

The Horror from the Middle Span

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August Derleth

Horror from the Middle Span, The (1967)

I

The Bishop Manuscript was found by authorities investigating the disappearance of Ambrose Bishop. It was enclosed in a bottle evidently thrown wide into the woods at the rear of the burning house. It is still being held in the office of the sheriff in Arkham, Massachusetts.

It was on my seventh day out of London that I reached the place in America to which my ancestors had come from England over two centuries before. It lay in the heart of wild, lonely country above Dunwich, Massachusetts, along the upper reaches of the Miskatonic River, and well away here even from the brier-bordered stone walls that line so much of the road away from the Aylesbury Pike — a country of great old trees, pressed darkly together, many brambles, and here and there — though rarely seen for the underbrush grown up about them — the ruins of a dwelling abandoned long ago. I might easily have missed the place, for the lane leading to the house — now totally concealed by trees and bushes — was long overgrown, but the remains of a stone pillar next to the road still bore the last four letters of Bishop, and thus I knew I had reached my goal, from which my great-uncle Septimus Bishop had vanished in his middle years, almost two decades before. I fought my way up the lane, through brier and bramble, over fallen limbs of the trees that lined it, up the slope for half a mile.

The house stood on the side of a hill — squat, though it was of two storeys, and hybrid in construction, being partly of stone, and partly of wood that had once, long ago, been painted white, but had now lost all but traces of its original color and had long since reverted to its natural state. I observed its most unusual aspect at once — unlike the other houses I had espied along the road wholly or partly in ruins, it stood intact, stone upon stone, and not a window-pane broken, though the weather had had its way with the wood of its superstructure, particularly the circular cupola that crowned it, in which I could detect several apertures surrounded by what was clearly rotten wood.

The door stood ajar, but the pillard verandah opening outward from it had protected the interior from the worst of the weather. Moreover, though dust lay thickly inside, it was quickly apparent that nothing had disturbed the interior — no vandal had laid hands upon so much as a stick of furniture, nor disturbed the still open book on the desk in the study, though mildew was everywhere, and the house smelled of damp and mustiness, which perhaps no amount of airing out would dissipate, and no intensiveness in cleaning would entirely eradicate.

Nevertheless, I undertook to try, a decision that made necessary a return journey to Dunwich; so I made my way back to the main road — though that road was little more than a rutted lane — where I had left the car I had rented in New York, and drove back to Dunwich, a squalid hamlet crouched between the dark waters of the Miskatonic and the brooding mass of Round Mountain, which seemed eternally to shadow the village. There I went to the only general store the settlement offered, one that occupied an abandoned church and boasted the proprietorship of one Tobias Whateley.

Though I had had some experience with the rustics of remote comers of the earth, I was hardly prepared for my reception by the bearded, gaunt-faced old man who advanced to wait upon me, and who produced almost all the articles I wanted without a word, until I had finished and paid him.

Then he looked me full in the face for the first time. “Ye’ll be a stranger here?”

“I — yes,” I said. “Come from England. But I once had relatives here. Name of Bishop.”

“Bishop,” he said in a voice that had fallen to a whisper. “Yew said ‘Bishop’?” Then, as if to reassure himself of something beyond my knowledge, he added in a stronger voice, “There be Bishops still hereabouts. Yew’ll likely belong to them?”

“Not likely,” I said. “My uncle was Septimus Bishop.”

At mention of the name, Whateley went a shade paler than his normal pallor. Then he made a move to sweep the articles I had bought back from

the counter.

“No, you don’t,” I said. “I paid you for these things.”

“Ye kin have ye’re money back,” he said. “I don’t want truck with any kin o’ Septimus Bishop’s.”

I had little trouble taking from him the articles I had bought for he had no strength in his lean arms. He backed away from the counter and stood over against the shelves behind.

“Ye’ll not be goin’ to that house?” he asked, again in a whisper, and with some alarm manifest on his old face.

“There’s nobody to stop me,” I said.

“Ain’t nobody from Dunwich’d set foot on that ground — let alone the house,” he said fervently.

“Why?” I demanded.

“Don’t yew know?” he asked.

“If I did, I wouldn’t ask. All I know is that my great-uncle disappeared from his home nineteen years ago, and I’m here to lay claim to his property. Wherever he is, he must be dead by now.”

