gleaming glass-chrome-steel tower, with its overpowering now presence, Qualus' suspicions seem like a grotesque nightmare, without reality, or actual threat...

The penthouse occupies the upper floors; the entrance hall is several stories high, and encircled by glass-railed balconies. As Sebastian, Ham and Mitri step from the elevator, they are swept up in the merriment of a party. The huge penthouse is crowded with merrymakers, dancing and cavorting to the beat of an acid-rock group. Sir Geoffrey steps forward to meet them, huge, powerful, dominating, moving with the tread of a jungle cat despite his size. His face remains smiling and sardonic, almost mocking, as he welcomes them, and you can almost feel the tension as his eyes meet those of Sebastian. His words of welcome could be construed as a warning, and a mockery of their power to interfere with him or his plans in any way. He is amused by Sebastian's coldness, and Ham's obvious sense of shock at the erotic goings on, the half-naked women, openly seductive, the drunkenness, the obvious availability of

drugs and sex. And the decor of the ultra-modern penthouse gives the same strangely intense feeling of decadence, of depravity. It is not overt, although the abstract paintings somehow convey obscenity without reality, and the fantastic sculptures seem to express things wholly evil, wholly unnatural. And every servant is young, female, and voluptuous, offering themselves in every look, every movement, without seeming to do so. And there is no doubt that Sir Geoffrey Cyon is lord and master of the revels, for everyone, servants and guests alike, defer to him..

Sir Geoffrey takes them into his library - a wood-paneled room lined with shelves that are heavy with books, a few bright dust jackets, but largely old, leather-bound - and depraved. Witchcraft, Devil Worship, Black Magic - and mental aberrations and madness; these themes dominate, as Ham discovers, and draws away from the shelves almost as if they threatened his peace of mind, even his sanity, a movement that brings a mocking laugh to Sir Geoffrey's lips. Is pleasure evil, he asks; or is life for the living, to be drained of enjoyment, no matter the form it takes? It is a challenge to Sebastian, but he shakes his head; no man is entitled to pleasures, if their price includes harming others. Again Sir Geoffrey laughs, then frowns at Sebastian. That is a child's morality, he says, nothing more. The end justifies the means - and every man knows that, accepts the truth, if he is honest with himself..

Without being aware of it, Ham finds a silent, dark-eyed, half-naked girl is pressed against him, offering him a glass of whiskey. With a trembling hand he takes the glass - then suddenly drops it to shatter on the tiles, as he sees ugliness within it... Sir Geoffrey sees this byplay, and faces Sebastian. For some men, it is not liquor, nor sexual pleasures, that they seek; for some men, it is power, to rule other men... for others, it is knowledge, and the final challenge of life itself... Which is it for Sebastian...? A white knight, crusading against evil? Sir Geoffrey's mocking laughter; no, only the imposition of one man's will, one man's judgment, against that of another, as evil as any side of human nature, as anything that motivates the human beast... For who is to judge what is right, and what is wrong?

Sebastian has remained silent, and now he smiles, slowly, and replies: "The strongest!" Their glances lock and hold - then Sir Geoffrey's falls, and he laughs again, but his mockery has a hollow note. He spins about and is gone. Ham is standing over the shattered glass, his face sweating, as he looks at Sebastian, almost accusingly. Sebastian only smiles.

They meet Lady Anitra Cyon, Geoffrey's sister; and Ham starts, for she is very much like the succubus he saw

Sebastian destroy, but older, plainer. She moves through the party with a set, hard expression of disdain, apart from them; and she is the recipient of many amused glances, but none of Geoffrey's guests can meet her eyes, or speak to her. Even the servant girls avoid her presence. She leads them to another part of the huge penthouse, a quieter, subdued area, without the sybaritic feeling of the rest. the sounds of the partying are lost here. In a comfortable sitting room, a quiet-mannered butler brings them wine, pours it. But Sebastian stops Ham's eager acceptance of the wine - and holds out the glass to the self-effacing butler. The man stares at Sebastian, who orders him to drink the wine. Lady Cyon starts to protest, then falls silent, as the butler suddenly screams a curse, and steps away from Sebastian. But Sebastian flings the glass of wine into the "man's" face - and the man-thing screams. The wine hisses and fumes like hydrochloric acid - and the butler stiffens. His face is a mass of writhing, lambent flames - then suddenly his whole figure glows with an unearthly light - and dissolves into nothingness. They stare at Sebastian, who picks up the wine decanter, and pours it onto the fireplace hearth, where it fumes, and bursts into flames... He shatters the decanter in the fireplace - as the real butler appears, carrying an identical tray and wine and glasses!

