

Edgar Pangborn

THE WITCHES OF NUPAL

I WILL interrupt the secret work on my *History of Heresy* to write you a story of murder, love, and witchcraft.

When I read about the burning of witches in Old Time—reading snug down here in the cellars of the Ecclesia at Nuber among ancient books the Holy Mur-can Church hasn't yet destroyed—I note that they were never called martyrs except by a few outraged historians of a later age which considered itself humanitarian. That was the same age that invented napalm, some kind of jellied fuel designed for the purpose of clinging to the skin and burning to the bone. And these historians, good gentlemen all, usually declined to believe that the victims were witches—an un-kind cut. For martyrdom you must hold beliefs later guaranteed to be holy, as Joan of Arc did: had she been a true witch no one would have found her death noteworthy. Poor girl, I suppose she was one more homosexual who became important enough so that she had to be made first a devil and then a saint.

I am Fifth Assistant Librarian to the Ecclesia, and in this blessed century, third since the supposed birth and death of Abraham, witchcraft has been declared a delusion of barbaric and unmurcan minds. (I could still be burned for that "supposed," maybe, although the bon-fires are rapidly losing favor as public entertainments, but this code I write in is not likely to be broken by those muttonheads upstairs, and my explosive notebooks ought to be safe behind the massive *Complete Works off Fenimore Cooper*.) Fifth Assistant is a soft, hideaway job. Here in the Ecclesiastical State of Nuber we are within my native land of Katskil but not of it, as the antique papal state once sheltered within the body of Italy. I am a mean, cynical, respectable old man, almost invisible, less vulnerable than most citizens to arrest and torture in the cause of modern alignment. Down here in the cellars I read, scribble at my *History*, and am sometimes almost happy. I am the jolly worm in your apple, O Ecclesia—look to the bloom on your cheek! For I shall one day be transfigured by a printing press into a book, and chew my way out clear through you, and spread my wings, while you fall to the mud, and rot.

I am thinking back to the St. George's Hatchet Day of the year 266, thirty-five years ago. I will write this moral tale for your someday instruction, whoever you are—my fellow man, poor sod!—because I have found out where the powers of darkness reside.

We thirteen silly adolescents met that June day according to our by-laws in the clearing below Simon's Mound, and Rudi Zavier was talking to us, resting his hand on the Stone of Sacrifice. "You have been faithful, my twelve," he said. "You shall learn more about the Master of the Horns." If you listened to Rudi, already loving him, your common sense wouldn't be yours to use again until he said so. He was close to twenty, by several years the oldest of us, full of inner fires.

That day he wore a brass pin on his shirt, a cherry-and-hatchet symbol of St. George, the way any conventional citizen might do. We knew Rudi scoffed at the Murcan Saints—it was part of our fun—but wearing such trash was what he called policy. He saw me look at the pin and took it off, grinning, making a half-motion as if wiping his arse with it, but his eyes were chilly, bits of blue sharp sky, probing us, searching and measuring. He was taller than any of us except me, but not weedy as I was—Rudi could bend the seven-foot bow. He stood by the Stone, easy and beautiful, and behind him rose the colossus, Mafairson's Oak.

I wonder if it still stands—but I'm not going back to Nupal. It was said to be the tree where they hanged Fiddler Mafairson for robbing the Kingstone mail coach in former days, and the brave fella broke his fiddle over a stone before they strung him up. Some claim it's only a story from an Old-Time song; and I don't know. That day a moody wind was intruding on our sheltered space. I thought of Mafairson's ghost, craving human sounds, interrupting them with a sigh.

The sun came out a moment on Rudi's bright hair. Almost white it was, silver spun to gossamer, an

imitation of age above a face of youthful splendor, demonic, secret. Rudi (at the time I knew him, when his childhood was spent) was not one for explaining himself. Maybe he tried to when his mother was living. She was a big pale woman with suffering eyes, who died a year after his family moved to Nupal from Albania up in Moha.

That day maybe our youngest—fat Nell Kunak or Jo Makepeace or poor Jena Doren who never stopped loving Rudi—believed the sun came out because he summoned it. Not Piet Horver. I think that big unhappy boy, the only one of us who never laughed, was already feeling the Church drag him back from our naughtiness. He had been the first member of the coven when Rudi started it, and worshipped Rudi fantastically for a while, but the bond was straining to the snapping point. Understand, my good readers of the future who may never exist, when I was a boy it was a common belief that witches could command the sun and moon, vagaries of storm and calm. And though today I see a few signs of reaction against such credulous nonsense, I promise you the multitudes will cherish it for a long time yet, for faith is easily generated, but the use of reason demands courage.

At seventeen I may not have believed that Rudi could dominate the sun and moon and rain. But there was a time when I think I would have jumped into the tarpits of Hell for him.