“He was dead then,” said the proprietor, again in little more than a whisper. “Kilt.”

“Who killed him?”

“The people. Them as lived all around. Him and his.”

“My great-uncle lived alone.”

I had begun to tire of this yokel’s fears and superstitions, and at his manifest lack of knowledge about Great-uncle Septimus, I felt justified in concluding that his attitude represented the typical response of the illiterate and

ignorant to knowledge and education, such as my great-uncle Septimus had possessed.

Whateley had begun to mumble "... In the night... buried him and that other alive... cursed 'em... an' their houses fell an' they died one after t' other..."

On this disagreeable note I left the store, determined to do any further shopping I needed to do in Arkham. Yet the aged proprietor's words had stirred sufficient doubt to impel me forthwith to drive to Arkham, there to consult the files of the Arkham Advertiser — an impulse that was but ill-rewarded, for the entire month of June carried but two stories date-lined Dunwich — the one concerning Septimus —

"Nothing has been heard of Septimus Bishop, who apparently vanished from his home in the country above Dunwich ten days ago. Mr. Bishop was a recluse and a bachelor, to whom the folk of Dunwich were in the habit of ascribing many superstitious abilities, calling him at various times, a 'healer' and a 'warlock.' Mr. Bishop was a tall, spare man, aged about 57 at the time of his disappearance."

— and the other an amusing account of the strengthening of one of the piers, that supported the middle span of a disused bridge over the Miskatonic above Dunwich, evidently by private initiative, since the county in charge stoutly denied — refuting the voluble criticism directed at it for repairing a bridge no longer in use — having had anything to do with it.

Nevertheless, I reflected on my return drive toward and beyond Dunwich that the superstitions of the natives doubtless accounted for the attitude of Tobias Whateley, who only reflected the general beliefs, however laughable they might be to someone decently educated in this scientific age, when all such ridiculous concepts as healing by the laying on of hands or any other method and of witchcraft were known to be but the product of ignorance. My great-uncle Septimus had been educated at Harvard, and was known to the English branch of the Bishop family as a bookish man, profoundly inimical to any form of superstition, surely. It was dusk when I returned to the old Bishop place. My great-uncle had evidently never laid in electricity or gas, but there were both candles and kerosene lamps — some of the latter

still containing kerosene. I lit one of the lamps and made myself a frugal meal, after which I cleared a place in the study where I could lie down without too much discomfort, and readily fell asleep.

II

In the morning I set about tidying up the place, though there was little that could be done about the mildewed books in my great-uncle's library, other than to get a roaring fire going in the fireplace — for all that it was midsummer and there was no lack of warmth — and so drying out this area of the house.

In time I had dusted and swept the lower floor — which consisted of the study, a bedroom adjacent, a small kitchen, a pantry, and a room that was obviously intended as a dining-room but clearly used for more, for mounds of books and papers indicated some kind of storage. I mounted to the second storey, but before beginning work there, I continued to the cupola, by way of a narrow stairs which permitted only one person at a time to move along it.

The cupola proved to be somewhat larger than I had thought it, with ample room for a man to stand and move about without impediment. It had patently been used for astronomical observation, for there was a telescope there, and the floor, for some reason I could not fathom, was covered with all manner of designs, in which circles, pentacles, and stars predominated, and there were, quaintly, in addition to texts on astronomy, some on astrology and divination, all quite old, one dating to 1623, some of them in German, but the majority in Latin, which certainly were the property of my great-uncle, though I could not conceive of any use to which he could put them. There was, in addition to a sky-light on the north, an opening through which the telescope could be thrust, once its covering was removed.

This cupola was surprisingly free of dust and lint, for all that there were openings in its wall, where some of the wood had rotted away, as I had observed on my approach to the house; at these openings there was some manifest water damage from rain and snow, but none of this was beyond repair, and it seemed to me — if I did ultimately conclude to make my home here for even a short time — that such repair could be accomplished with but comparatively little cost.

I had yet, however, to ascertain the condition of the foundation of the house; and, leaving the second storey — which consisted, I saw in a brief examination, of but two bedrooms, two closets, and a store-room, only one bedroom being furnished and looking as if it had never been put to the use for which it was intended — I descended again to the ground floor and made my way to the cellar below through the door that opened to it off the kitchen.