Sebastian smiles with amusement as Ham stares at his wineglass, his expression making his feeling of horror evident; first toads in whiskey - and now a fiery poison! He finally sips his wine very, very cautiously - and Sebastian notes he doesn't drain the glass...!

Later, as Ham and Sebastian are shown to their rooms, they pass an upper landing, beneath which the tempered-glass stairway circles around a sheer drop to the white marble fountain topped by a disturbing abstract sculpture. The party is still in full swing, and gaining momentum, with revelers parading up and down the stairway. Mitri is in the lead, when a beautiful young woman suddenly flies against Sebastian, who is caught off-balance and forced back against the tempered-glass railing. There is a sudden loud cracking sound, and the railing gives way, plummeting down to crash against the marble statue thirty feet below! And Sebastian lunges after it - only succeeding at the last second in grasping the unbroken section of the railing. Ham acts swiftly, tugging Sebastian back to safety. They stare down at the shattered remains of the railing, far below.

V

Shaken by the incident, which is greeted by the revelers with indifference, or laughter, and by Sir Geoffrey's oddly unmoved reaction, Sebastian and Ham are shown to large, connecting bedrooms. Weary, Ham flops down onto his bed - then jerks erect as some mechanism is activated and the canopy slides aside, revealing a mirrored ceiling - but with warped mirrors that subtly distort the image, giving it a malformed, almost obscene quality... Ham gapes up at it in astonishment, then inadvertently strikes a control panel set into the head of the bed - and activates more mechanisms that slide aside panels to reveal a well-stocked bar, hi-fi set, and a cabinet of half-visible weird sex-oriented objects. Hidden lights flood the room with hues of deep purple, while suggestive nudes done in fluorescent paint, invisible under incandescent light, appear on the walls. Another panel slides aside, revealing neatly-hung rows of whips, chains, and manacles... As Ham stares around the room in shocked dismay, Sebastian appears in the doorway, and glances around, then gives Ham an amused glance, asking just what sort of evening he had in mind...?

Ham furiously punches buttons, restoring the room to its normal ordinariness - with the exception of the well-stocked bar. He strides to it, pours himself a stiff jolt of whiskey - then quickly steps back from the glass, without looking at it. He's had enough of what he calls mumbo-jumbo for one night! But with a smile, Sebastian hands him the glass - perfectly ordinary whiskey. A nightcap might help him sleep - one nightcap! he adds. Gratefully, Ham downs the warming whiskey and crawls into bed. He gives the bedroom a troubled look, then settles down into his pillows...

Sebastian is asleep. Moonlight floods through the huge windows as the skies have cleared, as morning nears. Shadows fall across the floor, the bed, and the sleeping figure - and move. Dark, sinister shadows, with nothing to cast them, moving with an unholy life of their own... Black shadows, moving across the floor toward the bed. One monstrous, writhing shadow-shape with outstretched, enormous hands, sliding across the bed toward Sebastian - touching him - and suddenly gripping his throat!

Sebastian writhes, jerks - then silver flashes in his hand - and there is a screaming sound. Then Sebastian leaps from the bed. The shadow is sprawled across the bed, writhing insanely, a black, malevolent, two-dimensional shape...! And it is pinned to the bed by a silver dagger, the hilt and cross-guard of which form a cross. Then the room lights flash on, and Ham is in the doorway, wild-eyed, staring at Sebastian. He sees the incredible, writhing, living shadow pinned to the bed by the dagger, and gapes at it. Then the

first pink light of dawn floods through the window, and as it strikes the bed, the ugly black shadow fades, and is gone... only the silver dagger, plunged into the pillow, remains.