He had won me four years earlier, soon after he and his family came to Nupal. I was thirteen, all hands and feet and long bones—awkwardest damned boy in Nupal, my father said. Rudi won me by listening to my stumbling talk of becoming an explorer, when my sailor father couldn't hear it without a noisy snigger. And look you, for a few years I did that! In my early forties, as a Clerical in the company of only two scouts, I penetrated the southern jungle, marking out a new trail to the empire of Misipa. I know how its harbors gaze south over the sea, over the round turning world toward tropic-hearted Velen, cruel land of spices, coffee, mahogany, slaves for the brutal Misipan markets. But it's too late for me to go again, and I'll never sail to Velen. (Besides, those are other tales.) Four years after Rudi thus won me, I was still in subjection to his brilliance and power, my own will spellbound.

"You have been faithful," Rudi said to us. "When we formed this coven last year we swore loyalty. We haven't accomplished much yet—it had to be a time of testing. You've done nobly." We looked, we hoped, nobly modest. "I'm proud of you. No one has left our company nor betrayed our secrets—pity for him if he had!" According to our by-laws, the penalty for betrayal was death. I suppose none of us except Rudi (and maybe Piet Horver) had more than a dim idea of what we had agreed to there.

Our "secrets" included our naked romps and orgies in this clearing. At our feasts each of us was required to bring liberated goodies—liberated not just from family but from outside victims who might holler for the Nupal constables. And there were the sacrifices on the Stone under Mafairson's Oak. Stolen chickens mostly; but a month ago at the May meeting Elder Meehan's smelly old half-blind dog Prince had waddled along to the gathering at Jon Bright's heels and Jon had not been able to send him home. Poor fool, he shambled up to the slanted Sacrificial Stone, lifted his leg at it, and climbed on it gazing down at us, tongue dribbling. I remember milky spots where cataracts were forming on both his eyes; they were fuzzy at the iris and stupid with age. Before there was time for Jo Makepeace or any other softhearted one among us to protest, Rudi Zavier—no one else was allowed to touch the Sacrificial Knife—drove that knife into Prince's heart. Some of us trembled while his blood drenched the Stone.

(Elder Meehan, ancient and simple, searched all over town, speculating and grieving. We knew every pitiable move he made, and most of us were guilt-sick, but even little Jo Makepeace couldn't speak.)

I felt sometimes that Jo was with us as a sort of elfin observer. I don't mean a spy; I mean he inhabited the world itself like a stranger marveling at the darkness and occasional brightness of human ways. A fancy, of course—Jo was just a sweet kid with imagination, which is miracle enough, and maybe he let himself be drawn into Rudi's foolish coven because the poet in him wanted to discover what shadows are.

"Have I done wrong?" said Rudi, wiping the knife and smiling at us like bright death. "If so, let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

"How shall I become without sin?" That was Piet Horver, but what he said only began as a shout; it

ended in a mumble, as Rudi walked to him and took hold of his fist, gently straightening the fingers.

"See, Piet," he said. "There's no stone."

If any townsman had found the Sacrificial Stone and the blood, other witches might have been blamed, though I doubt whether there were any in Nupal in our time; a hundred years earlier perhaps. Certainly in the remoter Katskil towns, deeper in the wilderness, witch-craft may well have been practiced. I wouldn't care to say it doesn't go on even nowadays, back in the hills. There's no mystery thicker than the things good people prefer not to mention.

Now at that June meeting in evening sunlight, Rudi said: "Because of your faithfulness I'll tell you one thing: what the Church says about the existence of only one god is the biggest of all the Church's lies. And soon I'll prove it to you."

We gaped—not at the notion of more than one god, which is probably natural to children, nor at the idea that the Church would tell fibs, but just at hearing Rudi put such things in words. We knew what would happen if any Church person heard him and passed on information to the College of Examiners at Nuber, that grim gang of inquisitors which was rapidly becoming the dread official conscience of all Katskil. Rudi's youth wouldn't save him from the bonfire. Public opinion might be saying no about witchcraft; not about heresy. We had also the thrilling second thought: *He is trusting us, saying to us what he would say to no others.*

And there was the mingy little chance that Jehovah *might* hear him, although thus far heaven had rudely ignored our toughest blasphemies. Believing in Lucifer does imply at least some belief in Jehovah. If you don't believe in a god, how can you defy him? The ones who truly don't believe, I've noticed, are the only ones who don't get uptye about religion. (I'm giving this an entire chapter in my *History of Heresy*.) They leave the roaring and the acid forgiving to the true believers, and get on with their own affairs.

"There are many gods," Rudi said. "Little gods, great ones. Think of the thousands of happenings, all day long. How could one god deal with them?" To many of us ignoramuses this was a clincher. Jena Doren nodded her bright head; she had to believe that Rudi, who constantly hurt and humiliated her, couldn't be wrong. "But the one greatest of all gods is Lucifer, Master of the Horns—Lucifer, Son of the Morning. They say he fell from heaven, do they? Why, he rejected the god of heaven, found heaven to be a poor sorry place." Rudi spread his arms, holding us with his yearning, mocking eyes. A number of his tricks were borrowed from Father Rupert's pulpit mannerisms; more were his own. Rudi was original; the devil dwelling behind his eyes stayed consistent with itself, even to the end. (Remember, too, we were stuffed full of our juicy 3rd Century romances, those hell-love-and-disaster yarns that promise to bloom better than ever in the 4th, with the growth of printing houses and what passes for liter-acy.) "No, he didn't fall from heaven, my twelve. He flew down to us of his own free will, to be Lord of Hell and Lord of the Earth also—the Earth to which he brought the floods, the pestilence, the cleansing fire of Old Time—the Earth that he holds in the cup of his left hand."