Somewhat to my surprise I saw by the light of the lamp I carried that the floor of the cellar, which extended to only about half of the area covered by the house, was of laid brick, while the walls were of limestone all of a foot and a half thick, as the window embrasures showed. I had expected a floor of earth, as was commonly to be found in the cellars of old houses; but on closer examination, I concluded that the brick had been laid considerably after the building of the house, quite probably by my great-uncle Septimus.

In this floor, at opposite corners, there were two square trapdoors with large iron rings in them, the one, I judged by the evidence of a drainage pipe leading from the side of the wall to it, and the presence of a pump rising out of it, to cover a cistern. The other, however, gave no indication of its purpose, though I assumed that it might cover a fruit or root cellar, and went over confidently to lift it and prove my assumption correct.

Much to my astonishment, however, there was disclosed a succession of brick steps leading downward — certainly not, as the rays of the lamp revealed when I thrust it into the stair-well — any kind of cellar, but rather a passageway of some sort, into which I promptly climbed to find myself in a tunnel leading away from the house and, as nearly as I could determine, into the hill and away from the house along the slope to the northwest. I walked, crouching, a little way along this tunnel, following a turn, and then hesitated, unsure of the tunnel's purpose.

I was, however, reasonably certain that the tunnel had been constructed by my great-uncle, and was prepared to turn back when I caught sight of something gleaming only a little way ahead, and went forward, only to find myself gazing down at yet another trapdoor. This too I opened, and looked down into a large circular room, reached by seven brick steps.

I could not forbear descending into it, and, holding the lamp high, looking around. A brick floor had been laid here, as well, and some curious structures had been erected in it — something very much like an altar, of stone, for one, and benches, also of stone. And on the floor there were crude drawings very similar to those in the cupola of the house; though I could readily explain those astronomical designs in the cupola, which was open to the skies, I found it impossible to adduce any reason for their presence here.

There was, too, yet another opening into the floor before the altar. The great iron ring tempted me, but for some reason caution held me back from lifting the trapdoor. I went only close enough to detect a draft that indicated the circulation of air and suggested another opening to the outside below this subterranean chamber. Then I retreated to the passageway above, and, instead of returning to the house, pressed on.

In perhaps three quarters of a mile I came to a great wooden door, barred on the inside. I put down the lamp and lifted the bar. Opening the door, I found myself looking into a tangle of growth that effectively concealed the opening into the tunnel from anyone outside. I pushed through this tangle sufficiently to find myself looking down the hill toward the countryside below, where I could see the Miskatonic some distance away, and a stone bridge across it — but nowhere a dwelling of any kind, only the ruins of what had once been isolated farms. For a long minute I stood looking out upon that prospect; then I returned the way I had come, pondering the reason for being of the elaborate tunnel and the room below it — and whatever lay below that; for there was no key to their use, save only, remotely, as a secret way out of the house, if any were needed.

Once back in the house, I abandoned the cleaning of the second storey to another day, and set myself to bring about some order in the study, which, with papers on the desk and the floor around it, and the chair hurriedly pushed back, bore the aspects of having been precisely so left at my great-uncle's departure, as if he had been suddenly summoned and had gone straightaway, and had then never returned to right the room.

I had always understood that Great-uncle Septimus Bishop was a man of independent means, and that he had been engaged in some kind of scholarly research. Astronomy perhaps — perhaps even in its relation to astrology,

however unlikely that seemed. If only he had corresponded freely with those of his brothers who remained in England or if he had kept up some kind of diary or journal or daybook; but there was nothing of that kind in his desk or among the papers there, and the papers themselves were concerned with abstruse matters, filled with many diagrams and drawings, which I took to be related to geometry since they were all angles and curves and represented nothing familiar to me; and such lettering as was set down on them was little more than gibberish, since it was not in English but in some language too ancient to be known to me, though I could have read anything in Latin and in half a dozen other languages still spoken on the Continent.

But there were some letters, carefully tied together, and, after a light lunch of cheese and bread and coffee, I undertook to look into them. The very first of these letters amazed me. It was headed “Starry Wisdom” and bore no address. Written in a broad-pointed pen and in a flourishing hand, it read:

“Dear Brother Bishop,

“In the Name of Azathoth, by the sign of the Shining Trapezohedron, all things will be known to you when the Haunter of Dark is summoned. There must be no light, but He who comes by darkness goes unseen and flees the light. All the secrets of Heaven and Hell will be made known. All the mysteries of worlds unknown to Earth will be yours.

