

Where Satan Dwelt

by Henry Treat Sperry, 1902-1938

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When the most beautiful woman he had ever seen offered herself to him, unashamed, young Cilnius ignored the mute warning of too sharp teeth and lips too red by far for mortal man to safely kiss!

I WAITED for three nights and days for the rain to stop, and then on the evening of the fourth day, when the skies still gave no promise of clearing, I decided to carry out the enterprise that had brought me to Rome, regardless of the weather.

I was in a mood bordering on desperation. The Eternal City can be one of the gloomiest places in the world, under circumstances like these, and I didn't know a soul in the city. Moreover, the feeling of apprehension, of impending disaster, that had fallen on my spirits as I descended from the train, had augmented daily and

hourly until it had grown to the proportions of senseless, unreasoning terror. Kept indoors for seventy-two hours by a torrent that was like a falling river, I had on more than one occasion during that time, resolved to quit the place forthwith, abandon my quest, and let my inheritance go hang.

But I was sorely pressed for money, and it was really a simple, if peculiar and rather childish stipulation in my uncle's will which must be fulfilled before his attorneys would turn over his property to me. So in the end, on the evening of the fourth day, I packed a small bag with the things I needed for the enterprise and went out into the storm.

I made my way along the Piazza de Spagna, past the smart thriving shops of modernized Rome, and caught a tram for the Porta San Paolo. The streets were empty, the tram deserted of all but the motorman, the conductor and myself. The conductor eyed me curiously as he stood in the aisle and twirled the ends of his magnificent *mustachios*, and then went forward to relieve the tedium of the trip by jabbering with the motorman.

The blackness of my mood increased as we rumbled and banged along past the Forum and the Mamertine Prison where, according to legend, the apostles Peter and Paul of Tarsus were imprisoned. I was already soaking wet despite my slicker, for the rain had a wind behind it that drove the water down my neck, up the sleeves of my coat, and through the intervals between buttons. I sat there, sodden and dispirited, and cursed what I was pleased to regard as the religious fanaticism of my late uncle.

But there was something more than irritation and anger behind my mood. As a child I had always feared my uncle. He was a strange man and of forbidding appearance. Tall and gaunt, clad always in deepest black, he had a terrific hooked nose like the beak of an eagle and a parchment-like skin that seemed always ready to break over the sharp, protuberant cheek-bones beneath it. His light grey eyes were in startling contrast with his sooty eyebrows and lank black hair, and my earliest memory of him, as well as my latest, is haunted by the malign, piercing scrutiny of those pale orbs.

In all the time I had known him he had not seemed to age or change in any way, and somehow I could not believe that he was really dead. Unconsciously, I believe, I had always thought that he would live forever, sustained through the ravages of time by a force unholy and mysterious. And yet, he was accounted an upright and virtuous man. He had been an inveterate church-goer, his purse had always been open to worthy charities, and he had, for hours on end, harangued me about my lack of piety and my indifference to what he called the salvation of my immortal soul.

Nevertheless, I had always entertained the conviction that he was at bottom a hypocrite and a scoundrel, despite the fact that this labeled me, even in my own estimation, an ingrate undeserving of the heritage he had left me.

SHORTLY after we had passed the Pauline Gate I disembarked from the tram, and stood shivering in the mud of the Campagna, watching the lights of the clattering car disappear in the drenched blackness of the April night. With it seemed to go the last vestiges of my self-possession. I was smitten with fear—stark irresistible dread which broke over me in waves and seemed to rob me of all

volition. So that it was as though some will other than my own at length turned my feet in the direction of the Church of St. Paul, carried me past it and the Place of Three Fountains, where Paul had been beheaded, and onward through the darkness and the rain to the Strada delle Sette Chiese, or Road of Seven Churches, which led to the Via Appia and my destination.

I had a small electric torch with me, but I used it sparingly. I knew the route I now travelled, for I had traversed it many times during previous trips to Rome, although I had never before penetrated to the place where I was now going. Some strange influence, that I had never been able to understand or analyze, had prevented me from visiting the particular crypt in the St. Domitilla Catacombs where lay the bones of that ancient ancestor of mine, Aeneas Aurelius Cilnius.⁽¹⁾ My dread of the place was now magnified a thousand times. It seemed to me that all I had distrusted in my uncle, the whole atmosphere of his sinister personality, had been concentrated about the antique tomb toward which I now made my faltering, fearful way.