I have heard more practiced soul-rousers since then, but none with Rudi's voice-musk, his power to shove that voice under your skin till you felt on the edge of orgasm from sheer scare and goosepimples. "Serve him, serve the Master of the Horns! He is the lightning-fire of the dark!" He had us swaying and moaning, as the most devout Abramites do in church. The girls closed their eyes in ecstasy. I saw Anna Hiel's nipples stiffen under her thin smock, and she slid me a glance. "He is the spark in the tiger's eye." (Who cared about making sense out of Rudi's rhapsody?—the purpose was the music, not the meaning: it was our *Hear us, O Abraham* and our *Kyrie eleison*.) "He is the black wolfs cry, the blade of sacrifice, the blood that follows it. And you shall see him in the flesh."

He stopped, his silence shocking us out of our fuzzy trance. He was waiting and smiling. Rudi knew how to outwait an audience. Then he leered and said in a luscious imitation of Father Rupert's cadence: "Ay-y-men." We laughed and pressed close with our questions.

Relaxed now and amiable, he said, oh, he just meant that at the next meeting we'd see him put on the attributes of Lucifer, that was all—yes, my good loves, including the horns—and when he did, the Master's spirit would enter him. He couldn't predict what he might then be obliged to do—we wouldn't mind kissing his arse, would we? He laughed, too, watching us. In a true sense, he would *be* Lucifer

while the spirit made use of him.

The rest of that June meeting became an orgy as it grew dark. I chased Anna Hiels three times around the Oak and got her down squealing with her legs open. Jon Bright took her twice after I had spent. But we were uneasy, though we had sentinels posted. Maybe we felt ourselves under the regard of Lucifer and it chilled us, gave us the sense of something enormous, wanton, con-suming, outside our trivial posturing and capering.

Adam Ganz, who loved boys, got into a fight with Piet Horver, who shouted that his games with little Jo Makepeace were depraved—that from a witch! Some-times we were more than comic. Rudi had to separate them when Piet earned himself a bloody nose and started to rave and cry. And Jena Doren fell to weeping, too, and couldn't stop, when we went through our Black Mass, the Maharba (Abraham said backwards), making her naked body the table for our mock communion.

Before the Fourth of July Night meeting, hell was loose in Nupal. Three young girls—Dora Mallon and Ethel Lyme, and Dasi Stiles, who was seventeen but queer in the head, or "tarded" to use a Katskil ex-pression—were having fits and screaming of bewitch-ment. Dora and Ethel were cousins, and inseparable. Dora was a hunchback and for that reason suspected by some of being a mue, but the Church had let her live. Ethel's bland round face was purpled by a great birth-mark on the left side. They had named no names, so far. When some fool asked whether one Mam Shiller might be responsible for their pitiable state, the wenches were supposed to have screamed louder.

At Sudler's Dairy, where Rudi and I were working that summer, Rudi told me our coven might be in- volved, if not up to the neck at least up to the balls. Dora Mallon, he told me, had suspected the existence of our group and approached him with hints, wanting to join. He had put her off with evasions. "She may have seen some of us slipping away to Simon's Mound," he said. "She's a bitch we don't need. Sharp, though. I don't think any of us would have betrayed the coven. Do you, Sam?" He was looking into me with ice-blue coldness. "Sam?"

"No, Rudi. No." His look changed then to one of dreaminess, and some kind of exhilaration. Rudi's job at Sudler's was a joke, possibly due to some democratic notion of his father's that it would be "good for the boy." The Zavieres lived in a great gloomy house with ten acres of fenced-in privacy and a mess of servants. But Rudi rather liked the work, and it kept him in touch with me.

Here in my cozy cellars I have dug up and read some accounts of the Salem witchcraft episode of 1692, the addled trial, the hangings, the pressing to death of brave Giles Corey. In Nupal I suppose history was re-peating itself with a big squeak, as it may easily do for any people who have discarded knowledge and kept no understanding of the past. In old Massachusetts, how-ever, the madness was followed by a significant revul-sion against that kind of emotional garbage: the out-rages did clear the air. In Nupal we had no Robert Calef or Thomas Brattle to risk their necks by pillorying the holy ghouls with indignation and laughter.

Mam Shiller was a fierce old twice-widowed repro-bate living in a shanty outside of town, off the old Kingstone Road (which hadn't gone through to the national capital since the earthquake of 260 and still doesn't). She kept chickens, a few goats, a garden cherished behind thick hedges. In her late forties, she was currently giving bed and board to a traveling tinker who had holed up with her, scandalizing the town. I never could see that she was depriving Nupal's good ladies of anything, except the tinker, who was perfectly useless.

