

THE MANGLER

Officer Hunton got to the laundry just as the ambulance was leaving - slowly, with no siren or flashing lights. Ominous. Inside, the office was stuffed with milling, silent people, some of them weeping. The plant itself was empty; the big automatic washers at the far end had not even been shut down. It made Hunton very wary. The crowd should be at the scene of the accident, not in the office. It was the way things worked - the human animal had a built-in urge to view the remains. A very bad one, then. Hunton felt his stomach tighten as it always did when the accident was very bad. Fourteen years of cleaning human litter from highways and streets and the sidewalks at the bases of very tall buildings had not been able to erase that little hitch in the belly, as if something evil had clotted there.

A man in a white shirt saw Hunton and walked towards him reluctantly. He was a buffalo of a man with head thrust forward between shoulders, nose and cheeks vein-broken either from high blood pressure or too many conversations with the brown bottle. He was trying to frame words, but after two tries Hunton cut him off briskly:

'Are you the owner? Mr Gartley?'

'No. . . no. I'm Stanner. The foreman. God, this -'

Hunton got out his notebook. 'Please show me the scene of the accident, Mr Stanner, and tell me what happened.'

Stanner seemed to grow even more white; the blotches on his nose and cheeks stood out like birthmarks. 'D-do I have to?'

Hunton raised his eyebrows. 'I'm afraid you do. The call I got said it was serious.'

'Serious -' Stanner seemed to be battling with his gorge; for a moment his Adam's apple went up and down like a monkey on a stick. 'Mrs Frawley is dead. Jesus, I wish Bill Garley *was* here.'

'What happened?'

Stanner said, 'You better come over here.'

He led Hunton past a row of hand presses, a shirt-folding unit, and then stopped by a laundry-marking machine. He passed a shaky hand across his forehead. 'You'll have to go over by yourself, Officer. I can't look at it again. It makes me. . . I can't. I'm sorry.'

Hunton walked around the marking machine with a mild feeling of contempt for the man. They run a loose shop, cut corners, run live steam through home-welded pipes, they work with dangerous cleaning chemicals without the proper protection, and finally, someone gets hurt. Or gets dead. Then they can't look. They can't -Hunton saw it.

The machine was still running. No one had shut it off. The machine he later came to know intimately: the HadleyWatson Model-6 Speed Ironer and Folder. A long and clumsy name. The people who worked here in the steam and the wet had a better name for it. The mangler.

Hunton took a long, frozen look, and then he performed a first in his fourteen years as a law-enforcement officer: he turned around, put a convulsive hand to his mouth, and threw up.

'You didn't eat much,' Jackson said.

The women were inside, doing dishes and talking babies while John Hunton and Mark Jackson sat in lawn chairs near the aromatic barbecue. Hunton smiled slightly at the understatement. He had eaten nothing.

'There was a bad one today,' he said. 'The worst.'

'Car crash?'

'No. Industrial.'

'Messy?'

Hunton did not reply immediately, but his face made an involuntary, writhing grimace. He got a beer out of the cooler between them, opened it, and emptied half of it. 'I suppose you college pros don't know anything about industrial laundries?'

Jackson chuckled. 'This one does. I spent a summer working in one as an undergraduate.'

'Then you know the machine they call the speed ironer?' Jackson nodded. 'Sure. They run damp flatwork through them, mostly sheets and linen. A big, long machine.'

'That's it,' Hunton said. 'A woman named Adelle Frawley got caught in it at the Blue Ribbon Laundry crosstown. It sucked her right in.'

Jackson looked suddenly ill. 'But. . . that can't happen, Johnny. There's a safety bar. If one of the women feeding the machine accidentally gets a hand under it, the bar snaps up and stops the machine. At least that's how I remember it.'

Hunton nodded. 'It's a state law. But it happened.'

Hunton closed his eyes and in the darkness he could see the Hadley-Watson speed ironer again, as it had been that afternoon. It formed a long, rectangular box in shape, thirty feet by six. At the feeder end, a moving canvas belt moved under the safety bar, up at a slight angle, and then down. The belt carried the damp-dried, wrinkled sheets in continuous cycle over and under sixteen huge revolving cylinders that made up the main body of the machine. Over eight and under eight, pressed between them like thin ham between layers of superheated bread. Steam heat in the cylinders could be adjusted up to 300 degrees for maximum drying. The pressure on the sheets that rode the moving canvas belt was set at 800 pounds per square foot to get out every wrinkle.

