

**WARNING**

THE MATERIALS AND WORKS MADE AVAILABLE TO SUBSCRIBERS BY C&M ONLINE MEDIA INC. THROUGH BOSON BOOKS ARE COPYRIGHTED.

IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE TERMS OF YOUR SUBSCRIPTION AGREEMENT WITH C&M ONLINE MEDIA INC., YOU ARE PERMITTED TO DOWNLOAD LOCALLY MATERIALS AND WORKS FROM BOSON BOOKS AND TO MAKE A HARD COPY OF SUCH MATERIALS AND WORKS FOR YOUR PERSONAL USE.

FEDERAL COPYRIGHT LAWS, HOWEVER, PROHIBIT ANY FURTHER COPYING OR REPRODUCTION OF SUCH MATERIALS AND WORKS, OR ANY REPUBLICATION OF ANY KIND.

ILLEGAL COPYING OR DISTRIBUTION OF MATERIALS AND WORKS OBTAINED FROM BOSON BOOKS CONSTITUTES COPYRIGHT INFRINGEMENT. ILLEGAL COPIES OF SUCH MATERIAL AND WORKS CAN BE SEIZED AND DESTROYED. FURTHERMORE, MATERIALS AND WORKS CREATED BY YOU OR OTHERS USING COPYRIGHTED MATERIALS OBTAINED FROM BOSON BOOKS WITHOUT THE WRITTEN AUTHORIZATION OF C&M ONLINE MEDIA, INC. ALSO CAN BE SEIZED AND DESTROYED. COPYRIGHT INFRINGEMENT CAN BE INVESTIGATED BY THE FBI. CRIMINAL CONVICTIONS MAY RESULT IN IMPRISONMENT OR A FINE OF UP TO \$250,000, OR BOTH.

---

Published by **Boson Books**  
3905 Meadow Field Lane  
Raleigh, NC 27606  
ISBN 1-886420-15-7

An imprint of **C&M Online Media Inc.**

Copyright 1995 Fred Chappell  
All rights reserved

For Information contact  
**C&M Online Media Inc.**  
3905 Meadow Field Lane  
Raleigh, NC 27606  
Tel: (919) 233-8164; Fax: (919) 233-8578;  
e-mail: boson@vnet.net  
URL: <http://www.vnet.net/boson/>

*The Adder*

---

**THE ADDER**

by

**FRED CHAPPELL**

---



My Uncle Alvin reminds the startled stranger of a large, happy bunny. He is pleasantly rotund, and with silver-blond hair that makes him look a full decade younger than his sixty years. His skin has a scrubbed pink shine that the pale complexions of English curates sometimes acquire, and he has a way of wrinkling his nose that one irresistibly associates with - well, I've already named rabbits. He is a kindly, humorous, and often mildly mischievous fellow.

My admiration of Uncle Alvin has had a large measure of influence upon my life. His easygoing manner has seemed to me a sensible way to get along in the world. And his occupation is interesting and leisurely, though it's unlikely he'll ever gain great wealth by it. I can support this latter supposition by my own experience: I followed my uncle into the antiquarian book trade and I am not - please let me assure you - a rich man.

We don't compete with one another, however. Uncle Alvin lives in Columbia, South Carolina, and runs his mail-order business from his home. The bulk of my trade is also mail order, but I run it from a shopfront in Durham, North Carolina. My shop sells used paperbacks, mostly to Duke University students; in the back I package and mail out rare and curious books of history, the occult, and fantasy, along with some occasional odd science fiction. Uncle Alvin specializes in Civil War history, which in South Carolina almost guarantees a living income, however modest.

But anyone in the trade is likely to happen upon any sort of book, whether it belongs to his specialty or not. When Uncle Alvin called one Saturday morning to say that he had come into possession of a volume that he wanted me to see, I surmised that it was more in my line than his, and that he thought I might be interested in making a purchase.

"What sort of book is it?" I asked.

"Very rare indeed - if it's genuine. And still rather valuable if it's only a forgery."

"What's the title?"

"Oh, I can't tell you that on the telephone," he said.

"You can't tell me the title? It must be something extraordinary."

"Caution never hurts. Anyway, you can see it for yourself. I'll be by your place with it on Monday morning. If that's all right with you."

"Say, that's grand," I said. "You'll stay overnight, of course. Helen will be thrilled to see you."

"No," he said. "I'm driving through to Washington. I'll stop off on the way. Because I don't want to keep this book in the car any longer than I have to."