“Be patient. Despite many setbacks, we flourish still, however secretly, here in Providence.”

The signature was not decipherable, but I thought it read “Asenath Bowen” or “Brown.” This first astonishing letter set the tone for almost all the rest. They were almost to a letter the most esoteric communications, dealing with mystical matters beyond my ken — and also beyond that of any modern man, belonging as these matters did to an age of superstition all but lost since the Dark Ages, and what my great-uncle had to do with such

matters — unless, indeed, he were studying the survival of superstitious rites and practices in his time — I could not estimate.

I read them one after another. My great-uncle was hailed in the name of Great Cthulhu, of Hastur the Unspeakable, of Shub-Niggurath, of Belial and Beelzebub, and many another. My great-uncle seemed to have been in correspondence with every kind of quack and mountebank, with self-professed wizards and renegade priests alike. There was one quasi-scholarly letter, however, that was unlike the others. It was written in a difficult script, though the signature — Wilbur Whateley — was easily read, and the date, January 17, 1928, as well as the place of origin — nearby Dunwich — offered me no difficulty. The letter itself, once deciphered, was arresting.

“Dear Mr. Bishop.

“Yes, by the Dho formula it is possible to see the inner city at the magnetic poles. I have seen it, and hope soon to go there. When the earth is cleared off. When you come to Dunwich, come to the farm, and I will say the Dho formula for you. And the Dho-Hna. And tell you the angles of the planes and the formulas between the Yr and the Nhhngr.

“They from the air cannot help without human blood. They take body from it, as you know. As you, too, will be able to do if you are destroyed other than by the Sign. There are those hereabouts who know the Sign and its power. Do not speak idly. Guard your tongue, even at the Sabbat.

“I saw you there — and what walks with you in the guise of a woman. But by the sight given me by those I had summoned I saw it in its true form, which you must have seen; so I guess some day you may look upon what I can call forth in my own image, and it may not affright you.

“I am yours in the Name of Him Who Is Not To Be Named.”

Certainly the writer must have belonged to the same family as Tobias, who so shunned this house. Small wonder, then, at the fellow's fear and superstition; he must have had some first hand acquaintance with it in more tangible form than my great-uncle could have offered him. And if Great-uncle Septimus had been friendly with Wilbur Whateley, it was not surprising that another Whateley might suspect him, too, of being what Wilbur was. Whatever that was. But how to explain that friendship? Clearly, there were many things about my great-uncle I did not know.

I tied the letters up again and put them back where I had found them. I turned next to an envelope of newspaper clippings — all, I took it, recognizing the typeface, from the Arkham Advertiser, and found them no less puzzling than the letters, for they were accounts of mysterious disappearances in the Dunwich and Arkham region, principally of children and young adults — evidently just such as my great-uncle Septimus had ultimately fallen victim to. There was one clipping that concerned the fury of the local inhabitants and their suspicion of one of their neighbors, who was unnamed, as the author of the disappearances; and their threatening to take matters into their own hands, the local constabulary having failed them. Perhaps my great-uncle had interested himself in solving the disappearances.

I put these, too, away, and sat for some time pondering what I had read, disquieted by something recalled from Wilbur Whateley's letter. "I saw you there — and what walks with you in the guise of a woman." And I remembered how Tobias Whateley had referred to my great-uncle — "Him and his." Slain. Perhaps the superstitious natives had blamed Great-uncle Septimus for the disappearances and had indeed taken vengeance on him.

Abruptly I felt the need to escape the house for a little while. It was now mid-afternoon, and the need of fresh air after so long in the musty house was strong. So I walked outside, and again to the road, and turned away from Dunwich, almost as if impelled to do so, curious to know what the country beyond the Bishop house was like, and certain that the view I had seen from the mouth of the tunnel on the side of the hill lay in this general direction.

I expected that country to be wild, and indeed it was. The road carried through it, obviously little used, perhaps chiefly by the rural mailman. Trees and shrubbery pressed upon the road from both verges, and from time to time the hills loomed over on the one side, for on the other was the valley of the Miskatonic, drawing in now parallel to the road, then again swinging wide away from it. The land was utterly deserted, though there were fields that were clearly being worked, for grain flourished there for those non-resident farmers who came in to work it. There were no houses, only ruins or abandoned buildings; there were no cattle; there was nothing but the road to point to human habitation of recent date, for the road led somewhere, and presumably to another place where people lived.