And Mrs Frawley, somehow, had been caught and dragged in. The steel, asbestos-jacketed pressing cylinders had been as red as barn paint, and the rising steam from the machine had carried the sickening stench of hot blood. Bits of her white blouse and blue slacks, even ripped segments of her bra and panties, had been torn free and ejected from the machine's far end thirty feet down, the bigger sections of cloth folded with grotesque and blood-stained neatness by the automatic folder. But not even that was the worst.

'It tried to fold everything,' he said to Jackson, tasting bile in his throat. 'But a person isn't a sheet, Mark. What I saw. . . what was left of her . . .' Like Stanner, the hapless foreman, he could not finish. 'They took her out in a basket,' he said softly.

Jackson whistled. 'Who's going to get it in the neck? The laundry or the state inspectors?'

'Don't know yet,' Hunton said. The malign image still hung behind his eyes, the image of the mangler wheezing and thumping and hissing, blood dripping down the green sides of the long cabinet in runnels, the burning *stink* of her

'It depends on who okayed that goddamn safety bar and under what circumstances.'

'If it's the management, can they wiggle out of it?'

Hunton smiled without humour. 'The woman died, Mark. If Gartley and Stanner were cutting corners on the speed ironer's maintenance, they'll go to jail. No matter who they know on the City Council.'

'Do you think they were cutting corners?'

Hunton thought of the Blue Ribbon Laundry, badly lighted, floors wet and slippery, some of the machines incredibly ancient and creaking. 'I think it's likely,' he said quietly.

They got up to go in the house together. 'Tell me how it comes out, Johnny,' Jackson said. 'I'm interested.'

Hunton was wrong about the mangler; it was clean as a whistle.

Six state inspectors went over it before the inquest, piece by piece. The net result was absolutely nothing. The inquest verdict was death by misadventure.

Hunton, dumbfounded, cornered Roger Martin, one of the inspectors, after the hearing. Martin was a tall drink of water with glasses as thick as the bottoms of shot glasses. He fidgeted with a ball-point pen under Hunton's questions.

'Nothing? Absolutely nothing doing with the machine?'

'Nothing,' Martin said. 'Of course, the safety bar was the guts of the matter. It's in perfect working order. You heard that Mrs Gillian testify. Mrs Frawley must have pushed her hand too far. No one saw that; they were watching their own work. She started screaming. Her hand was gone already, and the machine was taking her arm. They tried to pull her out instead of shutting it down - pure panic. Another woman, Mrs Keene, said she *did* try to shut it off, but it's a fair assumption that she hit the start button rather than the stop in the confusion. By then it was too late.'

'Then the safety bar malfunctioned,' Hunton said flatly. 'Unless she put her hand over it rather than under?'

'You can't. There's a stainless-steel facing above the safety bar. And the bar itself didn't malfunction. It's circuited into the machine itself. If the safety bar goes on the blink, the machine shuts down.'

'Then how did it happen, for Christ's sake?'

'We don't know. My colleagues and I are of the opinion that the only way the speed ironer could have killed Mrs Frawley was for her to have fallen into it from above. And she had both feet on the floor when it happened. A dozen witnesses can testify to that.'

'You're describing an impossible accident,' Hunton said.

'No. Only one we don't understand.' He paused, hesitated, and then said: 'I will tell you one thing, Hunton, since you seem to have taken this case to heart. If you mention it to anyone else, I'll deny I said it. But I didn't like that machine. It seemed. . . almost to be mocking us. I've inspected over a dozen speed ironers in the last five years on a regular basis. Some of them are in such bad shape that I wouldn't have a dog unleashed around them - the state law is lamentably lax. But they were only machines for all that. But this one. . . it's a spook. I don't know why, but it is. I think if I'd found one thing, even a technicality, that was off whack, I would have ordered it shut down. Crazy, huh?'

'I felt the same way,' Hunton said.

'Let me tell you about something that happened two years ago in Milton,' the inspector said. He took off his glasses and began to polish them slowly on his vest. 'Fella had parked an old ice-box out in his backyard. The woman who called us said her dog had been caught in it and suffocated. We got the state policeman in the area to inform him it had to go to the town dump. Nice enough fella, sorry about the dog. He loaded it into his pickup and took it to the dump the next morning. That afternoon a woman in the neighbourhood reported her son missing.'

'God,' Hunton said.

The icebox was at the dump and the kid was in it, dead. As mart kind, according to the mother. She said he'd no more play in an empty icebox than he would take a ride with a strange man. Well, he did. We wrote it off. Case closed?'