Yet I went on, and before very long I felt the stones of the celebrated Appian Way beneath my feet. For a distance of several hundred feet I continued walking, and then turned off the road to the left, and sought a damp sanctuary in the shrubbery of the roadside. Here I opened my small bag, took out the monk's habit it contained, and donned it over my now saturated garments. Then I closed the bag, shoved it under some low bushes, and made off in the direction of the Basilica of St. Domitilla.

It was strange that the terms of the will of my uncle, professedly a religious and law-abiding man, had committed me to a course of action which might very well get me into trouble with the Roman constabulary. He had stipulated that I visit my ancestor's tomb at midnight, and unaccompanied. Yet he must have known that the Cardinal Vicar issues no passes to visitors to the catacombs after sun-down, and that visitors must be accompanied by guides at all times. I was forced, therefore, in order to carry out his expressed wishes, to gain entrance illegally. I knew, as a matter of fact, that this would be a comparatively simple matter, since few visitors come to the St. Domitilla Catacombs, most of them preferring the larger and more spectacular ones of St. Calixtus and others regularly included in the itinerary of the conducted tours, and that there were no guards at St. Domitilla. Nevertheless, I had taken the precaution to provide myself with the habit of a Trappist monk, just in case I should be seen by some night-wandering brother.

In a few minutes I stood before the unimposing entrance of the St. Domitilla Catacombs. The church stood to the left. It was invisible in the inky darkness, but I had seen it many times and knew its precise location. Many times, also, I had stood where I was now standing and contemplated the yawning cavern which opened before me with feelings of inexplicable dread. It was like the door of a storm-cellar, merely a blacker blot on the Stygian pall of night, now. But my horror of it had gone completely out of bounds and I was trembling violently as I slowly crept into that gaping maw, and felt my way down the steep staircase that led to the nether levels of the labyrinthine corridors.

I was in momentary danger of stumbling and breaking my neck, but I dared not show a light so near the surface. It was only after I felt the smooth floor of the first *cubicula* under my feet that I switched on my torch.

This *cubicula*, or small burial chamber, was revealed by the light to be about ten feet square by seven in height. In its center were grouped several *sarcophagi* of stone. A number of corridors led off in different directions through the walls, and following the guidings of the diagram which my uncle's lawyers had sent me, and which I had memorized, I took the first one to the left.

It lead first down another flight of steps and then off into a somewhat larger corridor which seemed to stretch straight ahead for a long distance. Photographing an impression of it in my mind, I switched off my torch and crept onward in the darkness with my heart thumping wildly.

After I had travelled a distance which seemed about equal to the area that had been illuminated by my torch I switched it on again. This time the beams showed a turn a few yards ahead, and I left the light on until I had reached it. Beyond the turn the corridor widened and increased considerably in height. Also, the walls were adorned with that species of decoration peculiar to catacombs—rows upon rows of human skulls, and festoons and arabesques of arm and leg-bones, ribs and vertebrae. These grisly ornaments served to increase my senseless terror, although I had been expecting them, and had looked upon their counterparts many times before with no feeling other than a sort of sardonic amusement.

I found nothing amusing about them now. As I stared into the gaping eye-sockets of those grinning skulls I wanted to do nothing so much as shriek aloud, turn tail, and run with every ounce of strength in my legs. Instead I continued onward, but I no longer dared to switch off my torch. I would have preferred a year's sentence to prison rather than walk in darkness between those rows of fleshless heads. I felt that they but waited for me to extinguish the light before falling on me and tearing my body to shreds with those lipless teeth, and bludgeoning me to death with those artfully arranged tibias and femurs.

Much good it did to tell myself that I was behaving like a child left alone in the dark by its mother. With every step my pulse seemed to accelerate, my heart to be more tightly constricted in my chest—and my surroundings contributed only a part, a small part, to the terror that possessed me. More than I have the power to describe I dreaded what might happen within the next few minutes. I knew, well enough, the reasons behind that peculiar stipulation in my uncle's will. It was legend, in our family, that he had once come here at night—whether in violation of the then prevailing rules, I do not know—had stood before the tomb of our ancestor, and had seen some sort of a vision. What that vision was he had never explained, other than to hint piously that it was of a deeply religious nature. Ever since that day, my uncle had been fond of saying, he had been assured of a heavenly home. It was fairly obvious that he anticipated that I would have a similar experience, and thereby become converted to the narrow, dogmatic faith which he professed.