It was at a point some distance from the river that I came upon a side road that wound away to the right. A leaning sign-post identified it as Crary Road, and an ancient barrier across it — itself all overgrown — marked it as “Closed,” with another sign tacked below it that read: “Bridge out.” It was this latter that inclined me to take the road; so I walked in along it, struggling through shrubbery and brambles for a distance of a little over half a mile, and thus came upon the Miskatonic where a stone bridge had once carried traffic across.

The bridge was very old, and only the middle span stood, supported by two stone piers, one of them thickened with a large outcropping of concrete, upon which whoever had constructed it had etched a large five-pointed star in the center of which was embedded a stone of the same general shape, though very small by comparison with the outline. The river had worn away both bridge-heads and carried down into it a span from either end, leaving the middle span to stand as a symbol of the civilization that had once flourished in this valley and had since passed away. It occurred to me that perhaps this was the very bridge that had been strengthened, though no longer used, as recorded in the Arkham Advertiser.

Strangely, the bridge — or what was left of it — exercised a curious attraction for me, though its architecture was crude; it was a purely utilitarian structure, and had never been built as an aesthetic object; yet, like so many old things, it had now the attraction of its great age, though the concrete reinforcement detracted from it in every way, making a great

blister or bulge up from the foundation almost to the top. Indeed, studying it, I could not understand how it could in fact serve as a reinforcement of the pier, though both piers were clearly very old and crumbling, and would not stand for long, what with the action of the water at their base. The Miskatonic here was seemingly not very deep, but it had a respectable width that surrounded both piers supporting the middle span.

I stood gazing at the structure, trying to estimate its age, until the sun darkened suddenly, and, turning, I saw that great mounds of cumulonimbus clouds were pushing up the west and southwest, presaging rain; then I left the ruin of the bridge and went back to the house that had been the home of my great-uncle Septimus Bishop.

It was well that I did so, for the storm broke within the hour, and was succeeded by another and another; and all night the thunder raged and the lightning flared and the rain came down in torrents hour after hour, cascading off the roof, running down the slop in scores of rills and freshets for all the hours of darkness.

III

Perhaps it was only natural that in the fresh, rain-washed morning, I should think again of the bridge. Perhaps it was, instead, a compulsion arising from some source unknown to me. The rain had now been done for three hours; the rills and freshets had dwindled to little trickles; the roof was drying under the morning sun, and in another hour the shrubbery and the grasses too would once again be dry.

At noon, filled with a sense of adventurous expectancy, I went to look at the old bridge. Without knowing quite why, I expected change, and I found it — for the span was gone, the very piers had crumbled, and even the great concrete reinforcement was sundered and seared — obviously struck by lightning, a force which, coupled with the raging torrent the Miskatonic must have been in the night (for even now it was high, swollen, brown with silt; and its banks showed that in the night it had been higher by over two feet), had succeeded in bringing to final ruin the ancient bridge that had once carried men and women and children across the river into the now deserted valley on the far side.

Indeed, the stones that had made up the piers had been carried well down river and flung up along the shores; only the concrete reinforcement, riven and broken, lay at the site of the middle span. It was while I followed with my eyes the path of the stream and the disposition of the stones that I caught sight of something white lying on the near bank, not far up out of the water. I made my way down to it, and came upon something I had not expected to see.

Bones. Whitened bones, long immersed in the water perhaps, and now cast up by the torrent. Perhaps some farmer's cow, drowned long ago. But the thought had hardly entered my mind before I discarded it, for the bones upon which I now looked were at least in part human, and now I saw, looking out from among them, a human skull.

But not all were human, for there were some among them that bore no resemblance to any bones I ever saw — long whips of bones, flexible by the look of them, as of some creature but half formed, all intertwined with the human bones, so that there was hardly any definition of them. They were bones that demanded burial; but, of course, they could not be buried without notification to the proper authorities.