The party and the people are vanished, only the silent, overly lush young women moving silently, and the grotesque, suggestively-erotic paintings and sculptures remain. At the sunny breakfast table, Sir Geoffrey appears, big, vital, seemingly fresh; and still openly amused by his guests and their purpose here. He talks openly, cheerfully, again making the point that good and evil are only arbitrary concepts, and cannot mean the same things to all men; he cites the strange customs of various times and tribes, to emphasize his meaning. The ancient Persians who accepted both perversion and incest as normal and completely moral; the ancient Egyptians who married brother to sister, and first postulated the idea of One God; the many tribes based upon matriarchy; polygamy practised around the world; human sacrifice a part of religious ceremonies in many civilizations for millennia; ritual cannibalism still believed in many parts of the world...

Sebastian asks for permission to inspect the site of the old stone-walled tunnels far below, and Sir Geoffrey shakes his head. After the - accident - he sealed them off. They are old and dangerous... Sebastian falls silent, as if accepting the statement, but later, when they are alone with Mitri, Sebastian requests that he take them to the tunnel. Mitri hesitates, then nods, and leads the way to a locked elevator door. He uses a key, opens the lock and they enter the elevator. The door closes behind them, and the cables hum as they start down - then suddenly there is a sickening lurch, and the shriek of friction, as the car plummets straight down the long shaft! Sebastian stiffens, as they fall, and lifts both hands, palms upward; and we see that Ham, Sebastian and Mitri are suspended in mid-air, their feet inches from the floor of the car. It crashes at the bottom of the shaft, but they halt with hardly a jar, dust exploding all around them. The car is jammed into the bottom of the shaft, the tunnel level above them. Sebastian raises his upturned palms and rises, slowly, into the air - until he can reach the door, which he opens, and steps out into the ancient tunnel. He gives Mitri and then Ham a hand. They are shaken, but unhurt. Ham stares at Sebastian, who smiles; as an adept, Sebastian has a limited power of levitation.

In the maze of incredibly ancient, be-slimed tunnels, Ham and Sebastian take a wrong turning, following the hand-torch held by Mitri, and hearing what they take for his voice leading them. Then suddenly a section of the roof crashes down - and they leap to safety in a cross-tunnel. They are in darkness. They call, but Mitri does not answer. They have

been led astray by a light and a voice. Then, in the shadowy darkness, they hear the low growl of a huge beast - the thick rumble of a giant tiger... Enormous eyes glare redly at them, and Sebastian draws Ham after him, and they race down the dark tunnel. It slants down, steeply, and behind them sounds the echoing pad of heavy paws, and they see the glaring red eyes, at the level of their own, and an enormous tiger-shadow that blends with the blackness... They plunge down the slippery, slimy stones of the tunnel floor - and with a screech of rusty metal, a thick iron-barred gate drops down with a clanging, barring their retreat! And the tunnel has ended in a stone wall! As they pause, considering their situation, they hear the sound of rushing water - and the tunnel begins to fill as water cascades about them...

For an instant Ham panics, then Sebastian grips his arm and shakes him. Sebastian pulls a silver chain and the crucifix from his pocket. He winds the chain about the iron bars of the gate-trap - and shoves Ham back. Sebastian chants strange words - and the iron gate begins to glow; it turns ruby-red, and the water hisses away from it! Then suddenly the iron bars shatter explosively, and they climb through the twisted metal, and race back up the tunnel, out of the water!

They find a cross-tunnel - and a light, far down it, and discover the great bronze door they had seen in the water-mirror at Sebastian's. The golden seal, shattered in half, dangles from it. Beyond is a cavern, with torch-brackets, and flaming torches! And a rune-stone altar, an enormous block of black stone, bound in thick, rusted iron chains, sits in the center - still red with fresh blood from sacrifice...! And, even as they stare about them, at the unearthly prehistoric drawings on the walls, depicting ugly rites of devil-worship and human sacrifice, the earth rumbles, slightly, shaking them, and a wall splits with a deafening roar, as dust filters down. Then Mitri runs in, frightened of face, hunting for them. They must get out of here. His father is right - the place is dangerous and could collapse at any moment!

But it has not been sealed off, Sebastian says, grimly, gesturing to the obscene altar, and the flaring torches. It has been used as recently as last night! Again the walls shake, and Mitri leads the way hurriedly off. But Sebastian pauses for an instant to kneel beside the golden seal - he cuts a piece from it - then leaps back, as the great bronze door suddenly sags, and crashes down where he had stood an instant before!