Mam Shiller wouldn't have strangers near her gar-den; she believed their sole object was to trample her flower beds. She'd take out after them with a broom or anything else handy. She also believed the town was dead set against her, and in that of course she was right—they are always against the queer and the lonely.

Dasi Stiles may have started the outbreak. Dasi nourished an ungovernable passion for flowers. She didn't admire them—she ate them. They must have done her good, too, for she had the creamiest complex-ion of any chick in Nupal, along with the weakest mind. Mam Shiller had recently chased her a quarter-mile with a pair of shears, Dasi chewing and strewing rose petals all the way. Slow to anger like any halfwit, Dasi did resent being chased, and I suppose Mam Shiner's roaring threats were impressive,

though the old woman wouldn't have hurt a mouse. Dasi must have gabbled to the other girls.

All three were children of poor families in the shanty section, but when Dora toppled screaming and frothing on the church steps on Friday morning while the congregation was filing out, she got enough attention for minor nobility. Ask Baron Reilla—he was there, and gave a few orders.

They carried her across the street into the house of the Elder Meehan. His wife, Mam Clotilda, was as pious-vague and sweet and cloth-headed as he was, while his sister-in-law Miz Beulah saw to it that they remembered to eat and get up and go to bed. Left to himself, Elder Meehan would have sat reading the Book of Abraham until he dried up and blew away. The Meehans should have had children, everyone said. They made a huge tremulous fuss over afflicted Dora, and over Ethel who followed along shouting: "O my poor Dora, my darling, will they never cease a-persecuting you?"—at which words the people in their good church clothes did marvel. Baron Reilla remarked she could hardly have got them out of a romance-book, since he didn't suppose she could read. And we all chewed on the fact that Ethel Lyme had said *they*. Ethel then flopped on the bed along with Dora, frothing and wailing like a skinned wildcat. Presently both were speaking with tongues—that's what the faithful call it when the gobbling sounds almost like words.

Dasi Stiles had squeezed in along with the rest of us. When the girls were well launched on that sad ecstasy, I'll be damned if Dasi wasn't down there prancing on all fours wagging her handsome big rump and barking like a dog.

Father Rupert tore over from the church, limping with his bad knee. At his arrival those three maidens really sucked up their lungs and tried for a record. I heard Ethel roaring: "Don't you dare touch me with that thing, you beast, you monster! I already said I wouldn't tell—ooh, *ooh, that hurts!*" I was crowded into a corner; being tall I didn't miss anything. Rudi was there, but didn't try to elbow forward; the girls may not have seen him. And then—I don't know quite how it started, or who asked the first question—presently the name *Mam Shiller* was zizzing around the room like a captive hornet.

By evening Mam Shiller was secured in the town lock-up. We heard she was to be tried when the Ecclesiastical Circuit Court arrived at Nupal in September. They said it required two men to get the chain fastened to her leg.

At the dairy, from the corner of his mouth as we were cleaning the milking stalls, Rudi said: "Those bitches are just warming up. They didn't name Mam Shiller, they just picked it up. I don't know why Dora hasn't named us."

Men were nearby, pitching hay into the loft. I said in the same kind of voice: "Could she be trying to scare us, hoping to get admitted?"

"Jasus-Abraham!" He thought about it. "Just maybe. But I'm sorry for Mam Shiller. I'm sorry for her." I couldn't recall ever hearing him say that about anyone else; but the devil was shining out of him still, and that exhilaration.

"Could she be a witch, Rudi?"

"Mam Shiller?" Again I'd said something that made him think. "I don't think so, Sam. No, she's a victim. We ought to do something for her." He thought some more, and laughed under his breath. "Ayah, something to turn the bloody town upside down." He was standing on the milking platform; for a fact, that was the only thing that made him taller than me when he put his arm around my shoulder, but I felt him taller. I was remembering who and what would be occupying his body on Fourth of July Night and believing every bit of it. "My good love, are you with me? Sam?"

"What do you take me for? Of course I'm with you."

Not smiling anymore, he asked: "To the death?"

"Of course, Rudi. . . . To the death."

"Sam, what happens if we're betrayed to the Gentiles?"

"Gentiles?"

He was impatient, shaking me; he'd taught us that word and I'd forgotten. "Gentiles means common folk, Sam. People like—oh, Elder Meehan, or even Baron Reilla, or my own crawling son of a bitch of a father." Rudi's father was a lawyer, bland and clammy, a busy deacon of the Church. I may have been the only person who knew how savagely Rudi hated him, for both masked their feelings in public

very well—for that mat-ter the deacon himself probably didn't know the whole of it, being so thickly concerned with his own righteous-ness that he may have seen those around him as not much more than animated dolls. Nobody could have liked rich and sanctimonious Deacon Zavier, nobody with any sense or warm blood, but Rudi's loathing went beyond anything I could imagine happening in my own insides. Rudi never spoke of his mother, that big sad-faced woman who was thought by some to possess the second sight. The deacon had remarried, a blowsy ma-tron whom Rudi spoke of to me (and maybe not only to me) as The Sow. "So what happens if we're betrayed? Come on, Sam, think! We burn, don't we?"

