

What Dark God?

by Brian Lumley, 1937–

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„...*Summanus*—whatever power he may be...“
—Ovid’s *Fasti*

The Tuscan Rituals! Now where had I heard of such a book or books before? Certainly very rare... Copy in the British Museum? Perhaps! Then what on earth were these fellows doing with a copy?

And such a strange bunch of blokes at that.

Only a few minutes earlier I had boarded the train at Bingham. It was quite crowded for a night train and the boozy, garrulous, and vociferous „Jock“ who had boarded it directly in front of me had been much upset by the fact that all the compartments seemed to be fully occupied.

„Och, they bleddy British trains,“ he had drunkenly grumbled, „either a‘wiz emp’y or a‘wiz fool. No orgnization whatsayever—ye no agree, ye sassenach?“ He had elbowed me in the ribs as we swayed together down the dim corridor.

„Er, yes,“ I had answered. „Quite so!“

Neither of us carried cases and as we stumbled along, searching for vacant seats in the gloomy compartments. Jock suddenly stopped short.

„Noo what in hell’s this—will ye look here? A compartment wi’ the bleddy blinds doon. Prob’ly a young laddie an’ lassie in there wi’ six emp’y seats. Privacy be damned. Ah’m no standin’ oot here while there’s a seat in there...“

The door had proved to be locked—on the inside—but that had not deterred the „bonnie Scot“ for a moment. He had banged insistently upon the wooden frame of the door until it was carefully, tentatively opened a few inches: then he had stuck his foot in the gap and put his shoulder to the frame, forcing the door fully open.

„No, no...“ The scrawny, pale, pin-stripe jacketed man who stood blocking the entrance protested. „You can’t come in—this compartment is reserved...“

„Is that so, noo? Well, if ye’ll kindly show me the reserved notice,“ Jock had paused to tap significantly upon the naked glass of the door with a belligerent fingernail, „Ah’ll bother ye no more—meanwhile, though, if ye’ll hold ye’re blether, Ah’d appreciate a bleddy seat...“

„No, no...“ The scrawny man had started to protest again, only to be quickly cut off by a terse command from behind him:

„Let them in...“

I shook my head and pinched my nose, blowing heavily and puffing out my cheeks to clear my ears.

For the voice from within the dimly-lit compartment had sounded hollow, unnatural. Possibly the train had started to pass through a tunnel, an occurrence which never fails to give me trouble with my ears. I glanced out of the exterior corridor window and saw immediately that I was wrong; far off on the dark horizon I could see the red glare of coke-oven fires. Anyway, whatever the effect had been which had given that voice its momentarily peculiar—resonance?—it had obviously passed, for Jock’s voice sounded perfectly normal as he said: „Noo tha’s better; excuse a body, will ye?“ He shouldered the dubious looking man in the doorway to one side and slid clumsily into a seat alongside a second stranger. As I joined them in the compartment, sliding the door shut behind me, I saw that there were four strangers in all, six people including Jock and myself; we just made comfortable use of the eight seats which faced inwards in two sets of four.

I have always been a comparatively shy person so it was only the vaguest of perfunctory glances which I gave to each of the three new faces before I settled back and took out the pocket-book I had picked up earlier in the day in London.

Those merest of glances, however, were quite sufficient to put me off my book and to tell me that the three friends of the pin-stripe jacketed man appeared the very strangest of traveling companions—especially the extremely tall and thin member of the three, sitting stiffly in his seat beside Jock. The other two answered to approximately the same description as Pin-Stripe—as I was beginning mentally to tag him—except that one of them wore a thin moustache; but that fourth one, the tall one, was something else again.

Within the brief duration of the glance I had given him I had seen that, remarkable though the rest of his features were, his mouth appeared decidedly odd—almost as if it had been painted onto his face—the merest thin red line, without a trace of puckering or any other depression to show that there was a hole there at all. His ears were thick and blunt and his eyebrows were bushy

over the most penetrating eyes it has ever been my unhappy lot to find staring at me. Possibly that was the reason I had glanced so quickly away; the fact that when I had looked at him I had found him staring at me—and his face had been totally devoid of any expression whatsoever.

Fairies? The nasty thought had flashed through my mind unbidden; none the less, that would explain why the door had been locked.

Suddenly Pin-Stripe—seated next to me and directly opposite Funny-Mouth—gave a start, and, as I glanced up from my book, I saw that the two of them were staring directly into each other's eyes.

„Tell them...“ Funny-Mouth said, though I was sure his strange lips had not moved a fraction, and again his voice had seemed distorted, as though his words passed through weirdly angled corridors before reaching my ears.

„It's, er—almost midnight,“ informed Pin-Stripe, grinning sickly first at Jock and then at me.