"We'll have lunch, at least," I said. "Do you still crave lasagne?"

"Day and night," he replied.

"Then it's settled," I said, and we chatted a little longer before ringing off.

\* \* \*

Monday morning he entered my shop-called Alternate Histories - carrying a battered metal cash box and I knew the book was inside it. We sounded the usual pleasantries that friendly kinfolk make with one another, though ours may have been more genuinely felt than many. But he was anxious to get to the business he had in mind. He set the cash box on top of a stack of used magazines on the counter and said, "Well, this is it."

"All right," I said. "I'm ready. Open her up."

"First, let me tell you a little bit about what I think we have here," he said. "Because when you see it, you're going to be disappointed. Its appearance is not prepossessing."

"All right."

"In the first place, it's in Arabic. It's handwritten in a little diary in ordinary badly faded ink and it's incomplete. Since I don't read Arabic, I don't know what's missing. I only know that it's too short to be the full version. This copy came to me from the widow of a classics professor at the University of South Carolina, an Egyptologist who disappeared on a field excursion some thirty years ago. His wife kept his library all this time, hoping for his return. Then, last year, she offered up the whole lot. That's how I happen to be in possession of this copy of *Al Azif*."

"I never heard of it," I said, trying not to show the minor disappointment I felt.

"It's the work of a medieval poet thought to have been insane," Uncle Alvin said, "but there is debate as to how crazy he actually was. His name was Abdul Alhazred and he lived in Yemen. Shortly after composing *Al Azif* he met a violent and grisly death-which is all we know about it because even the eyewitnesses dispute the manner of his dying."

"Abdul Alhazred. Isn't that-?"

"Yes indeed," he said. "The work is more recognizable under the title of its Greek translation, *The Necronomicon*. And the most widely known text-if any of them can really be said to be widely known - is the thirteenth-century Latin translation of Olaus Wormius. It has always been surmised that the original Arabic text perished long ago, since every powerful government and respected religious organization has tried to destroy the work in all its forms. And they have largely succeeded in doing so."

"But how do you know what it is, if you don't read Arabic?"

"I have a friend," he said proudly. "Dr. Abu-Saba. I asked him to look at it and to give me a general idea of the contents. When I handed it to him and he translated the title, I stopped him short. Better not to go on with *that*. You know the reputation of *The Necronomicon*."

"I do indeed," I said, "and I don't care to know what's in it in any detail. In fact, I'm not really overjoyed at finding myself in such close company."

"Oh, we should be safe enough. As long as we keep our mouths closed so that certain unsavory groups of cultists don't hear that we've got it."

"If you're offering it to me for sale -" I began.

"No, no," he said hastily. "I'm trying to arrange to deposit it in the Library of Congress. That's why I'm going to Washington. I wouldn't put my favorite nephew in jeopardy - or not for long, anyway. All I would like is for you to keep it for a week while I'm negotiating. I'm asking as a personal favor."

I considered. "I'll be happy to keep it for you," I said. "To tell the truth, I'm more concerned about the security of the book than about my own safety. I can take care of myself. But the book is a dangerous article, and an extremely valuable one."

"Like an atomic weapon," Uncle Alvin said. "Too dangerous to keep and too dangerous to dispose of. But the Library of Congress will know what to do. This can't be the first time they've encountered this problem."

"You think they already have a *Necronomicon*?"

"I'd bet money," he said cheerfully, "except that I wouldn't know how to collect. You don't expect them to list it in the catalogue, do you?"

"They'd deny possession, of course."

"But there's a good chance they won't have an Arabic version. Only one is known to have reached America and it was thought to have been destroyed in San Francisco around the turn of the century. This volume is probably a copy of that version."

"So what do I do with it?" I asked.

"Put it in a safe place. In your lockbox at the bank."

"I don't have one of those," I said. "I have a little old dinky safe in my office in back, but if anyone came to find it, that's the first place they'd look."

"Do you have a cellar in this shop?"

"Not that I'd trust the book to. Why don't we take a hint from Edgar Allan Poe?"

He frowned a moment, then brightened. "A purloined letter, you mean?"

"Sure. I've got all sorts of books scattered about in cardboard boxes. I haven't sorted them yet to shelve. It would take weeks for someone to hunt it out even if he knew it was here."

"It might work," Uncle Alvin said, wrinkling his nose and rubbing his pink ear with a brisk forefinger. "But there's a problem."

"What's that?"

"You may wish to disregard it because of its legendary nature. I wouldn't. In the case of *Al Azif* it's best to take every precaution."