Without thinking I made the sign of the Wheel, Church-fashion. Rudi grabbed my wrist and forced me to make the circle out from the body and in, the witch way, instead of tracing it flat across the chest. You're supposed to make the witch motion with a closed fist too, middle finger stuck out to look like a cock. His eyes were probing at me unbearably, inches away. "But Rudi, there haven't been any burnings for—oh, for years. Since before we was born."

"Means nothing." He still had his arm around me. "Hide your big dumb head if you got to." I could feel him using the contempt as a tool to push me around, and I couldn't be angry. "I was going to ask you to help me spring Mam Shiller, for that's what I'm going to do. But maybe you'd wish to be excused."

"I'm with you," I said, feeling all torn inside. "But Jasus-Abraham, Rudi, they got that lock-up guarded day and night."

His eyes were spitting blue fire. "Buck Winters, night guard—if a flea goosed him he'd run a mile. My good Sam, I know one or two things about prison guards. You take my father for instance—he's sort of a prison guard, you might say, though too stupid to know it. I know one thing about prison guards, that's for *sure*."

"All right—what?"

"They are mortal."

"Rudi! Rudi, you never would."

"Poor little Sam!" said that dear miserable devil, and he lifted up on his toes to kiss my cheek.

We got her free that same night, Rudi and I, with no word about it to the coven. Some of them, he remarked, were still mighty young, not to be counted on as much as he'd led them to believe when he was speechmaking. Me?—I was just about old enough to know I was being flattered by that confidence.

We stole down to the lock-up wearing black cloth masks and tight caps to hide our hair, after midnight when the town was in bed. Rudi had been watching the lock-up for two nights, and knew the guard Buck Win-ters' habits to the last yawn. The building was a small thing in a scrubby yard back of the town hall, ap-proached by an alley; they'd had no one in it for years but an occasional tramp or drunk, and now no one but Mam Shiller. All we had to do was wait in the bushes near the back wall until Buck waddled out to take a leak. When he was squared away at the wall Rudi slid out shadow-soft and snapped him with a stone in a sock. You can kill a man easily with one of those, but we were lucky, or else somehow Rudi knew just how hard to hit without finishing him. Buck was tall as well as fat, but with not much muscle. I had the gag crammed in his mouth and tied back of his thick neck before he finished collapsing. He was already coming around by the time we had him blindfolded, legs and arms trussed. Rudi told him to stop moaning or he'd get gut-sliced; he stopped it. Then Rudi hissed in his ear: "We are of the Old Religion." A tremor shook his whole carcass; he couldn't answer but he went on breathing. Rudi snatched the key ring off his belt and we were inside.

There was a cubbyhole office for the guard, a storeroom, and an l-shaped corridor with two cells, both empty. I carried the small lamp from the office for Rudi. She was crouched on a foul heap of straw, chained to the wall, and poor soul, she was naked. While Rudi was getting the cell door open she probably saw our masks. She said; "I can't tell you anything. Don't hurt me anymore."

"Nay, we're friends." And to me Rudi said: "Go find her clothes. Take the lamp."

"O my lordagod!" she said. "O my good loves!"

"Nay, Mother, don't talk now. We'll get you out."

"O Jesus and Abraham! They've hurt me some, my good loves. Will I have to walk far?"

As I went to look for the clothes I heard him say: "Not far, Mother—nay, I don't know, it might be far." I had never heard him call any other old woman Mother, though it's a common thing in Katskil. "You're not safe in Nupal," he said—"ever, I guess."

Her clothes weren't to be found, not in the office nor in a ghastly storeroom, where I blundered into a heap of rusty tools dating from the old days that the Church says need never come again—all we have to do is trust in the faith and pay the taxes and the tithes. When I returned to the cell Rudi had unlocked her leg-iron. He still wore his cap and mask, so I kept mine. "No clothes. Nowhere."

Rudi was furious, but it was like him not to lash out at me or go looking where I'd looked. Mam Shiller was crying. "It's all right, boys—I won't try to find out who you are. I guess you're the good angels—you got fresh young voices like boys—never mind, I won't ask, I'll do anything you say. Is my man waiting for me? My Wat?" That was the tinker. I never knew a last name for him. Nobody had glimpsed him since her arrest.

"Gone," Rudi said. "He's no good."

"O my lordagod, don't say that!—no, never mind, I expect it's so, I never counted on him for nothing. A'n't anybody seeing to my goats, my little hens? They won't tell me."

"The town took them, Mam," I told her, talking soft like Rudi through the bottom of my mask. She looked at me keenly as if she might have recognized my voice, but I felt she'd never tell.

"The town," she said—"oh, the town, their balls can rot off and drop in the jakes, I won't cry. But boys, I can't travel without no clothes. I'm not decent."