„Aye,“ said Jock sarcastically, „happens every night about this time... Ye're very observant...“

„Yes,“ said Pin-Stripe, choosing to ignore the jibe, „as you say—but the point I wish to make is that we three, er, that is, we four,“ he corrected himself, indicating his companions with a nod of his head, „are members of a little-known, er, religious sect. We have a ceremony to perform and would appreciate it if you two gentlemen would remain quiet during the proceedings...“ I heard him out and nodded my head in understanding and agreement—I am a tolerant person—but Jock was of a different mind.

„Sect?“ he said sharply. „Ceremony?“ He shook his head in disgust. „Well; Ah'm a member o' the Church o' Scotland and Ah'll tell ye noo—Ah'll hae no truck wi' bleddy heathen ceremonies...“

Funny-Mouth had been sitting ram-rod straight, saying not a word, doing nothing, but now he turned to look at Jock, his eyes narrowing to mere slits; above them, his eyebrows meeting in a black frown of disapproval.

„Er, perhaps it would be better,“ said Pin-Stripe hastily, leaning across the narrow aisle towards Funny-Mouth as he noticed the change in that person's attitude, „if they, er, went to sleep...“

This preposterous statement or question, which caused Jock to peer at its author in blank amazement and me to wonder what on earth he was babbling about, was directed at Funny-Mouth who, without taking his eyes off Jock's outraged face, nodded in agreement.

I do not know what happened then—it was as if I had been suddenly unplugged—I was asleep, yet not asleep—in a trance-like condition full of strange impressions and mind-pictures—abounding in unpleasant and realistic sensations, with dimly-recollected snatches of previously absorbed information floating up to the surface of my conscious mind, correlating themselves with the strange people in the railway compartment with me...

And in that dream-like state my brain was still very active; possibly fully active. All my senses were still working; I could hear the clatter of the wheels and smell the acrid tang of burnt tobacco from the compartment's ash-trays. I saw Moustache produce a folding table from the rack above his head—saw him open it and set it up in the aisle, between Funny-Mouth and himself on their side and Pin-Stripe and his companion on my side—saw the designs upon it, designs suggestive of the more exotic work of Chandler Davies, and wondered at their purpose. My head must have fallen back until it rested in the corner of the gently rocking compartment, for I saw all these things without having to move

my eyes; indeed, I doubt very much if I could have moved my eyes and do not remember making any attempt to do so.

I saw that book—a queerly bound volume bearing its title, *The Tuscan Rituals*, in archaic, burnt-in lettering on its thick spine—produced by Pin-Stripe and opened reverently to lie on that ritualistic table, displayed so that all but Funny-Mouth, Jock, and I could make out its characters. But Funny-Mouth did not seem in the least bit interested in the proceedings. He gave me the impression that he had seen it all before, many times...

Knowing I was dreaming—or was I?—I pondered that title, *The Tuscan Rituals*. Now where had I heard of such a book or books before? The feel of it echoed back into my subconscious, telling me I recognized that title—but in what connection?

I could see Jock, too, on the fixed border of my sphere of vision, lying with his head lolling towards Funny-Mouth—in a trance similar to my own, I imagined—eyes staring at the drawn blinds on the compartment windows. I saw the lips of Pin-Stripe, out of the corner of my right eye, and those of Moustache, moving in almost perfect rhythm and imagined those of Other—as I had named the fourth who was completely out of my periphery of vision—doing the same, and heard the low and intricate liturgy which they were chanting in unison.

Liturgy? Tuscan rituals? Now what dark „God“ was this they worshipped? ... And what had made that thought spring to my dreaming or hypnotized mind? And what was Moustache doing now?

He had a bag and was taking things from it, laying them delicately on the ceremonial table. Three items in all; in one corner of the table, that nearest Funny-Mouth. Round cakes of wheat-bread in the shape of wheels with ribbed spokes. Now who had written about offerings of round cakes of—

Festus? Yes, Festus—but, again, in what connection?

Then I heard it. A name: chanted by the three worshippers, but not by Funny-Mouth who still sat aloofly upright.

„*Summanus, Summanus, Summanus...*“ they chanted; and suddenly, it all clicked into place.

Summanus! Of whom Martianus Capella had written as being The Lord of Hell... I remembered now. It was Pliny who, in his *Natural History*, mentioned the dreaded Tuscan Rituals, „books containing the Liturgy of Summanus...“ Of course; Summanus—Monarch of Night—The Terror that Walketh in Darkness; Summanus, whose worshippers were so few and whose cult was surrounded with such mystery, fear, and secrecy that according to St Augustine even the most curious enquirer could discover no particular of it.

So Funny-Mouth, who stood so aloof to the ceremony in which the others were participating, must be a priest of the cult.

Though my eyes were fixed—my centre of vision being a picture, one of three, on the compartment wall just above Moustache’s head—I could still clearly see Funny-Mouth’s face and, as a blur to the left of my periphery, that of Jock.