'I guess,' Hunton said.

'No. The dump caretaker went out next day to take the door off the thing. City Ordinance No.58 on the maintenance of public dumping places.' Martin looked at him expressionlessly. 'He found six dead birds inside. Gulls, sparrows, a robin: And he said the door closed on his arm while he was brushing them out. Gave him a hell of a jump. The mangler at the Blue Ribbon strikes me like that, Hunton. I don't like it.'

They looked at each other wordlessly in the empty inquest chamber, some six city blocks from where the Hadley-Watson Model-6 Speed Ironer and Folder sat in the busy laundry, steaming and fuming over its sheets.

The case was driven out of his mind in the space of a week by the press of more prosaic police work. It was only brought back when he and his wife dropped over to Mark Jackson's house for an evening of bid whist and beer.

Jackson greeted him with: 'Have you ever wondered if that laundry machine you told me about is haunted, Johnny?'

Hunton blinked, at a loss. 'What?'

'The speed ironer at the Blue Ribbon Laundry, I guess you didn't catch the squeal this time.'

'What squeal?' Hunton asked, interested.

Jackson passed him the evening paper and pointed to an item at the bottom of page two. The story said that a steam line had let go on the large speed ironer at the Blue Ribbon Laundry, burning three of the six women working at the feeder end. The accident had occurred at 3.45 p.m. and was attributed to a rise in steam pressure from the laundry's boiler. One of the women, Mrs Annette Gillian, had been held at City Receiving Hospital with second-degree burns.

'Funny coincidence,' he said, but the memory of Inspector Martin's words in the empty inquest chamber suddenly recurred: *It's a spook*. . . And the story about the dog and the boy and the birds caught in the discarded refrigerator.

He played cards very badly that night.

Mrs Gillian was propped up in bed reading *Screen Secrets* when Hunton came into the four-bed hospital room. A large bandage blanketed one arm and the side of her neck. The room's other occupant, a young woman with a pallid face, was sleeping.

Mrs Gillian blinked at the blue uniform and then smiled tentatively. 'If it was for Mrs Cherinikov, you'll have to come back later. They just gave her medication.'

'No, it's for you, Mrs Gillian.' Her smile faded a little. 'I'm here unofficially - which means I'm curious about the accident at the laundry. John Hunton.' He held out his hand.

It was the right move. Mrs Gillian's smile became brilliant and she took his grip awkwardly with her unburnt hand. 'Anything I can tell you, Mr Hunton. God, I thought my Andy was in trouble at school again.'

'What happened?'

'We was running sheets and the ironer just blew up - or it seemed that way. I was thinking about going home an' getting off my dogs when there's this great big bang, like a bomb. Steam is everywhere and this hissing noise, awful.' Her smile trembled on the verge of extinction. 'It was like the ironer was breathing. Like a dragon, it was. And Alberta - that's Alberta Keene - shouted that something was exploding and everyone was running and screaming and Ginny Jason started yelling she was burnt. I started to run away and I fell down. I didn't know I got it worst until then. God forbid it was no worse than it was. That live steam is three hundred degrees.'

'The paper said a steam line let go. What does that mean?'

'The overhead pipe comes down into this kinda flexible line that feeds the machine. George - Mr Stanner - said there must have been a surge from the boiler or something. The line split wide open.'

Hunton could think of nothing else to ask. He was making ready to leave when she said reflectively:

'We never used to have these things on that machine. Only lately. The steam line breaking. That awful, awful accident with Mrs Frawley, God rest her. And little things. Like the day Essie got her dress caught in one of the drive chains. That could have been dangerous if she hadn't ripped it right out. Bolts and 'things fall off. Oh, Herb Diment - he's the laundry repairman - has had an awful time with it. Sheets get caught in the folder. George says that's because they're using too much bleach in the washers, but it never used to happen. Now the girls hate to work on it. Essie even says there are still little bits of Adelle Frawley caught in it and it's sacrilege or something. Like it had a curse. It's been that way ever since Sherry cut her hand on one of the clamps.'

'Sherry?' Hunton asked.

'Sherry Ouelette. Pretty little thing, just out of high school. Good worker. But clumsy sometimes. You know how young girls are.'

'She cut her hand on something?'

'Nothing strange about *that*. There are clamps to tighten down the feeder belt, see. Sherry was adjusting them so we could do a heavier load and probably dreaming about some boy. She cut her finger and bled all over everything.' Mrs Gillian looked puzzled. 'It wasn't until after that the bolts started falling *off*. Adelle was. . . you know. . . about a week later. As if the machine had tasted blood and found it liked it. Don't women get funny ideas sometimes, Officer Hinton?'