"All right," I said. "What's the legend?"

"Among certain bookmen, *The Necronomicon* is sometimes known as *The Adder*. Because first it poisons, then it devours."

I gave him a look that I intended to mean: not another one of your little jokes, Uncle Alvin. "You don't really expect me to believe that we've got a book here that eats people."

"Oh no." He shook his head. "It only eats its own kind."

"I don't understand."

"Just make sure," he said, "that when you place it in a box with other books, none of them is important."

"I get it," I said. "Damaged cheap editions. To draw attention away from its true value."

He gave me a long, mild stare, then nodded placidly. "Something like that," he replied at last.

"Okay," I agreed, "I'll do exactly that. Now let's have a look at this ominous rarity. I've heard about *The Necronomicon* ever since I became interested in books. I'm all aflutter."

"I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed," Uncle Alvin said. "Some copies of this forbidden text are quite remarkable, but this one -" He twitched his nose again and rubbed it with the palm of his hand.

"Now don't be a naughty tease, Uncle Alvin," I said.

He unlocked the metal box and took out a small parcel wrapped in brown paper. He peeled away the paper to reveal a rather thin octavo diary with a worn morocco cover that had faded from what would have been a striking red to a pale brick color, almost pinkish. Noticing the expression on my face, he said, "See? I told you it would be a disappointment."

"No, not at all," I said, but my tone was so obviously subdued that he handed it to me to examine without my asking.

There was little to see. The pinkish worn binding felt smooth. The spine was hubbed and stamped *Diary* in gold, but the gold, too, had almost worn away. I opened it at random and looked at incomprehensible Arabic script so badly faded that it was impossible to say

what color the ink had been. Black or purple or maybe even dark green - but now all the colors had become a pale uniform gray. I leafed through almost to the end but found nothing in the least remarkable.

"Well, I do hope this is the genuine article," I said. "Are you sure your friend, Dr. Hoodoo -"

"Abu-Saba," said Uncle Alvin primly. "Dr. Fuad AbuSaba. His knowledge of his native tongue is impeccable, his integrity unassailable."

"Okay, if you say so," I said. "But what we have here doesn't look like much."

"I'm not trying to sell it. Its nondescript appearance is in our favor. The more undistinguished it looks, the safer we are."

"That makes sense," I admitted, handing it back to him.

He glanced at me shrewdly as he returned it to the cashbox, obviously thinking that I was merely humoring him-as to a certain extent I was. "Robert," he said sternly, "you're my favorite nephew, one of my most favorite persons. I want you to follow my instructions seriously. I want you to take the strongest precautions and keep on your guard. This is a dangerous passage for both of us."

I sobered. "All right, Uncle Alvin. You know best."

He wrapped the volume in the brown paper and restored it to the scarred box and carried it with him as we repaired to Tony's Ristorante Venezia to indulge copiously in lasagne and a full-bodied Chianti. After lunch he dropped me back at Alternate Histories and, taking *Al Azif* out of the metal box, gave it over to my safekeeping with a single word of admonition. "Remember," he said.

"Don't worry," I said. "I remember."

In the shop I examined the book in a more leisurely and comprehensive fashion. But it hadn't changed; it was only one more dusty, faded, stained diary like thousands of others and its sole distinction to the unlearned eye was that it was in handwritten Arabic script. A mysterious gang of sinister thieves would have to know a great deal about it merely in order to know for what to search.

I decided not to trust it to a jumble of books in a maze of cardboard boxes. I took it into my little back-room office, shoved some valueless books out of the way, and laid it flat on a lower shelf of a ramshackle bookcase there that was cluttered with every sort of pamphlet, odd periodical, and assorted volume from broken sets of Maupassant, Balzac, and William McFee. I turned it so that the gilt edge faced outward and the word *Diary* was hidden. Then I deliberated for a minute or two about what to stack on top of it.

I thought of Uncle Alvin's warning that no important books were to be placed with *Al Azif* and I determined to heed it. What's the point in having a favorite uncle, wise and experienced in his trade, if you don't listen to him? And besides that, the dark reputation of the book was an urgent warning in itself.

I picked up an ordinary and utterly undistinguished copy of Milton's poems - Herndon House, New York, 1924. No introduction and a few sketchy notes by an anonymous editor, notes no doubt reduced from a solid scholarly edition. It was a warped copy and showed significant water damage. I opened to the beginning of *Paradise Lost* and read the first twenty-six lines, then searched to find my favorite Miltonic sonnet, number XIX, *On His Blindness*.