I looked around for something in which to carry them, and my eye fell upon some coarse sacking, also cast up by the Miskatonic. So I walked down and took it up, wet though it still was, and brought it back and spread it out beside the bones. Then I picked them up — at first all intertwined as they were, by the handful; and then one by one to the last finger-bone — and having finished, gathered them up in the sacking by tying the four corners of it together, and in that fashion carried them back to the house, and took them down into the cellar until I could take them into Dunwich later in the day, and perhaps to Arkhani and the county seat, thinking then that I had ought to have resisted the impulse to gather them up, and left them where I had found them, which no doubt the authorities would have preferred.

I come now to that portion of my account which, by any standard, is incredible. I have said that I took the bones directly to the cellar; now, there was no reason why I could not have deposited them on the verandah or even in the study; yet without question I took them to the cellar, and there I left them while I went back to the ground floor to prepare and eat the lunch I had not troubled to eat before I walked to the old bridge. When I had finished my repast, I determined to take the bones from the river to the proper authorities, and went back down into the cellar to fetch them.

Judge my baffled astonishment to find, when I lifted the sacking, which lay just as I had left it, to find it empty. The bones were gone. I could not believe the evidence of my own senses. I returned to the ground floor, lit a lamp, and carried it into the cellar, which I proceeded to search from wall to wall. It was futile. Nothing was changed in the cellar since first I had looked into it — the windows had not been touched, for the same cobwebs still covered them — and, as far as I could see, the trapdoor leading to the tunnel had not been lifted. Yet the bones were irrevocably gone.

I returned to the study, bewildered, beginning to doubt that I had in fact found and carried home any bones. But indeed I had! As I sat trying to resolve my perplexity, one possible — if far-fetched — solution to the mystery occurred to me. Perhaps the bones had not been as firm as I had thought them; perhaps exposure to the air had reduced them to dust. But in that case surely that dust would have been in evidence. And the sacking was clean, free of the white detritus to which the bones would have been reduced.

Manifestly, I could not go to the authorities with such a tale, for certainly they would have looked upon me as a madman. But there was nothing to prevent my making inquiries, and, accordingly, I drove into Dunwich. Perversely, I went first into Whateley's store.

At sight of me, Tobias glowered, "Wun't sell yew nothin'," he said before I had had a chance to speak, and, to another customer — a slovenly old fellow — he said pointedly, "This here's thet Bishop!" which intelligence caused the old man to sidle quickly out the door.

"I came to ask a question," I said.

"Ask it."

"Is there a cemetery along the Miskatonic up a piece from that old bridge above my place?"

"Dun't know uv any. Why?" he asked suspiciously.

"I can't tell you," I said. "Except to say I found something that made me think so."

The proprietor's eyes narrowed. He bit at his lower lip. Then his sallow face lost the little color it had. "Bones," he whispered. "Yew found some bones!"

"I didn't say so," I answered.

"Where'd yew find 'em?" he demanded in an urgent voice.

I spread my hands. "I have no bones," I said, and walked out of the store.

Looking back as I walked up toward the rectory of a little church I had seen on a side street, I saw that Whateley had closed his store and was hurrying along the main street of Dunwich, evidently to spread the suspicion he had voiced.

The name of the Baptist minister, according to his mailbox, was Abraham Dunning, and he was at home — a short, rotund man, rosy-cheeked and with spectacles on his nose. He appeared to be in his middle sixties, and, gratifyingly, my name obviously meant nothing to him. He invited me into his spare parlor, which evidently served as his office.

I explained that I had come to make inquiries of him.

“Pray do so, Mr. Bishop,” he invited.

“Tell me, Reverend Dunning, have you ever heard of warlocks hereabouts?”

He tented his fingers and leaned back. An indulgent smile crossed his face. “Ah, Mr. Bishop, these people are a superstitious lot. Many of them do indeed believe in witches and warlocks and all manner of things from outside, particularly since the events of 1928, when Wilbur Whateley and the thing that was his twin brother died. Whateley fancied himself a wizard and kept talking about what he ‘called down’ from the air — but of course, it was only his brother — horribly misshapen through some accident of birth, I suppose, though the accounts given me are too garbled for me to be sure.”

“Did you know my late great-uncle, Septimus Bishop?”

He shook his head. “He was before my time. I do have a Bishop family in my charge, but I rather think they are a different branch. Ill-educated. And there is no facial resemblance.”