VI

That night the sleeping Ham is awakened by a hand slipping across his mouth; he starts up, fighting, then slumps back as he recognizes Sebastian, who whispers to him to be silent... and to get dressed. Ham obeys, and Sebastian, also dressed, and carrying a flashlight, leads the way. The penthouse is silent as they make their way downstairs. The elevator has been repaired; why so quickly? Ham wonders. There is a reason, Sebastian replies, grimly! Ham hesitates about entering, but Sebastian shoves him in, and they go down into the darkness of the earth, far down to ancient stone tunnels...

Torches flicker along the tunnels, now. As if burning in anticipation of something... Ham asks what they are doing down here, and Sebastian replies, looking for a devil...! They move through the torch-lit, shadowy tunnels. The silence is thick about them. Nothing moves, nothing threatens them, but the suspense is thicker than the silence...

Twice Sebastian hurries down cross-tunnels, and searches - but finds nothing, at least not what he seems to be looking for. It must be here, somewhere! he whispers. They reach the great bronze doors, the one fallen to the floor, the other incredibly bent and twisted, and slammed against the stone wall of the tunnel by some terrible force - the explosion that burst them apart two years before... The chamber with the huge, black, chain-bound altar is alive with shadows and vague whispering noises... Sebastian holds there, staring around, his face baffled, and intent. It must be here! he says, then stiffens, as down the tunnels, echoing and re-echoing, comes the deep, frightening chant of men, words in some unknown tongue, strangely frightening and obscene. Ham stares about, frightened. Then Sebastian reacts, staring at the huge, bent and twisted bronze door slammed shut against the tunnel. He moves to it, puts his shoulder to it, trying to move it back from the wall, then calls to Ham to help him. The chanting continues, steadily, slowly growing louder! And in the chamber of the black altar, something stirs, a monstrous shadow against the far wall, writhing, shapeless, threatening, becoming more and more substantial...

Then the bronze door drops away at an angle, held there by the thick bronze hinges, and behind it - the mashed, almost skeletal remains of the body of a man. A slim man, the facial features, mashed as they are, somehow preserved. Ham gasps. It is the dead body of Mitri Cyon - dead for two years! He gapes at Sebastian; how can this be? But Sebastian does not reply. The chanting has continued, and grown loud, and now down the tunnels come flickering lights of torches, carried by men who are shadows, men in dark, priest-like robes with cowls pulled over their heads. Sebastian bends,

and twists at something we do not see - then shoves Ham ahead of him, into the sacrificial chamber. They recoil from the silent, writhing shadow on the far wall, and find a shallow crevice in one wall, and slide into it, as the chanting, robed figures enter the chamber. They file in, and fall silent, standing there in the torchlight, sinister, cowled, as two of their members haul a slim, feminine shape toward the altar, and bend her limply back across it. In the torchlight, Anitra Cyon's frightened face stares up. She is chained to the rock, too frightened to speak, staring at the shapeless, writhing black shadow on the wall behind her!

Then a white-robed figure, cowled as the others, strides forward from the darkness, to stand beside the altar. He picks up a strange stone axe, golden-hafted with strange carvings, and raises it. He faces the others, the axe in his hands. The voice of Sir Geoffrey Cyon rings out - and he points toward the crevice where Sebastian and Ham are cowering! Sebastian strides out, boldly, past the hooded figures standing menacingly. The white-hooded man, his face hidden beneath the cowl, laughs in Sir Geoffrey's voice. Anitra cries out for her brother to release her, and the white-robed man replies he will, and soon - and raises the heavy stone axe higher.

Then Sebastian speaks; there is no longer need for masquerade, he says; he has found the body behind the bronze door. The white-robed figure laughs again - but it is not Sir Geoffrey's voice, now - but that of Mitri! And one hand sweeps back the white hood, to reveal the boy's handsome features, and his red-blazing eyes! Anitra stares up at him in horror. She calls out his name, but Sebastian answers that it is not Mitri - for Mitri died two years ago! It is the demon, Asmodeus, assuming Mitri's likeness to accomplish his evil work... Again Mitri laughs, a strange, echoing laughter from the depths of Hell itself!