*When I consider how my light is spent  
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,  
And that one Talent which is death to hide,  
Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent  
To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
My true account, lest he returning chide . . .*

Well, you know how it goes.

It's a poem of which I never tire, one of those poems that has faithfully befriended me in periods happy and unhappy since the years of my majority. Milton's customary stately music is there, and a heartfelt personal outcry not often to be found in his work. Then there comes the sternly contented resolution of the final lines. Milton requires, of course, no recommendation from me, and his sonnet no encomium. I only desire to make it clear that this poet is important to me and the sonnet on his blindness particularly dear.

But not every copy, or every edition, of Milton is important. I have personal copies of fully annotated and beautifully illustrated editions. The one I held in my hand was only a cheap mass edition, designed in all probability to be sold at railway bookstalls. I placed it on top of the Arabic treasure and then piled over both books a stack of papers from my desk, which is always overflowing with such papers: catalogues, book lists, sale announcements, and invoices. Of this latter item especially there is an eternal surplus.

Then I forgot about it.

*No, I didn't.*

I didn't in the least forget that I almost certainly had in my possession *Al Azif* one of the rarest documents in bibliographic annals, one of the enduring titles of history and legend - and one of the deadliest. We don't need to rehearse the discomfiting and unsanitary demises alleged of so many former owners of the book. They all came to bad ends, and messy ones. Uncle Alvin had the right idea, getting the volume into the hands of those prepared to care for it. My mission was merely a holding action - to keep it safe for a week.

That being so, I resolved not to go near it, not even to look at it until my uncle returned the following Saturday.

And I was able to keep to my resolution until Tuesday, the day after I'd made it.

The manuscript in its diary format had changed when I looked. I noticed right away that the morocco covers had lost their pinkish cast and taken on a bright red. The stamped word *Diary* shone more brightly, too, and when I opened the volume and leafed through it, I saw that the pages had whitened, losing most of the signs of age, and that the inked script stood forth more boldly. It was now possible to discern, in fact, that the writing actually was clothed in different colors of ink: black, emerald green, royal purple, Persian rose.

*The Necronomicon*, in whatever version, is a remarkable book. All the world knows something of its reputation, and I might have been more surprised if my encounter with it had been uneventful than if something unusual transpired. Its history is too long, and a knowledgeable scholar does not respond to mysterious happenings in the presence of the book by smiting his breast and exclaiming, "Can such things be?"

But a change in the physical makeup of the book itself was something I had not expected and for which I could not account. Not knowing yet what to think, I replaced it just as it had been, beneath the random papers and the copy of Milton, and went on with my ordinary tasks.

There was, however, no denying the fact of the changes. My senses did not belie me. Each time I examined it on Tuesday and Wednesday - I must have picked it up a dozen times all told - our *Al Azif* had grown stronger.

*Stronger*: As silly as that word seems in this context, it is still accurate. The script was becoming more vivid, the pages gleamed like fresh snowbanks, the staunch morocco covers glowed blood red.

It took me too long to understand that this manuscript had found something to feed upon. It had discovered a form of nourishment that caused it to thrive and grow stout. And I am embarrassed to admit that more hours elapsed before I guessed the source of the volume's food - which had to be the copy of Milton's poems I had placed on top of it.

Quickly then I snatched up the Milton and began to examine it for changes. At first I could discover no anomalies. The print seemed perhaps a little grayer, but it had already been rather faded. Perhaps, too, the pages were more brittle and musty than I'd thought - but, after all, it was a cheap book some sixty-odd years old. When I turned to the opening of *Paradise Lost*, all seemed well enough; the great organ tones were as resonant as ever:

*Of Man 's First Disobedience, and the Fruit  
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe . . .*

And I thought, Well, I needn't have worried. This poetry is immune to the ravages of time and of all circumstance.

So it was in anticipation of a fleeting pleasure that I turned idly to glance at sonnet XIX:

*When I consider how my loot is spent  
On Happy Daze, afifth of darling wine. . .*

But the familiar opening of the sonnet had lost much of its savor; I was missing something of that intimate stateliness to which I was accustomed. I set down my pallid reaction to tiredness and excited nerves. Anxiety about Uncle Alvin's treasure was beginning to tell on me, I thought.