I did not share this anticipation, but within the past few hours I had been seized with the conviction that I had somehow fallen under some evil spell, some malign influence that sought my destruction; and that, by acting in accordance with the

instructions in my uncle's will, I was placing myself in the power of something that would not release me while life remained in my body.

MY gloomy train of thought was now abruptly interrupted. Coming down the corridor behind me, and approaching the last turn I had just made, I heard the sound of hurrying feet. First taking a frantic look about me I switched off my torch, and rushed as silently as I was able toward a niche in the right wall that the last beams of my light had discovered. I reached the niche and felt my way into it, compressing my body into as small a space as possible.

The sound of the footsteps came onward, and peering around the corner of my hiding place I saw a fitful, dancing light playing on the wall at the end of the turn. Then, suddenly, a black-robed and hooded figure came into view, carrying a flaming pitch link high above its head. I ducked my head back, and watched the weird play of light and shadow on the grinning skulls opposite me on the wall of the corridor as the monk came on.

I drew back, and tried to make myself as small as possible—and all the time what I really wanted to do was to reveal myself to this hooded monk, deliver myself into his hands and pay whatever slight penalty might be imposed upon me by the civil authorities for thus venturing illegally into the catacombs. But I had no power to do this. It was as though some giant, unseen hand was thrusting me back into my crypt, sealing my lips so that I could not call out; and I had to watch the lay brother pass me by without suspecting my presence as a liner might pass the survivor of a shipwreck in the dead of night.

The monk hurried on, and soon turned off the main corridor to the left. My way lay to the right, I knew, and soon I was walking down a narrow passage that branched off the corridor I had been on, and approaching, as I was now convinced an inescapable doom.

The passage that I now traversed gave none of the evidence of constant use displayed by the other corridors I had encountered. The floor was uneven and littered with scraps of broken stone, some bearing part of inscriptions, others being plainly portions of shattered statuary. The walls were honeycombed with *loculi*—burial crypts—some open and containing nothing. Others were closed and sealed, and bore the names of those whose final resting places they were. Still others were open and contained scattered bones or, in some cases, complete skeletons. I shuddered past them and at length came to the last turn of my awful journey.

Beyond this turn, I knew, lay my destination—and my fate. My hands shook so that I could hardly hold my torch, and my knees threatened to give way under the weight of my body with every step, yet I kept on.

I rounded the turn and stood before a somewhat larger *loculus*. This crypt was by itself in the wall, and was faced with a slab of white marble upon which, in Latin, was engraved this inscription:

**Aeneas Aurelius Cilnius
I Die in Defiance of the Gods Whose
Tyranny Will Permit Me to Live
No Longer.**

There was no date, either of birth or death.

Strangely, the reading of this odd inscription seemed to calm me. I regained something of my self-possession, although I fully realized that my mind was still almost completely dominated by some influence outside myself. Terror still hovered over me like a black-plumaged bird, but for the time it had relaxed the paralyzing grip it had held on my emotions.

NOW I prepared to carry out the final instructions contained in my uncle's will. Locking my torch in the *on* position, I placed it on a nearby slab of broken stone so that its rays illuminated the tomb of my ancestor, and drew an envelope from my pocket. Breaking the seal, I drew forth the single piece of paper it contained, and read the following message written in my uncle's strange, angular hand:

My Dear Nephew:

When you read this, you will be standing before the tomb of our celebrated ancestor, Aeneas Aurelius Cilnius. I say celebrated, but actually he has been known to but a chosen few during the centuries since he passed to a higher plane of existence. Among them, however, his name has been that of a god—that of a man who knew and practiced in his time the highest arts of the alchemist, the wizard, and the sorcerer. You will shortly become inducted into his service as I was, many years ago—and thereafter you will be able to employ the legacy I have left you in a manner conducive to greater joy, both intellectual and physical, than the common ruck of humanity ever even dreams of attaining to.