I assured him that we were not related. It was clear, however, that he knew nothing that would be of any assistance to me; so I took my departure as soon as I decently could, for all that the Reverend Dunning was patently anxious for the company of an educated man, not commonly found in Dunwich and its environs, I gathered.

I despaired of learning anything in Dunwich; so I made my way back to the house, where I could not prevent myself from descending once more to the cellar to make certain anew that the bones I had brought home were gone. And, of course, they were. And not even rats could have carried them, one by one, past the door of the study and out of the house without my having seen them.

But the suggestion of rats set in mind a new train of thought. Acting on it, I went again into the cellar with the lamp and searched carefully for any opening such as rats might use, still seeking some natural explanation for the disappearance of the bones.

There was none.

I resigned myself to their vanishing, and spent the remainder of that day trying to keep my mind upon something else.

But that night I was troubled by dreams — dreams in which I saw the bones I had brought reassemble themselves into a skeleton — and the skeleton clothe itself in flesh — and the whiplike bones grow into something not of this world that constantly changed shape, and was once a thing of utter horror and then a large black cat, once a tentacled monster and then a lissome naked woman, once a giant sow and then a lean bitch running at its master's side; and, waking, I lay hearing distant sounds I could not identify — a strange snuffling and a slobbering that seemed to rise from far below, from deep in the earth, a rending and grinding that suggested something dreadful and malign.

I rose to shake myself free of dream and hallucination, and walked the house in the dark, pausing now and then to gaze out into the moonlight night, until hallucination troubled me even there, for I thought I saw at the edge of the close-pressing wood the long lean figure of a man together with a thing of abominable shape that loped at his side — seen so for but a few minutes before both vanished into the dark wood which the moonlight did not penetrate. If ever I wished for the guiding wisdom of my great-uncle Septimus, it was then; for the hallucination was even more vivid than the dream, with which I had done now, as I had with the sounds I had fancied I heard from below.

Nevertheless, in the clear light of day that dawned soon enough, I was persuaded to descend into the cellar, and enter the tunnel with the lamp, and go on to the subterranean room — compelled to do so by some force I did not understand and could not withstand. At the entrance to the underground room I thought that the earth was disturbed by more than my footprints at my earlier visit, disturbed not only by alien prints, but by the marks as of something dragged there from the direction of the door in the hillside, and I was apprehensive when I went down into that room. But I need not have been, for there was no one there.

I stood with lamp held high and looked about. All was unchanged — stone benches, brick floor, altar — and yet... There was a stain, upon the altar, a great dark stain I could not remember having seen before. Slowly, reluctantly, I moved forward, though I had no will or inclination to do so, until the lamplight disclosed it — freshly wet and gleaming — undeniably a pool of blood.

And I saw now, for the first time seeing the altar close, that there were other and far older stains, dark, too, and still faintly red, that must have been blood spilled there a long time ago.

Badly shaken, I fled the cellar, ran along the tunnel, and blundered up into the cellar immediately below the house. And there I stood to catch my breath until I heard a sound of footsteps above, and made my cautious way up to the ground floor.

The steps had seemed to come from the study. I blew out the lamp, for the light from outside the house, despite the massed trees, was ample, and I made my way to the study.

There sat a man, lean of face, saturnine of countenance, his tall body concealed by a cloak, his eyes like fire fixed upon me.

“You are clearly a Bishop,” he said. “But which one?”

“Ambrose,” I said, when I found my voice. “Son of William, grandson of Peter. Come to see about the property of my great-uncle Septimus. And you?”

“I have been hidden away a long time. Nephew, I am your great-uncle Septimus.”

Something stirred behind him, and looked out from behind his chair, though he pulled out his cloak as if to hide what was there — a squamous thing with the face of a lovely woman.

I fainted dead away.

As I was coming around to consciousness again, I fancied he stood near me and said to someone, “We shall have to give him a little more time.”

Opening my eyes fearfully, I looked to where he had been.

There was no one there.

IV

Four days later the first issue of the Arkham Advertiser was delivered to me, left under a stone on top of what remained of the pillar at the roadside. I had entered a six-month subscription when I had taken the opportunity of studying its files for mention of my great-uncle. I resisted my initial impulse to discard it, for I had subscribed merely as a courtesy in return for the privilege accorded me, and carried it into the house.

Though I had no intention of reading it, a two-column heading caught my eye. Dunwich Disappearances Resume. Somewhat apprehensively, I read the story below.