I shook my head as if to clear it, closed my eyes and rubbed them with both hands, then looked once more into the volume of Milton open on the counter, sonnet XIX:

*When I consider how my lute is bent  
On harpyfates in this dork woolly-wold,  
And that dung-yellow witches' breath doth glide,  
Lobster and toothless . . .*

No use-I was too confused to make sense of the lines at all. It's only nerves, I thought again, and thought, too, how glad I would be for my uncle's return on Sunday.

I laid the copy of *Al Azif* down and determined to put the puzzle out of my mind.

I couldn't do that, of course. The idea had occurred that our particular copy of Abdul Alhazred's forbidden work was changing the nature of Milton's lines. What was it Uncle Alvin had compared it to? An adder, was it? First it poisons, he'd said, then it devours. Was it indeed poisoning the lines of the great seventeenth-century poet? I took up the Milton again and opened to the beginning of his immortal religious epic:

*Of Man's First Dish of Beetles, and the Fat  
Of that Forboding Fay, whom Myrtle Trent  
Brought fresh into the World, and Hollywood. . . ?*

The words made no sense to me, none at all - but I couldn't remember them any differently than how they appeared on the page. I couldn't tell whether the fault lay in the book or in myself.

A sudden thought inspired me to go to my poetry shelves and find another edition of Milton's poems so that I could cross-check the strange-seeming verses. If *Al Azif* truly was changing the words in the other, then a book untouched by the diary would render up only the purest Milton. I went round to the front and took down three copies of Milton's poems in different editions and used my favorite sonnet as touchstone. The first one I examined was Sir Hubert Portingale's Oxbridge edition of 1957. It gave me these lines:

*When I consider to whom my Spode is lent,  
Ear-halves and jays on this darkgirlle slide . . .*

It seemed incorrect somehow. I looked at the poem in Professor Y. Y. Miranda's Big Apple State University Press volume of 1974:

"Winnie's Corn Cider, how my lust is burnt!"

That line was wrong, I felt it in my bones. I turned to the more informal edition edited by the contemporary poet Richmond Burford:

*When I consider how a lighter splint  
Veered off my dice in this dour curled end.-word  
And that wan Talent. . . .*

I shook my head. Was that correct? Was it anywhere near correct?

The trouble was that I couldn't remember how the lines were supposed to read. I had the vague feeling that none of these versions was the right one. Obviously, they couldn't all be right. But why couldn't I remember my favorite poem, more familiar to me than my Social Security number?

Uncle Alvin's warning had been "First it poisons, then it devours."

Now I began to interpret his words in a different way. Perhaps *The Necronomicon* didn't poison only the book it was in physical contact with, perhaps it poisoned the actual content of the work itself, so that in whatever edition it appeared, in whatever book, magazine, published lecture, scholarly essay, commonplace book, personal diary-in whatever written form-a polluted text showed up.

It was an altogether terrifying thought. Uncle Alvin had not warned against placing it with an important *edition*; his warning concerned an important *book*. I had placed it with Milton and had infected the great poems wherever they now might appear.

Could that be right? It seemed a little farfetched. Well no, it seemed as silly as picturing Milton, the poet himself, in a Shriner's hat. It seemed just dog-dumb.

But I determined to test my wild hypothesis, nevertheless. I got to the telephone and called my old friend and faithful customer in Knoxville, Tennessee, the poet Ned Clark. When he said hello, I was almost rude: "Please don't ask me a lot of questions, Ned. This is urgent. Do you have a copy of Milton's poems handy?"

He paused. Then: "Robert, is that you?"

"Yes it is. But I'm in an awful hurry. Do you have the poems?"

"In my study."

"Can you get the book, please?"

"Hold on," he said. "I have an extension. I'll pick up in there." I waited as patiently as I was able until he said, "Here we are. What's the big deal?"

"Sonnet XIX," I said. "Would you please read it to me?"

"Right now? Over the phone?"

"Yes. Unless you can shout very loud."

"Hey, man," he said. "Chill out, why don't you?"

"I'm sorry, Ned," I said, "but I think I may have made a big mistake. I mean, a heavy *bad* mistake, old son. So I'm trying to check up on something. Could you read the poems to me?"

"Sure, that's cool," he replied, and I heard him leafing through his book. "Okay, Robert. Are you ready? Here goes: 'When icons in a house mild lights suspend, Or half my ties in this stark world have died...'"

I intermpted. "Okay, Ned. Thanks. That's all I need to hear right now."

"That's all? You called long distance to hear me say two lines of your favorite poem?"

"Yes I did. How did they sound to you?"

"As good as Milton gets."