Your initiation will be somewhat alarming—even painful—but you must not expect to obtain the precious gifts in store for you without paying a price.

A final word of caution, before I pass on to you the key to the greatest mysteries of life: Be careful in your demeanor with your fellow-man. To be sure, the day has passed when suspicion of sorcery was sufficient to condemn one to the stake—but many of the ancient taboos remain, and if you appear to be an upright and God-fearing man you will escape automatically much of the suspicion you will run the risk of incurring in the practice of the arts you will hereafter be engaged in. Moreover, the Master you will serve is pleased when His servants give the outward appearance of bowing to his Great Adversary...

AT this point I found myself unable, for the time, to go on. I was overwhelmed with a feeling of horror—nor had the mere revelation of the true character of my uncle had this effect. This latter only served to confirm my lifelong feeling concerning him, although I had never dreamed of the true extent of his hypocrisy, nor suspected him of the dark crimes he must have committed in the service of his dread master. What palsied my hands, so that they could hardly hold the letter I had been reading, and brought the sweat of stark terror out upon my brow, was the sudden conviction that I was already committed to that same service—that I had advanced so far along the road to hell that there could be no withdrawal.

As if to demonstrate the correctness of this conviction, I found my eyes being drawn irresistibly back to the paper I held in my shaking hands. I wanted to tear it up into minute pieces, burn it and grind it into the earth with my feet—but I could not. I read on.

Now to give you the priceless formula for invoking the ear of the Master. It is but necessary to repeat the following phrase aloud:
LIVE MORF SU REVILED.

Through no volition of my own, and, indeed, before I realized what I was doing, I found myself reading this last unintelligible sentence of my uncle's letter aloud. Then, mentally, I traced the letters of it backward—read it backward! As I did so, I fell back in a state near to fainting, and clapped both hands to my mouth. The paper fluttered to the floor and immediately burst into flames, there was the sound of a deep hollow groan which seemed to come from the depths of the tomb before me, and my horror-distended eyes beheld the marble tablet forming its door slowly beginning to slide downward.

As the door of the *loculus* reached the bottom of its slide and revealed the gaping blackness of the interior of the tomb there was a tremendous clap of thunder, and the light of my electric torch was immediately extinguished. How I kept from going mad or at least being stricken unconscious in that instant I will never know. The darkness closed in upon me like a foul maggoty shroud—a darkness that seemed alive and crawling with obscene creatures from the lowest cycle of hell. There was the sound of shrill chatterings and squeakings all about me. Slimy things, and things with sticky, matted fur crawled about my feet, brushed against my hands. Unseen, hideous wings whistled about in the air around my head, blundered against my face, and fled away with sharp chirpings and twitterings of fear.

I screamed and struck out in an abandonment of insane terror. My hands smashed and crushed soft pulpy bodies in whatever direction I thrust them—but no matter how many fell victim to my blows, there were always more.

Flailing my arms about me wildly, I sought to clear a way of escape. But I was so distraught that I knew not in which direction to turn. Then I lost my balance and fell crashing to the floor. In a moment my body was covered with the nameless, crawling things with which the dark was infested. The horrible shrill babble of the things seemed to drown my screams of agony as I felt tiny sharp teeth nipping at my flesh. A loathsome, slimy body passed over my face, and my arms were so weighed down with a multitude of foul creatures that I could not lift a hand to hurl it away.

Then, as suddenly as the creatures had come, they disappeared, and I was aware of a faint, greenish light illuminating the crypt in which I lay. I looked up and beheld a sight I can never hope to forget as long as I live.

A NAKED man stood in the passage-way, just opposite the open door of the tomb. It was from his body that the glow originated—a body gleaming with the foul purples and green of decay—the phosphorescence of rotting matter. And on the face of this man was a smile, such a smile as the Devil, himself, might wear while contemplating the agonies of his victims in the pit.

Then this living obscenity spoke, and his voice was low and faintly amused and indescribably evil.

„You have passed through the first degree of your initiation, my young friend,” he said. „Those were your familiars you just met, rather informally. Hereafter they will not dare take such liberties with your person, and will be your own particular slaves, compelled to do your bidding in all things. Perhaps they are not to be blamed for taking their slight pleasure while they may.