"Wait," he said, "sit calm." He jerked his head at me. We slipped outside and skinned the clothes off Buck Winters and dressed him up again in the ropes. He was wide awake now, eyes rolling, but he played it safe and chewed quiet on his gag.

"All right," she said, and chuckled. "They got a p'ison smell of polis about 'em, but we can't be choosers. It's my back hurts where they broke a stick onto me." She supported herself on Rudi's shoulder while she strug-gled into the trousers. They were tight for her in the leg but not in the rump, for old Buck had a spread bottom like a lump of warm butter.

"Have you friends outside of Nupal, Mam Shiller?" Rudi was treating her like a lady and she knew it. There was a big streak of gentleman in Rudi; I don't think he got it from his father.

"Ah, by the last hear-tell I heard, my old father's still alive in Maplestock. Used to say himself he was too mean to die. He'll be gone seventy, or past."

"Go home to him," says Rudi, gentle and mild. "He'll take you, won't he, Mam?"

Strength was rising in her just from the taste of free-dom, though she'd been miserably beaten and likely half starved. "He'll take me," she said, "or I'll sit howling on his doorstep. Look you, there's milk-and-egg money under a stone in my garden if the town ha'n't smelled it out. Wat never knew about it. If it's there it's yours. Under the second flat stone behind the rodidenders."

"No, you'll need that, we won't take it. We'll see you safe up there, and then you better be off for Maplestock across country, and fast. But don't risk the roads after sun-up, and wade upstream a piece through Myler's Brook, in case they go for dogs."

She was crying and blessing us. We got her moving, and out past the naked guard. She would have gone by him in the night dark, but Rudi stopped there. I could feel an ugliness rising, and when I put my hand on his arm he was tight as a drawn seven-foot bow, and breathing hard as if something hurt too much. "This bag of crap here," he said—"remind you of anybody?"

I remembered how he had talked wild about his father being like a prison guard, and I snatched hold of that frozen arm, my own strength surprising me. "No!" I said. "It's nothing but old Buck Winters, and you know it. Come on—we got to help Mam Shiller get clear." I think it was anyone's guess for a minute whether old Buck would live or die, but the moment crawled past and Rudi was coming along with us.

We saw Mam Shiller safe through the spooky sleep-ing town, as far as her shanty. It had already taken on that horrible haunted look that comes to any dwelling just because people have stopped caring; we stumbled over trash in the yard that looters had left there, and the shanty door was swinging wide and groaning under a little breeze. She found her money safe, though, and then we saw her a short way on the

road to Maplestock, Rudi making her promise again to take to the woods before sunrise, and wade through Myler's Brook.

Maybe that moment with the bound guard was the first time I had thought of Rudi in words like "mad." And yet I loved him.

They made a wonder of it that grew every time Buck Winters told the story—that is, eight or ten times a day. Rudi had not only turned the town upside down, he'd shaken it, with just those few words whispered to Buck about the Old Religion. According to Buck, he *counted* five witches, and they made him climb the roof of the town hall, driving him with whips and pins. Given a week, good old Buck would have worked in a trip around the moon. But another wonder crowded us, at about the time people were getting tired of listening to Buck.

Two mornings after we sprang Mam Shiller, Dora Mallon was found strangled in an alley near the shanty where she had lived with her parents; Ethel Lyme had disappeared. They had been last seen together, the evening before, walking toward Main Street on the way to the church, where Father Rupert was to hold a prayer meeting for the guidance concerning their bewitchment and the prodigy of Mam Shiller's escape. They would have had to pass the opening of that alley.

Rumor and speculation fed the town's thunderstorm of terror. My own storm was worse. I lay awake all night after the discovery, maybe for fear that a nightmare would show me the truth, but I thought I knew it anyway. Rudi never came to work at the dairy that day, nor the next. Fourth of July Night was coming on, and to me that meant other nightmares.

The people did search for Ethel Lyme, but Nupal is a small town in a pocket of heavily wooded hills, several thousand acres of them. Search all the trails, gullies, thickets, bear dens? How?

The majority were convinced that Mam Shiller had murdered Dora, likely with supernatural help. Buck Winters, of course, was a wholehearted spokesman for that party. By then I'm sure he devoutly believed in his witches himself, all five of them. But some began remembering out loud that bland-looking Ethel Lyme possessed large hands and strong fingers, good at kneading bread dough. Those people also had it on firm authority that the Devil, given entrance to the body of a victim who (knowingly or not) invites him, can make that subject do just anything, even to murdering a close friend. Or it might be, they said (anxious to preserve good feeling), that Devil-occupied Ethel and Mam Shiller were out there working together. The upshot of all this earnest thinking was that nobody cared about scouring the woods even in a party of twenty with dogs.