'Hunton,' he said absently, looking over her head and into space.

Ironically, he had met Mark Jackson in a washateria in the block that separated their houses, and it was there that the cop and the English professor still had their most interesting conversations.

Now they sat side by side in bland plastic chairs, their clothes going round and round behind the glass portholes of the coin-op washers. Jackson's paperback copy of Milton's collected works lay neglected beside him while he listened to Hunton tell Mrs Gillian's story.

When Hunton had finished, Jackson said, 'I asked you once if you thought the mangler might be haunted. I was only half joking. I'll ask you again now.'

'No,' Hunton said uneasily. 'Don't be stupid.'

Jackson watched the turning clothes reflectively. 'Haunted is a bad word. Let's say possessed. There are almost as many spells for casting demons in as there are for casting them out. Frazier's *Golden Bough* is replete with them. Druidic and Aztec lore contain others. Even older ones, back to Egypt. Almost all of them can be reduced to startlingly common denominators. The most common, of course, is the blood of a virgin.' He looked at Hunton, 'Mrs Gillian said the trouble started after this Sherry Ouelette accidentally cut herself.'

'Oh, come on,' Hunton said.

'You have to admit she sounds just the type,' Jackson said.

'I'll run right over to her house,' Hunton said with a small smile. 'I can see it. "Miss Ouelette, I'm Officer John Hunton. I'm investigating an ironer with a bad case of demon possession and would like to know if you're a virgin." Do you think I'd get a chance to say goodbye to Sandra and the kids before they carted me off to the booby hatch?'

'I'd be willing to bet you'll end up saying something just like that,' Jackson said without smiling. 'I'm serious, Johnny. That machine scares the hell out of me and I've never seen it.'

'For the sake of conversation,' Hunton said, 'what are some of the other so-called common denominators?'

Jackson shrugged. 'Hard to say without study. Most Anglo-Saxon hex formulas specify graveyard dirt or the eye of a toad. European spells often mention the hand of glory, which can be interpreted as the actual hand of a dead man or one of the hallucinogenics used in connection with the Witches' Sabbath - usually belladonna or a psilocybin derivative. There could be others.'

'And you think all those things got into the Blue Ribbon ironer? Christ, Mark, I'll bet there isn't any belladonna within a five-hundred-mile radius. Or do you think someone whacked off their Uncle Fred's hand and dropped it in the folder?'

'If seven hundred monkeys typed for seven hundred years -'One of them would turn out the works of Shakespeare,'

Hunton finished sourly. 'Go to hell. Your turn to go across to the drugstore and get some dimes for the dryers.'

It was very funny how George Stanner lost his arm in the mangler.

Seven o'clock Monday morning the laundry was deserted except for Stanner and Herb Diment, the maintenance man. They were performing the twice-yearly function of greasing the mangler's bearings before the laundry's regular day began at seven-thirty. Diment was at the far end, greasing the four secondaries and thinking of how unpleasant this machine made him feel lately, when the mangler suddenly roared into life.

He had been holding up four of the canvas exit belts to get at the motor beneath and suddenly the belts were running in his hands, ripping the flesh off his palms, dragging him along.

He pulled free with a convulsive jerk seconds before the belts would have carried his hands into the folder.

'What the Christ, George!' he yelled. 'Shut the frigging thing *off*,

George Stanner began to scream.

It was a high, wailing, blood-maddened sound that filled the laundry, echoing off the steel faces of the washers, the grinning mouths of the steam presses, the vacant eyes of the industrial dryers. Stanner drew in a great, whooping gasp of air and screamed again: '*Oh God of Christ I'm caught I'M CAUGHT* -

The rollers began to produce rising steam. The folder gnashed and thumped. Bearings and motors seemed to cry out with a hidden life of their own.

Diment raced to the other end of the machine.

The first roller was already going a sinister red. Diment made a moaning, gobbling noise in his throat. The mangler howled and thumped and hissed.

A deaf observer might have thought at first that Stanner was merely bent over the machine at an odd angle. Then even a deaf man would have seen the pallid, eye-bulging rictus of his face, mouth twisted open in a continuous scream. The arm was disappearing under the safety bar and beneath the first roller; the fabric of his shirt had torn away at the shoulder seam and his upper arm bulged grotesquely as the blood was pushed steadily backwards.