„The next degree will be more enjoyable, I trust, although its culmination may be somewhat alarming to a neophyte such as you. However, be of good cheer—you may rest assured that you will not be *permanently* harmed...”

With his last words the apparition disappeared, and the poisonous blackness closed in upon me again. My breath was coming in great gasps, and it was only through the exercise of the last atom of my will that I was able to raise myself from the floor. Even as I did so, however, I was aware of a lessening of the darkness, again.

Then a vision of breath-taking loveliness materialized out of the darkness and I was looking at the nude figure of the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Even Titian had never approached the delineation of a body such as the one I now beheld. It was slender and deliriously curved, ripe with the fullness of early maturity but firm and lithe with everlasting youth. The face of the woman was a delicate oval, set with great dark eyes and curling lashes, crowned with a curling mass of gleaming blue-black hair. Her full lips parted in a dazzling smile as she extended her arms toward me and took a short step forward.

I was swept with such an instant devastating flame of desire that I tottered on my feet as from a physical blow; but in that same moment, as though released by the sheer impact of psychic shock, a part of my mind seemed to clear and withdraw itself from the influence of my overwhelming emotions. And with that portion of my brain I saw and recognized this unearthly woman for what she actually was. I saw that those seductively parted lips only partially hid teeth that were tiny and pointed as a she-wolf's. I saw that those red lips had gained their too rich hue from hideous feastings, and I noted that the rosy, mysterious glow that emanated from that deliriously enticing body had its origin in the dark magic known to the *succubi*.

I saw all this, I say, and knew this woman for the foul and immortal fiend she was—and I knew that I was lost and condemned to everlasting torment in the same moment, for this knowledge did not steel me to resist her proffered caress.

She came toward me another gliding step, and my body shook as with an ague in the grip of an unholy passion. I was facing the fires of hell, and like one who peers into a—bottomless pit, I was shaken with a mad desire to fling myself headlong into the abyss.

Another step forward she came, and then with a sudden rush she was upon me, twining her arms about my neck, and pressing her madly intoxicating body close against me...

I know not from what reservoir of will-power I drew the strength to do what I did then, but as her arms closed about me I grasped her raven hair and pulled her head away from me with all the waning force of my left arm. Then I strove to strike

at her with my right fist, but she quickly shifted her arms so that they pinned mine tightly against my sides, and she held me with a strength as of ten men.

Now her eyes blazed with the dancing flames of hell's furies, and her smile became a feline snarl. She hissed like a rabid panther and her blood-red lips curled back from those needle-pointed teeth as her head darted forward, tearing her hair from my nerveless grip. With a groan of despair that came from the bottom of my soul I felt those red lips closing on my throat, I felt the stinging needles of her teeth piercing my flesh, and the warm blood gushing from my jugular into her burning mouth and spilling down my neck. And then I knew no more.

WHEN I regained my senses I was lying on a narrow cot in a small white cell-like room. By the side of my bed sat a friar in a brown cassock and a shaven crown.

„Rest, brother,“ he said, as I started to speak. „Do not try to talk until you are stronger.“

With a sigh I closed my eyes again, for I was very tired. And then memory came flooding back and I jerked erect on my cot, with a cry of anguish bursting from my lips. My hands flew to my neck, which was swathed in bandages, and I cast an agonized look of inquiry at my companion. How much did he know? Did he realize that he was harboring one who was accursed, who had had traffic, even though involuntary and undesired, with the fiends of hell?

As though in answer to my unvoiced question he lowered his eyes and said in a calm deep voice.

„Do not excite yourself, my brother. You have sinned, but have suffered much. You have been a victim of forces which the Mother Church knows how to control, and the fiend who sought to enslave you has been forced to return whence he came. When you are completely recovered, you may depart in peace...“

As I sank back on my cot I knew a joy almost too great to be contained in my swelling heart, and I resolved that for the rest of my life, if I could take the same vows that the holy man at my side had taken, I would remain in this place, and never know an instant's regret for having renounced the world. Nor in the many years since that moment have I had such a regret.



⁽¹⁾ The Romans did not use „Anaeas“ as *praenomen* (forename). Sperry gives the last name as „Cilinus“ (an unknown *cognomen*); I have changed it to the known form „Cilnius.“—Ed.