"Did they sound correct? Are those the words as you've known them all your life?"

"I haven't known them all my life," he said. "You're the wild-haired Milton fan. He's too monumental for my taste, you know? I mean, massive."

"Okay, but you've read the poem, at least."

"Yes indeedy. It's a big-time famous poem. I read all those babies, you know that."

"And these lines are the ones you've always known?"

Another pause. Well, maybe not exactly," he admitted. "I think the punctuation might be a little different in this book from what I'm used to. But it mainly sounds right. Do you want publication information?"

"Not now," I said, "but I may call back later for it." I thanked my friend and hung up.

It seemed that my surmise was correct. All the texts were now envenomed. But I wanted to make certain of the fact and spent the next four hours telephoning friends and acquaintances scattered throughout America, comparing the lines. Not every one answered, of course, and some of my friends in the western states were groggy with sleep, but I got a large enough sample of first lines to satisfy me.

Walt Pavlich in California: "One-Eye can so draw my late sow's pen..."

Paul Ruffin in Texas: "Wind I consider now my life has bent..."

Robert Shapard in Hawaii: "Wound a clean liver and the lights go out..."

Vanessa Haley in Virginia: "Wind a gone slider and collide a bunt...."

Valerie Collander in West Virginia. "Watch a corned beef sandwich bow and bend..."

These were enough and more for me to understand the enormity of my mistake. All the texts of Milton that existed were now disfigured beyond recognition. And I had noted a further consequence of my error. Even the texts as they resided in memory were changed; not one of my friends could remember how the lines of sonnet XIX were *supposed* to read. Nor could I, and I must have been for a decade and a half one of the more constant companions of the poem.

The copy of *Al Azif* was flourishing. I didn't need even to pick it up to see that. The gilt edge shone like a gold bar fresh from Fort Knox and the morocco binding had turned ruby red and pulsed with light like a live coal. I was curious how the inks would glitter, so now I did pick up the volume - which seemed as alive in my hands as a small animal - and opened it at random.

I was right. The different colors of the inks were as vivid and muscular as kudzu and looked as if they were bitten into the thick creamy pages like etching. However disquieting these changes, they had resulted in a truly beautiful manuscript, a masterpiece of its kind. And though I knew it to be a modern handwritten copy, it also seemed to be regaining some of its medieval characteristics. Most of the pages were no longer totally in Arabic; they had become macaronic. Toward the end pages a few English words were sprinkled into the Eastern script.

*Oh, no.*

As long as *Al Azif* was in Arabic it was relatively harmless. Most people would be unable to read the spells and incantations and the knowledge to be found there that is - well,

the traditional epithet is *unspeakable*, and it is accurately descriptive. I certainly would not speak of the contents, even if I was able to read them.

I flipped to the front. The first lines I found in the first page were these:

*Wisely did Ibn Mushacab say, that happy is the tomb where no wizard hath lain, and happy the town at night whose wizards are all ashes. For the spirit of the devil-indentured hastes not from his charnel clay, but feeds and instructs the very worm that knaws. Then an awful life from corruption springs and feeds again the appointed scavengers upon the earth. Great holes are dug hidden where are the open pores of the earth, and things have learned to walk that ought to crawl.*

I snapped the cover shut. Those phrases had the true stink of *The Necronomicon*. You don't have to be an expert upon the verses of Alhazred to recognize his style and subject matter.

I had read all of these pages that I ever wanted to read, but even so I opened the volume again, to the middle, to confirm my hypothesis. I was right: *Al Azif* was translating itself into English, little by little. There was only a sprinkling of English in the latter pages; the early pages were English from head to foot; the middle pages half Arabic, half English. I could read phrases and sentences, but not whole passages. I could make out clearly, "they dwell in the inmost adyta"; then would follow lovely Arabic calligraphy. Some of the passages I comprehended were these:

*Yog-Sothoth knows the gate; in the Gulf the worlds themselves are made of sounds; the dim horrors of Earth; Ia ia ia, Shub-Niggurath!*

Nothing surprising, and nothing I wanted to deal with.

But I did understand what had happened. When I had so carelessly allowed this copy of *Al Azif* to batten upon Milton's poetry, it took the opportunity to employ Milton's language in the task of translating itself. With a single thoughtless act, I had given *The Necronomicon* - call it accursed or unspeakable or maddening, call it whatever minatory adjective you choose - both life and speech and I saw the potential for harm that I had set in place.