'Turn it off!' Stanner screamed. There was a snap as his elbow broke.

Diment thumbed the off button.

The mangler continued to hum and growl and turn.

Unbelieving, he slammed the button again and again -nothing. The skin of Stanner's arm had grown shiny and taut. Soon it would split with the pressure the roll was putting on it; and still he was conscious and screaming. Diment had a nightmare cartoon image of a man flattened by a steamroller, leaving only a shadow.

'Fuses -' Stanner screeched. His head was being pulled down, down, as he was dragged forward.

Diment whirled and ran to the boiler room, Stanner's screams chasing him like lunatic ghosts. The mixed stench of blood and steam rose in the air.

On the left wall were three heavy grey boxes containing all the fuses for the laundry's electricity. Diment yanked them open and began to pull the long, cylindrical fuses like a crazy man, throwing them back over his shoulders. The overhead lights went out; then the air compressor; then the boiler itself, with a huge dying whine.

And still the mangler turned. Stanner's screams had been reduced to bubbly moans.

Diment's eye happened on the fire axe in its glassed-in box. He grabbed it with a small, gagging whimper and ran back. Stanner's arm was gone almost to the shoulder. Within seconds his bent and straining neck would be snapped against the safety bar.

'I can't,' Diment blubbered, holding the axe. 'Jesus, George, I can't, I can't, I -'

The machine was an abattoir now. The folder spat out pieces of shirt sleeve, scraps of flesh, a finger. Stanner gave a huge, whooping scream and Diment swung the axe up and brought it down in the laundry's shadowy lightlessness. Twice. Again.

Stanner fell away, unconscious and blue, blood jetting from the stump just below the shoulder. The mangler sucked what was left into itself. . . and shut down.

Weeping, Diment pulled his belt out of its loops and began to make a tourniquet.

Hunton was talking on the phone with Roger Martin, the inspector. Jackson watched him while he patiently rolled a ball back and forth for three-year-old Patty Hunton to chase.

'He pulled *all* the fuses?' Hunton was asking. 'And the off button just didn't function, huh? . . . Has the ironer been shut down? . . . Good. Great. Huh? . . . No, not official.' Hunton frowned, then looked sideways at Jackson. 'Are you still reminded of that refrigerator, Roger?'

Yes. Me too, Goodbye.'

He hung up and looked at Jackson. 'Let's go see the girl, Mark.'

She had her own apartment (the hesitant yet proprietary way she showed them in after Hunton had flashed his buzzer made him suspect that she hadn't had it long), and she sat uncomfortably across from them in the carefully decorated, postage-stamp living room.

'I'm Officer Hunton and this is my associate, Mr Jackson. It's about the accident at the laundry.' He felt hugely uncomfortable with this dark, shyly pretty girl.

'Awful,' Sherry Ouelette murmured. 'It's the only place I've ever worked. Mr Gartley is my uncle. I liked it because it let me have this place and my own friends. But now. . . it's so *spooky*.'

'The State Board of Safety has shut the ironer down pending a full investigation,' Hunton said. 'Did you know that?'

'Sure,' She sighed restlessly. 'I don't know what I'm going to do -'

'Miss Ouelette,' Jackson interrupted, 'you had an accident with the ironer, didn't you? Cut your hand on a clamp, I believe?'

'Yes, I cut my finger.' Suddenly her face clouded. 'That was the first thing.' She looked at them woefully. 'Sometimes I feel like the girls don't like me so much any more as if I were to blame.'

'I have to ask you a hard question,' Jackson said slowly. 'A question you won't like. It seems absurdly personal and off the subject, but I can only tell you it is not. Your answers won't ever be marked down in a file or record.'

She looked frightened. 'D-did I do something?'

Jackson smiled and shook his head; she melted. *Thank God for Mark*, Hunton thought.

'I'll add this, though: the answer may help you keep your nice little flat here, get your job back, and make things at the laundry the way they were before.'

'I'd answer anything to have that,' she said.

'Sherry, are you a virgin?'

She looked utterly flabbergasted, utterly shocked, as if a priest had given communion and then slapped her. Then she lifted her head, made a gesture at her neat efficiency apartment, as if asking them how they could believe it might be a place of assignation.

'I'm saving myself for my husband,' she said simply.

Hunton and Jackson looked calmly at each other, and in that tick of a second, Hunton knew that it was all true: a devil had taken over the inanimate steel and cogs and gears of the mangler and had turned it into something with its own life.

'Thank you,' Jackson said quietly.