“Seth Frye, 18, employed at the Howard Cole farm immediately north of Dunwich, has been reported missing. He was last seen three nights ago walking out of Dunwich on his way home. This is the second disappearance in the Dunwich area in as many days. Harold Sawyer, 20, vanished from the outskirts of Dunwich without trace two days ago. Sheriff John Houghton and his deputies are searching the area, but as yet report no clue. Neither young man had any known reason to disappear voluntarily, and foul play is suspected.

“It will be remembered by older readers that a rash of similar disappearances took place over twenty years ago, culminating in the vanishing of Septimus Bishop in the summer of 1929.

“The Dunwich area is a backwater which has a curious reputation and has figured from time to time in the news, usually in a strange way, ever since the mysterious Whateley affair of 1928...”

I lowered the paper, overcome with the knowledge that events were shaping toward only one explanation, one I was loath even now to accept. It was then that I determined to set down everything that had occurred, in the hope of seeing everything that had happened in its proper relation, one, event to another, for those events were hopelessly garbled in my mind, and I kept

thinking of the bones that had disappeared from the cellar and of Wilbur Whateley's words in his letter to my great-uncle — "They from the air cannot help without human blood. They take body from it... as you, too, will be able to do..." and of Great-uncle Septimus's mysterious return and his equally mysterious vanishing again, for there had been no sign of him since the sight I had had of him in the study.

I threw the paper to the floor, my mind a whirl with the lore of warlocks and familiars, the power of running water to contain ghost and witches and all such superstitious manifestations, my reason embattled, besieged. Impelled by a wild curiosity to learn more, I ran from the house; unmindful of the brambles in my path, I pushed through the lane to the car, and drove down the road to Dunwich.

I had hardly set foot into Tobias Whateley's shop before he confronted me, eyes ablaze.

"Git aout! I wun't wait on yew," he cried fiercely. "Yew done it!"

I found it impossible to break into his anger.

"Git aout of taown, afore it happens again. We done it once — we kin do it again. I known thet boy, Seth, like I known my own. Yew done it — yew cursed Bishops!"

I backed away from his naked hatred, and saw, as I retreated to my car, the way in which other inhabitants of Dunwich grouped along the street staring at me with unconcealed loathing.

I got into the car and drove back out of Dunwich, knowing for the first time a spreading fear of the unknown against which all rationalization was powerless.

And once back at the Bishop house, I lit the lamp and descended to the cellar. I entered the tunnel and walked along it to the trapdoor into the subterranean room. I lifted it, and such a charnel odor rose up from it — perhaps from that other opening I had never looked into below, for the room, as much as could be seen in the glow from my lamp, was unchanged

from the last time I had looked into it — that I could not bring myself to descend.

I dropped the trapdoor and fled back the way I had come.

Against all reason, I knew now what horror I had unwittingly loosed upon the countryside — I and the blind forces of nature — the horror from the middle span.

*

Later, Great-uncle Septimus has just awakened me from my dream-haunted sleep, a firm hand on my shoulder. I opened my eyes to see him dimly in the dark, and behind him the white, unclothed body of a long-haired woman, whose eyes shone as if with fire.

“Nephew, we are in danger,” said my great-uncle. “Come.”

He and his companion turned and left the study.

I swung off the couch where I had fallen asleep fully dressed to set these last words to the account I have written.

Outside, I can see the flickering of many torches. I know who is there at the woods’ edge — the hateful inhabitants of Dunwich and the country around — I know what they mean to do.

Great-uncle Septimus and his companion are waiting for me in the tunnel. There is no other course for me.

If only they do not know of the door in the hillside... .

*

The Bishop manuscript ends at this point.

By way of coincidence, seekers after curiosa will find in the inside pages of the Arkham Advertiser dated eleven days after the destruction by fire of the old Bishop house, this paragraph:

“The Dunwichers have been at it again.

“Hard upon the disappearance of Ambrose Bishop, the Dunwichers have been building again. The old Crary Road bridge, which was recently completely destroyed during a flash flood on the Miskatonic, apparently holds some charm for the Dunwichers, who have quietly rebuilt one of the central piers in concrete, and crowned it with what old-timers in the area call ‘the Elder Sign.’ No one in Dunwich, approached by our reporter, would admit any knowledge of the old bridge...”