I flung the volume into my flimsy little safe, clanged shut the door, and spun the dial. I put up the CLOSED sign on my shop door, called my wife, Helen, to tell her I wouldn't be home, and stood guard like a military sentinel. I would not leave my post, I decided, until Uncle Alvin returned to rescue me and all the rest of the world from a slender little book written centuries ago by a poet who ought to have known better.

Nor did my determination falter.

As soon as Uncle Alvin laid eyes on me Sunday morning, he knew what had gone wrong. "It has escaped, hasn't it?" he said, looking into my face. "*Al Azif* has learned English."

"Come in," I said. When he entered, I glanced up and down the empty street, then shut the door firmly, and guided my uncle by his arm into my office.

He looked at the desk, at the crumpled brown paper bags that held my meals and at the dozens of empty Styrofoam cups. He nodded. "You set up a watch post. That's a good idea. Where is the volume now?"

"In the safe," I said.

"What's in there with it?"

"Nothing. I took everything out."

"There's no cash in the safe?"

"Only that book you brought upon me."

"That's good," he said. "Do you know what would happen if this copy was brought into contact with cash money?"

"It would probably poison the whole economy of the nation," I said.

"That's right. All U.S. currency everywhere would turn counterfeit."

"I thought of that," I said. "You have to give me some credit. In fact, this never would have happened if you had given me a clearer warning."

"You're right, Robert, I'm sure. But I feared you'd think I was only pulling your leg. And then I thought maybe you'd experiment with it just to see what would happen."

"Not me," I said. "I'm a responsible citizen. *The Necronomicon* is too powerful to joke around with."

"Let's have a look," he said.

I opened the safe and took the volume out. Its outward appearance was unchanged, so far as I could tell. The ruby morocco was rich as a leopard pelt and the gilt edge and gold stamping gleamed like fairy-tale treasure.

When I handed it to Uncle Alvin, he didn't bother to glance at the exterior of the book, but turned immediately to the latter pages. He raised his eyebrows in surprise, then began reading aloud: "The affair that shamleth about in the night, the evil that defieth the Elder Sign, the Herd that stand watch at the secret portal each tomb is known to have and that thrive on that which groweth out of the tenants thereof: All these Blacknesses are lesser than He Who guardeth the Gateway -"

"Stop, Uncle Alvin," I cried. "You know better than to read that stuff aloud." It seemed to me that it had grown darker in my little office and that a certain chill had come into the room.

He closed the book and looked at it with a puzzled expression. "My word," he said, "that is an exotic and obsolescent diction. What has *Al Azif* been feeding on?"

"Milton," I answered.

"Ah, Milton," he said, and nodded again. "I should have recognized that vocabulary."

"It has poisoned all of Milton's works," I said.

"Indeed? Let's see."

I picked up one of the copies on the desk and handed it to him.

He opened it and, without showing any expression, asked, "How do you know this book is Milton?"

"I brought all my copies in here and stacked them on the desk. I've been afraid to look at them for two days, but I know that you're holding a fairly expensive edition of John Milton's poetic works."

He turned the open book toward me. The pages were blank. "Too late."

"It's eaten all the words," I said. My heart sank. I tried to remember a line of Milton, even a phrase or a characteristic word. Nothing came to mind.

"Well, maybe not *eaten*," Uncle Alvin said. "Used up, let's say. *Absorbed* might be an accurate term."

"No more Milton in the world. . . . How am I going to live my life, knowing I'm responsible for the disappearance of Milton's works?"

"Maybe you won't have to," he replied. "Not if we get busy and bring them back."

"How can we do that? *Al Azif* has-swallowed them," I said.

"So we must get the accursed thing to restore the poems, to spit them up for us, the way the whale spat Jonah whole and sound."

"I don't understand."

"We must cause this manuscript to retract its powers," he said. "If we can reduce it to its former state of weakness, the way it was when I first met it in Columbia, the works of John Milton will reappear on the pages - and in the minds of men."

"How do you know?"

"You don't think this is happening for the first time, do you? It has been such a recurring event that restoration procedures have been designed and are followed in a traditional-almost ritualistic-manner."

"You mean other authors have been lost to it and then recovered?"

"Certainly."

"Who?"

"Well, for instance, the works of all the Cthulhu Mythos writers have been lost to the powers of the evil gods that they describe. Stories and poems and novels by Derleth, Long, Price, and Smith have all had to be recovered. The works of Lovecraft have been taken into the domain of *Al Azif* at least a dozen times. That's why his work is so powerfully pervaded by that eldritch and sinister atmosphere. It has taken on some of the shadow of its subject."