After the third day of the so-called search for her, Dasi Stiles reported seeing Ethel Lyme chased by a big man with horns all the way to the beach of the Hudson Sea, where she grew fins on her arms and escaped him under water. Questioned eagerly by Father Rupert and other experts, Dasi smiled in her sweetest empty manner and said, why yes, sure, she dreamed it—thus making the public all the more certain of the vision's truth. There is no means, Confucius said, of persuading the human race not to believe whatever it chooses to.

Deacon Zavier announced to his respectable friends and clients: "You know, after all, there's got to be Some-thing Out There." Or maybe he said "Something Up There." The views of a man with that kind of income are invariably sound.

And speaking of Deacon Zavier, I learned on that third day after the murder that the deacon had told Sudler's Dairy Rudi wouldn't be coming to work any-more. He was going to stay home and read law with his loving father, and go to the University at Nuber in the autumn. This made no sense to me whatever, for Rudi hated the law as he did his father. Indeed I have never quite understood why Rudi, almost twenty, detesting his father and stepmother, hadn't struck out for himself long before. No opportunity to speak of in Nupal, but all Katskil was available. He could have found work anywhere and taken care of himself. What bound him? Not Jena Doren—I think girls to him were little more than creatures to be used. Love along with the hate? He had it too soft there at the Zavier house, three carriages, a butler, and all that bit? Oh, I do myself no good with these questions now, when Rudi has been dead for going-on thirty-five years.

After quitting work that third day I saw them walking together on Main Street, the deacon marching

as usual like a well-fed secretary of the Lord, Rudi slouching half a pace behind. Rudi gave me a quick headshake, so I only waved to him from across the street; the deacon didn't even nod—he had to keep his recognition uncon-taminated, for important people. I couldn't read Rudi, in that glimpse. Captive? Change of heart? Lying low? I couldn't read him at all.

In Rudi's place Sudler hired Jon Bright. Jon was rather big on muscle and short on brain, a nice kid. Like me he was a First Member of the coven and full of wonder at all Rudi's doings. Jon confirmed what I had already heard—none of our lot was getting through to Rudi. Jena Doren and Jo Makepeace went to the big house trying to see Rudi and were turned away by the acid old butler: Mister Rudi was busy with his law books and could not be disturbed, bang!

Jon and I met with a few of the others on the 3rd of July, a fret session. Without Rudi our courage softened; we might be dangerous witches, but nobody was about to take on the Zavier establishment, certainly not when the town was in a lather about Mam Shiller's escape, Dora's murder, Ethel Lyme's disappearance. We agreed to keep the meeting date the following night, and couldn't think beyond that. What we would do if Rudi didn't show we hadn't a notion.

I think we were all feeling—Jon and Adam Gantz and Jo and Anna Hiels and I—that we had been following a dream, maybe a childish one, into a country of experi-ence where dreams of that kind can't live. Or we had worn out our old fantasies and needed new.

Dora Mallon's body had been publicly viewed at the parlor of the Nupal Mourners' Guild. Father Rupet fancied himself a scholar of Old-Time lore—he called it Lost Knowledge and I think he sometimes tiptoed a little bit close to heresy—and somewhere he had hap-pened on the legend that if a murderer approached the corpse of his victim the dead flesh would betray him—wounds would open and bleed, and so on. Nothing like that happened. But we all did file past the bier, practically everyone in Nupal who could walk, includ-ing Rudi in his father's company. We all saw the green-purple bruises on Dora's young throat, and the terrible mouth. And we of the coven wanted out.

The Fourth of July Night arrived in weeping dark-ness, with black overcast and flurries of rain. The time of our appointment was midnight, and we all came there, all twelve of us, sneaking out of our houses and groping through the wet woods. Adam Ganz told me nobody had seen Rudi all day. Adam had brought a pail of coals, so we started a fire under the tree-cover in spite of the occasional drizzle. It reddened the clearing and showed us grimacing faces and lewd designs in the ancient bark of Mafairson's Oak, but we got little warmth from it because of a coldness inside us. We talked some, hush-voiced. Adam Ganz tended the fire, and Jo kept close to him for comfort. My mother, who was a cure-woman from Tappan, had taught me a little about telling time from the moon—any fool can read it from the sun—and I had passed on the tricks of it to Rudi. I knew it was drawing on close to midnight; if Rudi was anywhere about he would know it too. The actual moment would be told to us by the beautiful voice of Nupal's town bell two miles away across the pastures and the woods.

"He won't come," said Anna Hiels. "His Da's got him hog-tied. It's all crap anyway." She wouldn't have said that, or thought it, two days earlier.

"Maharba!" said Jena Doren, who never forgot any of the words that Rudi had taught her. "You think Deacon Zavier's got any power to stop Lucifer if the god is a-mind to—"

"Hush!" said Jon Bright. He had the sharpest hearing of any of us, but soon we all heard it, a dreadful small whimpering sound from deeper in the woods, like a hurt cat, or a child trying not to snuffle. It came closer by slow intervals. We couldn't speak or think; we were just suffering ears, and once or twice we heard a rus-ting and shifting of underbrush. We had turned our eyes away from our fire. We tried to pierce the wet forest blackness, and we searched for I don't know what—gold-green eyes, red eyes maybe, set high above ground and approaching like certain damnation. But we found nothing except the dark and the timorous-fluttering shadows of our own small fire. The whimper-ing ceased, and the noises of motion too, for the longest silence I have ever endured.