'What now?' Hunton asked bleakly as they rode back. 'Find a priest to exorcise it?'

Jackson snorted. 'You'd go a far piece to find one that wouldn't hand you a few tracts to read while he phoned the booby hatch. It has to be our play, Johnny.'

'Can we do it?'

'Maybe. The problem is this: We know something is in the mangler. We don't know *what*.' Hunton felt cold, as if touched by a fleshless finger. 'There are a great many demons. Is the one we're dealing with in the circle of Bubastis or Pan? Baal? Or the Christian deity we call Satan? We don't know. If the demon had been deliberately cast, we would have a better chance. But this seems to be a case of random possession.'

Jackson ran his fingers through his hair. 'The blood of a virgin, yes. But that narrows it down hardly at all. We have to be sure, very sure.'

'Why?' Hunton asked bluntly. 'Why not just get a bunch of exorcism formulas together and try them out?'

Jackson's face went cold. 'This isn't cops 'n' robbers, Johnny. For Christ's sake, don't think it is. The rite of exorcism is horribly dangerous. It's like controlled nuclear fission, in a way. We could make a mistake and destroy ourselves. The demon is caught in that piece of machinery. But give it a chance and -'

'It could get out?'

'It would love to get out,' Jackson said grimly. 'And it likes to kill.'

When Jackson came over the following evening, Hunton had sent his wife and daughter to a movie. They had the living room to themselves, and for this Hunton was relieved. He could still barely believe what he had become involved in.

'I cancelled my classes,' Jackson said, 'and spent the day with some of the most god-awful books you can imagine.

This afternoon I fed over thirty recipes for calling demons into the tech computer. I've got a number of common elements. Surprisingly few.'

He showed Hunton the list: blood of a virgin, graveyard dirt, hand of glory, bat's blood, night moss, horse's hoof, eye of toad.

There were others, all marked secondary.

'Horse's hoof,' Hunton said thoughtfully. 'Funny -'

'Very common. In fact -'

'Could these things - any of them - be interpreted loosely?' Hunton interrupted.

'If lichens picked at night could be substituted for night moss, for instance?'

'Yes.'

'It's very likely,' Jackson said. 'Magical formulas are often ambiguous and elastic. The black arts have always allowed plenty of room for creativity.'

'Substitute Jell-O for horse's hoof,' Hunton said. 'Very popular in bag lunches. I noticed a little container of it sitting under the ironer's sheet platform on the day the Frawley woman died. Gelatine is made from horses' hooves.'

Jackson nodded. 'Anything else?'

'Bat's blood . . . well, it's a big place. Lots of unlighted nooks and crannies. Bats seem likely, although I doubt if the management would admit to it. One could conceivably have been trapped in the mangler.'

Jackson tipped his head back and knuckled bloodshot eyes. 'It fits . . . it all fits.'

'It does?'

'Yes. We can safely rule out the hand of glory, I think. Certainly no one dropped a hand into the ironer *before* Mrs Frawley's death, and belladonna is definitely not indigenous to the area.'

'Graveyard dirt?'

'What do you think?'

'It would have to be a hell of a coincidence,' Hunton said.

'Nearest cemetery is Pleasant Hill, and that's five miles from the Blue Ribbon.'

'Okay,' Jackson said. 'I got the computer operator-who thought I was getting ready for Halloween - to run a positive breakdown of all the primary and secondary elements on the list. Every possible combination. I threw out some two dozen which were completely

meaningless. The others fall into fairly clear-cut categories. The elements we've isolated are in one of those.'

'What is it?'

Jackson grinned. 'An easy one. The mythos centres in South America with branches in the Caribbean. Related to voodoo. The literature I've got looks on the deities as strictly bush league, compared to some of the real heavies, like Saddath or He-Who-Cannot-Be-Named. The thing in that machine is going to slink away like the neighbourhood bully'

'How do we do it?'

'Holy water and a smidgen of the Holy Eucharist ought to do it. And we can read some of the Leviticus to it. Strictly Christian white magic.'

'You're sure it's not worse?'

'Don't see how it can be,' Jackson said pensively. 'I don't mind telling you I was worried about that hand of glory. That's very black juju. Strong magic.'

'Holy water wouldn't stop it?'

'A demon called up in conjunction with the hand of glory could eat a stack of Bibles for breakfast. We would be in bad trouble messing with something like that at all. Better to pull the goddamn thing apart.'

'Well, are you completely sure

'No, but fairly sure. It all fits too well.'

'When?'