The liturgy had come to an end with the calling of the „God’s“ name and the offering of bread. For the first time Funny-Mouth seemed to be taking an interest. He turned his head to look at the table and just as I was certain that he was going to reach out and take the bread-cakes the train lurched and Jock slid sideways in his seat, his face coming into clearer perspective as it came to rest about half-way down Funny-Mouth’s upper right arm. Funny-Mouth’s head snapped round in a blur of hate. Hate, livid and pure, shone from those cold eyes, was reflected by the bristling eyebrows and tightening features; only

the strange, painted-on mouth remained sterile of emotion. But he made no effort to move Jock's head.

It was not until later that I found out what happened then. Mercifully my eyes could not take in the whole of the compartment—or what was happening in it. I only knew that Jock's face, little more than an outline with darker, shaded areas defining the eyes, nose, and mouth at the lower rim of my fixed „picture“, became suddenly contorted; twisted somehow, as though by some great emotion or pain. He said nothing, unable to break out of that damnable trance, but his eyes bulged horribly and his features writhed. If only I could have taken my eyes off him, or closed them even, to shut out the picture of his face writhing and Funny-Mouth staring at him so terribly.

Then I noticed the change in Funny-Mouth. He had been a chalky-grey colour before; we all had, in the weak glow from the alternatively brightening and dimming compartment ceiling light. Now he seemed to be flushed; pinkish waves of unnatural colour were suffusing his outré features and his red-slit mouth was fading into the deepening blush of his face. It almost looked as though...

My God! He did not have a mouth. With that unnatural reddening of his features the painted slit had vanished completely; his face was blank beneath the eyes and nose.

What a God-awful dream. I knew it must be a dream now—it had to be a dream—such things do not happen in real life. Dimly I was aware of Moustache putting the bread-cakes away and folding the queer table. I could feel the rhythm of the train slowing down. We must be coming into Grenloe.

Jock's face was absolutely convulsed now. A white, twitching, jerking, bulge-eyed blur of hideous motion which grew paler as quickly as that of Funny-Mouth—if that name applied now—reddened.

Suddenly Jock's face stopped its jerking. His mouth lolled open and his eyes slowly closed. He slid out of my circle of vision towards the floor.

The train was moving much slower and the wheels were clacking over those groups of criss-crossing rails which always warn one that a train is approaching a station or depot. Funny-Mouth had turned his monstrous, nightmare face towards me. He leaned across the aisle, closing the distance between us. I mentally screamed, physically incapable of the act, and strained with every fibre of my being to break from the trance which I suddenly knew beyond any doubting was not a dream and never had been...

The train ground to a shuddering halt with a wheeze of steam and a squeal of brakes. Outside in the night the station-master was yelling instructions to a porter on the unseen platform. As the train stopped Funny-Mouth was jerked momentarily back, away from me, and before he could bring his face close to mine again Moustache was speaking to him.

„There's no time, Master—this is our stop...“ Funny-Mouth hovered over me a moment longer, seemingly undecided, then he pulled away. The others filed past him out into the corridor while he stood, tall and eerie, just within the doorway. Then he lifted his right hand and snapped his fingers.

I could move. I blinked my eyes rapidly and shook myself, sitting up straight, feeling the pain of the cramp between my shoulder-blades.

„I say...“ I began.

„Quiet“ ordered that echoing voice from unknown spaces—and of course, his painted, false mouth never moved. I was right; I had been hypnotized, not

dreaming at all. That false mouth—Walker in Darkness—Monarch of Night—Lord of Hell—the Liturgy to Summanus...

I opened my mouth in amazement and horror, but before I could utter more than one word—„Summanus“—something happened.

His waist-coat slid to one side near the bottom and a long, white, tapering tentacle with a blood-red tip slid into view. That tip hovered, snake-like, for a moment over my petrified face—and then struck. As if someone had taken a razor to it, my face opened up and the blood began to gush.

I fell to my knees in shock, too terrified even to yell out, automatically reaching for my handkerchief; and when next I coweringly looked up, Funny-Mouth had gone.

Instead of seeing him—It—I found myself staring, from where I kneeled dabbling uselessly at my face, into the slack features of the sleeping Jock.

Sleeping?

I began to scream. Even as the train started to pull out of the station I was screaming. When no one answered my cries, I managed to pull the communication-cord. Then, until they came to find out what was wrong, I went right on screaming. Not because of my face—because of Jock...

A jagged, bloody, two-inch hole led clean through his jacket and shirt and into his left side—the side which had been closest to... to that thing—and there was not a drop of blood in his whole, limp body. He simply lay there—half on, half off the seat—victim of „a bleddy heathen ceremony“—substituted for the bread-cakes simply because the train had chosen an inopportune moment to lurch—a sacrifice to Summanus...