Then the bell. Twelve clear strokes, human and brave, reaching us through the rainy night—but they were also the signal for Lucifer to come to us; and he was coming.

He parted the bushes and stepped forth monstrous toward our fire, his masked head lifting high the

horns, black and inward-pointing, and he led a victim slowly to the Stone by a cowhide rope. His shoulders bulked huge and shaggy, and his hairy loins sprouted a prodigious phallus that glinted in the firelight now dead white, now scarlet.

Painted wood, of course. I knew that. I knew it was Rudi, just Rudi. I knew the horror on his head was nothing but a pair of woods-buffalo horns, likely, some wall-trophy of his father's strapped clumsily in place, and the shag at his shoulders and hips was simply hacked off from a buffalo rug, and the priapus probably carved and painted by himself—poor Rudi was never very good with his hands. I knew all that, and so did most of the others. Why, we knew it and we didn't know it. Proving that an image is a fraud will not necessarily convince the credulous that the original of the likeness does not exist, and in this they follow a fair logic.

Lucifer's victim was Ethel Lyme, what was left of her after three days of captivity and isolation without food or drink. We learned afterward that she had spent that time tied and gagged in Mam Shiller's shanty where no one dared go after Mam Shiller's supernatural liberation. There Ethel had stayed in misery, probably remembering the sight of her friend's murder, until Lucifer came horned and masked and shaggy to lead her to the Stone of Sacrifice. As for Lucifer, why, he had been detained at home or he might not have left her so, detained to read law books until he managed his escape on the Fourth of July Night. Did Lucifer's father suspect who he was?—it's possible. I never held any conversation with Deacon Zavier, never desired any.

Ethel's wits were totally confused, gone with shock. She was so dirty and tear-stained, the remnant of her dress so ruined, that without the birthmark we might not even have recognized her—pinched too, somehow fallen in on herself. She was reduced to the mindless whimpering we had heard, and she lurched ahead obediently as Lucifer tugged the rope that was tied around her hands.

Jo Makepeace said: "No!" He ran to Ethel and struggled at the cowhide binding her hands. The god Lucifer roared at him in amazed fury and swung his black sharp horns, and I think little Jo, fighting the cowhide rope with no help from witless Ethel, was not even aware of it. He knew well enough who and what Lucifer was, by then.

I can't guess how much further we might have let it go, but for Jo Makepeace. As it was, his single-handed act of honest outrage got through to us, shamed us out of witchcraft for good. Whatever meanness or foolish wickedness we might stumble into in later times, it wouldn't be that. And then—no blame to Jo, who took no part in it—we went too far the other way in reaction: savages we were, and one brave kid couldn't change that.

The story's really over. I'll write the end as quickly as I can.

Adam Ganz snatched the other end of the rope out of Lucifer's grasp and shouted to us: "Hell, it's nothing but Rudi dressed up! Who's afraid of him?" I heard Jo say, clear and urgent: "Ethel, Ethel! Wake up! We're going to take you home." Then he and Adam were hurrying away with her—as they passed beyond the firelight I saw Adam scoop her up in his arms—and paying no heed to us, and certainly none to the mighty god Lucifer, who just stood there.

Anna Hiels cried: "*He* killed Dora Mallon! Look you, who else?"

And someone else yelled: "Stone him! *Stone him!*"

Someone else?—why it was Jena Doren who screamed that, over and over. And still *I* think that in her own way she never did stop loving him: it was only the other side of the mirror. Maybe I still loved him too, even knowing what he had done to Dora Mallon, what he had done and would have done to Ethel Lyme. And I know (in my age, here in the cellars) that it is a great human folly to love the image, the aura of glamor that may hang about someone, instead of searching for the human self that may be someone altogether different from the dream.

Jena Doren yelled that; Piet Horver was the first to obey her, sweeping up a rock in his big fist and howling: "This in Christ's name! This for a murderer! This in Abraham's name!"

He hurled it true. It struck and knocked away the horns of Lucifer, who was Lucifer no more but only terrified Rudi, who couldn't understand what had happened, who called urgent things to us that our shouting drowned, and who then made the fearful mistake of running.

There were stones in all our hands. I saw Jena's arm swing. Hate and love were in us. Most of all

there was fear, finding its voice in Jena's screaming. Rudi was lost, he was down.

I try to think there was love in me, or at least pity along with my panic terror, my resentment, my mind-less need to make an end, when the stone left my own hand. For he saw me throw it, and after that blow he moved no longer.

Piet Horver became a priest, a good one I suppose, a missionary to the Salloren savages of the north country. Ethel won back her wits in a year or so, such as they were, and married a farmer. Jena married too—I think; it would have been after I left Nupal. Dear Jo Makepeace—ah, he grew up awhile, and went to the University, and became a poet, and died young.