'The sooner, the better,' Jackson said. 'How do we get in? Break a window?'

Hunton smiled, reached into his pocket, and dangled a key in front of Jackson's nose.

'Where'd you get that? Gartley?'

'No,' Hunton said. 'From a state inspector named Martin.'

'He knows what we're doing?'

'I think he suspects. He told me a funny story a couple of weeks ago.'

'About the mangler?'

'No,' Hunton said. 'About a refrigerator. Come on.'

Adelle Frawley was dead; sewed together by a patient undertaker, she lay in her coffin. Yet something of her spirit perhaps remained in the machine, and if it did, it cried out. She would have known, could have warned them. She had been prone to indigestion, and for this common ailment she had taken a common stomach tablet called E-Z Gel, purchasable over the counter of any drugstore for seventy-nine cents. The side panel holds a printed warning:

People with glaucoma must not take E-Z Gel, because the active ingredient causes an aggravation of that condition. Unfortunately, Adelle Frawley did not have that condition.

She might have remembered the day, shortly before Sherry Ouelette cut her hand, that she had dropped a full box of E-Z Gel tablets into the mangler by accident. But she was dead, unaware that the active ingredient which soothed her heartburn was a chemical derivative of belladonna, known quaintly in some European countries as the hand of glory.

There was a sudden ghastly burping noise in the spectral silence of the Blue Ribbon Laundry - a bat fluttered madly for its hole in the

insulation above the dryers where it had roosted, wrapping wings around its blind face.

It was a noise almost like a chuckle.

The mangler began to run with a sudden, lurching grind -belts hurrying through the darkness, cogs meeting and meshing and grinding, heavy pulverizing rollers rotating on and on.

It was ready for them.

When Hunton pulled into the parking lot it was shortly after midnight and the moon was hidden behind a raft of moving clouds. He jammed on the brakes and switched off the lights in the same motion; Jackson's forehead almost slammed against the padded dash.

He switched off the ignition and the steady thump-hiss-thump became louder. 'It's the mangler,' he said slowly. 'It's the mangler. Running by itself. In the middle of the night.'

They sat for a moment in silence, feeling the fear crawl up their legs.

Hunton said, 'All right. Let's do it.'

They got out and walked to the building, the sound of the mangler growing louder. As Hunton put the key into the lock of the service door, he thought that the machine *did* sound alive - as if it were breathing in great hot gasps and speaking to itself in hissing, sardonic whispers.

All of a sudden I'm glad I'm with a cop,' Jackson said. He shifted the brown bag he held from one arm to the other. Inside was a small jelly jar filled with holy water wrapped in waxed paper, and a Gideon Bible.

They stepped inside and Hunton snapped up the light switches by the door. The fluorescents flickered into cold life. At the same instant the mangler shut off.

A membrane of steam hung over its rollers. It waited for them in its new ominous silence.

'God, it's an ugly thing,' Jackson whispered.

'Come on,' Hunton said. 'Before we lose our nerve.'

They walked over to it. The safety bar was in its down position over the belt which fed the machine.

Hunton put out a hand. 'Close enough, Mark. Give me the stuff and tell me what to do.'

'But -'

'No argument.'

Jackson handed him the bag and Hunton put it on the sheet table in front of the machine. He gave Jackson the Bible.

'I'm going to read,' Jackson said. 'When I point at you, sprinkle the holy water on the machine with your fingers. You say: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, get thee from this place, thou unclean. Got it?'

'Yes.'

'The second time I point, break the wafer and repeat the incantation again.'

'How will we know if it's working?'

'You'll know. The thing is apt to break every window in the place getting out. If it doesn't work the first time, we keep doing it until it does.'

'I'm scared green,' Hunton said.

'As a matter of fact, so am I.'

'If we're wrong about the hand of glory -'

'We're not,' Jackson said. 'Here we go.'

He began. His voice filled the empty laundry with spectral echoes. 'Turnest not though aside to idols, nor make molten gods for yourself. I am the Lord thy God . . . and the land will vomit you out for having defiled it, as it vomited out nations before you.' Jackson looked up, his face strained, and pointed. 'The words fell like stones into a silence that had suddenly become filled with a creeping, tomblike cold. The mangler remained still and silent under the fluorescents, and to Hunton it still seemed to grin.

Hunton sprinkled holy water across the feeder belt.

There was a sudden, gnashing scream of tortured metal. Smoke rose from the canvas belts where the holy water had touched and took on writhing, red-tinged shapes. The mangler suddenly jerked into life.