So, now it is revealed - well, why not? Reveal thyself! he orders - the silent, hooded figures obey, throwing back their hoods - and even Sebastian is riven by horror. For every figure has the head of an animal - a living head, completely real! A jackal, a pig, a wolf, a rat - they stand in mute array, the minions of Asmodeus. Mitri nods, pleased. They are his - no longer human, but animals, to do his work, as he commands! To kill, to prey upon others, to corrupt and defile, to obey the devil Asmodeus!

And Sir Geoffrey? Sebastian demands. Mitri laughs his devil's laughter. His "father"? Aye, and truly a magnificent beast - a lord of evil... And Mitri gestures, and a huge, robed and cowled figure moves from the darkness, slowly, to stand before the altar. The cowl is swept back - to reveal the head of a tiger, tawny, striped, with blazing tiger's

eyes! But enough time has been wasted, Mitri shouts. It ends, now! Or, rather, he laughs, his work begins now - without interference...! He gestures, the strange, writhing, monstrous shadow looming on the wall behind him. He raises the axe to kill, to sacrifice. Then Sebastian leaps forward, shouting. We see what he has wrested from the wall - it is the dried, mummified hand of the dead Mitri! He plunges it into the flame of a torch - and the fingers, standing stiffly erect, blaze with an eerie, bluish-white light. Five dancing, lambent flames - the Hand of Glory, the most powerful token known to black magic, capable of destroying the power of any evil spirit! Holding it high, Sebastian confronts the figure of Mitri before him! He thrusts the Hand of Glory into Mitri's face - and the demon screams - and for an instant we see the demonic features of Asmodeus, himself! Then the writhing black shadows on the wall close about him, and he is gone! Sebastian jerks free the thongs that bind the woman, and commands Ham to carry her out, fast! Ham obeys, picking her up. The cowed figures stand there, their animal eyes burning redly in the torchlight.

Mitri's voice screams out: Kill! Kill! Kill! and the animal-men lurch into action. But Sebastian reaches the wall, and presses the Hand of Glory close - then drives his silver knife-cross into the shadow! The silver blade sinks deep into the rotten stone, pinning the shadow there. Mitri's screams are horrible! The demon is pinned forever!

Then Sebastian is hurled aside by a monstrous tiger-paw, and steel-like claws rake the wall. Sebastian thrusts the burning Hand of Glory into the tiger-face, sending it reeling back. The walls shake, and crack, and the ceiling crumbles. The frightened beast-men turn to run; one entire tunnel collapses, burying many of them! Then Sebastian is running behind Ham, toward [the passageway leading back to Cyon Tower.]

They reach the elevator, and then the huge figure of the tigerman, Sir Geoffrey, lurches from the dust and shadows, claws extended, fangs gaping wide! Sebastian is knocked back, into the elevator - and Ham bends over the woman, Anitra. The tigerman springs into the elevator cage as it starts upward. Then the shaft rocks, and rocks and dirt fall, and the cage swings wildly. Sebastian, locked in mortal combat with the tigerman, draws a tiny derringer from his pocket - presses it into the monster's back and fires! The tigerman crumbles to the floor. The elevator rises to safety, and they spring out. Sebastian sees the tigerman move, and seizes him, drags him from the elevator as the cage suddenly plummets back down the shaft - and blinding, orange-red flames leap up. The whole building shakes as the underground tunnels collapse and are gone!

EPILOG

In a darkened room, Sir Geoffrey's huge figure lies in a hospital bed. Dr. Ham is bent over him, and now straightens as Sebastian enters. Lady Cyon is all right, he says. What about Sir Geoffrey? Will he live? Ham looks at him; yes, Geoffrey will live - not that he'll want to. Sebastian frowns at Ham - who draws a closed drape open. Light floods in, and we see Sir Geoffrey. The golden bullet, made from the seal by Sebastian, has partially ended his curse. But only partially. Cyon's eyes [are cat-like, yellow with slitted pupils. His hands are furry,] the nails like claws, and his hair is tawny, with darker streaks... He is caught, half-animal, half-man...

Sebastian stares down at Cyon, and feels sympathy. The curse of Asmodeus, he says, slowly. Can it ever be wiped away? Ham asks. Sebastian frowns; possibly, but that is up to Cyon, what he is, and what he does. He alone can wipe away the curse of the animal...

And so ends the story - and begins the series...