'We've got it!' Jackson cried above the rising clamour. 'It's on the run!'

He began to read again, his voice rising over the sound of the machinery. He pointed to Hunton again, and Hunton sprinkled some of the host. As he did so he was suddenly swept with a bone-freezing terror, a sudden vivid feeling that it has gone wrong, that the machine had called their bluff - and was the stronger.

Jackson's voice was still rising, approaching climax.

Sparks began to jump across the arc between the main motor and the secondary; the smell of ozone filled the air, like the copper smell of hot blood. Now the main motor was smoking; the mangler was running at an insane, blurred speed; a finger touched to the central belt would have caused the whole body to be hauled in and turned to a bloody rag in the space of five seconds. The concrete beneath their feet trembled and thrummed.

A main bearing blew with a searing flash of purple light, filling the chill air with the smell of thunderstorms, and still the mangler ran, faster and faster, belts and rollers and cogs moving at a speed that made them seem to blend and merge, change, melt, transmute - Hunton, who had been standing almost hypnotized, suddenly took a step backwards. 'Get away!' he screamed over the blaring racket.

'We've almost got it!' Jackson yelled back. 'Why -'

There was a sudden indescribable ripping noise and a fissure in the concrete floor suddenly raced towards them and past, widening. Chips of ancient cement flew up in a starburst.

Jackson looked at the mangler and screamed.

It was trying to pull itself out of the concrete, like a dinosaur trying to escape a tar pit. And it wasn't precisely an ironer any more. It was still changing, melting. The 550-volt cable fell, spitting blue fire, into the rollers and was chewed away. For a moment two fireballs glared at them like lambent eyes, eyes filled with a great and cold hunger.

Another fault line tore open. The mangler leaned towards them, within an ace of being free of the concrete moorings that held it. It leered at them; the safety bar had slammed up and what Hunton saw was a gaping, hungry mouth filled with steam.

They turned to run and another fissure opened at their feet. Behind them, a great screaming roar as the thing came free. Hunton leaped over, but Jackson stumbled and fell sprawling.

Hunton turned to help and a huge, amorphous shadow fell over him, blocking the fluorescents.

It stood over Jackson, who lay on his back, staring up in a silent rictus of terror - the perfect sacrifice. Hunton had only a confused impression of something black and moving that bulked to a tremendous height above them both, something with glaring electric eyes the size of footballs, an open mouth with a moving canvas tongue.

He ran: Jackson's dying scream followed him.

When Roger Martin finally got out of bed to answer the doorbell, he was still only a third awake; but when Hunton reeled in, shock

slapped him fully into the world with a rough hand.

Hunton's eyes bulged madly from his head, and his hands were claws as he scratched at the front of Martin's robe. There was a small oozing cut on his cheek and his face was splashed with dirty grey specks of powdered cement.

His hair had gone dead white.

'Help me . . . for Jesus' sake, help me. Mark is dead. Jackson is dead.'

'Slow down,' Martin said. 'Come in the living room.'

Hunton followed him, making a thick whining noise in his throat, like a dog.

Martin poured him a two-ounce knock of Jim Beam and Hunton held the glass in both hands, downing the raw liquor in a choked gulp. The glass fell unheeded to the carpet and his hands, like wandering ghosts, sought Martin's lapels again.

'The mangler killed Mark Jackson. It. . . it. . . oh God, it might get out! We can't let it get out! We can't. . . we.

oh -' He began to scream, a crazy, whooping sound that rose and fell in jagged cycles.

Martin tried to hand him another drink but Hunton knocked it aside. 'We have to burn it,' he said. 'Burn it before it can get out. Oh, what if it gets out? Oh Jesus, what if -' His eyes suddenly flickered, glazed, rolled up to show the whites, and he fell to the carpet in a stonelike faint.

Mrs Martin was in the doorway, clutching her robe to her throat. 'Who is he, Rog? Is he crazy? I thought -' She shuddered.

'I don't think he's crazy.' She was suddenly frightened by the sick shadow of fear on her husband's face. 'God, I hope he came quick enough.'

He turned to the telephone, picked up the receiver, froze.

There was a faint, swelling noise from the east of the house, the way that Hunton had come. A steady, grinding clatter, growing louder. The living-room window stood half open and now Martin caught a dark smell on the breeze. An odour of ozone. . . or blood.

He stood with his hand on the useless telephone as it grew louder, louder, gnashing and fuming, something in the streets that was hot and steaming. The blood stench filled the room.

His hand dropped from the telephone.

It was already out.