"I never thought of that, but it makes sense. So what are the restoration procedures?"

"They're simple enough," he said. "You keep watch here while I go to my car."

He gave me the book and I set it on the edge of the desk, well away from any other written matter. I couldn't help thinking that if Uncle Alvin succeeded in defeating the powers of *Al Azif* and rescuing the hostage works of Milton, these moments represented my last opportunity to read in the great bibliographic rarity. And simply as a physical object it was inviting: The lush red glow of the binding offered a tactile pleasure almost like a woman's skin and I knew already how the inks shone on the white velvety pages. *The Necronomicon* seemed to breathe a small breath where it lay on the desk, as if it were peacefully dozing like a cat.

I couldn't resist. I picked it up and opened it to a middle page. The seductive Persian rose ink seemed to wreath a perfume around the couplet that began the fragment of text: "That is not dead which can eternal lie, And with strange aeons even death may die." A large green fly had settled on the bright initial that stood at the beginning of the next sentence, rubbing its legs together and feasting on the ink that shone as fresh and bright as dripping blood. I brushed at it absentmindedly and it circled lazily toward the ceiling.

"That is not dead..."

The lines sang hypnotically in my ear, in my head, and I began to think how I secretly longed to possess this volume for myself, how indeed I had burned to possess it for a long time, and how my ridiculous rabbit-faced Uncle Alvin was the only obstacle in my way to -

"No, no, Robert," Uncle Alvin said from the doorway. "Close the book and put it down. We're here to break the power of the book, not to give in to its spells."

I snapped it shut in a flash and flung it onto the desk. "Wow," I said. "Wow."

"It's an infernal piece of work, isn't it?" he said complacently. "But we'll have a hammerlock on it shortly."

He set down the metal cash box he had formerly carried the book in and opened it up. He then laid *The Necronomicon* inside and produced from a brown paper bag under his arm a small book bound in black cloth and placed this second book on top of the other and closed the metal box and locked it with a key on his ring. I noticed that the black book sported no title on cover or spine.

"What are we doing now?" I asked.

"The inescapable nature of this book is to cannibalize other writings," he said. "To feed upon them in order to sustain its ghoulish purposes. If it is in contact with another work, then it *must* try to feed; it cannot stop itself. The method of defeating it is to place it with a book so adamantine in nature, so resistant to evil change, to the inimical powers of darkness, that *The Necronomicon* wastes all its forces upon this object and in exhausting itself renders up again those works it had consumed earlier. It simply wears itself out and that which formerly had disappeared now reappears."

"Are you certain?" I asked. "That seems a little too simple."

"It is not simple at all," he said. "But it is effective. If you'll open up one of your copies of Milton there, we ought to be able to watch the printed words return to the pages."

"All right," I said, and opened one of the blank-paged books to a place toward the front.

"The process is utterly silent," he said, "but that is deceptive. Inside this box, a terrific struggle is taking place."

"What is the unconquerable book that you put in with it?"

"I have never read it," he said, "because I am not worthy. Not yet. It is a great holy book written by a saint. Yet the man who wrote it did not know he was a saint and did not think of himself as writing a book. It is filled with celestial wisdom and supernal light, but to read it requires many years of spiritual discipline and ritual cleansing. To read such a holy book one must first become holy himself."

"What is the title?"

"Someday soon, when I have accomplished more of the necessary stages of discipline, I will be allowed to say the title aloud," he told me. "Till then I must not."

"I am glad to know there is such a book in the world," I said.

"Yes," he said. "And you should look now to see if Milton is being restored to us."

"Yes he is," I said happily. "Words are beginning to reappear. Wait a second while I find our control poem." I leafed through rapidly to find sonnet XIX and read aloud:

*"When I consider how my light is spent  
Ere half my days-"*

"Why are you stopping?" he asked.

"It's that damned pesky green fly again." I brushed at the page. "Shoo!" I said.

The fly shooed, lifting from the book in a languorous circle, buzzing around the office for a moment, and then departing the premises through the open window there beside a broken bookshelf.

"You need to put in a screen, Uncle Alvin said. He wrinkled his nose, pawed at his ear.

"I need to do a lot of things to this old shop," I replied. "Let's see now, where were we?" I found my place on the page and began again:

*"When I consider how my light is spent  
Ere half my days, in this dark world and weird -"*

"Wait a minute," my uncle said. "What was that last word?"

I looked. "*Weird*," I said.

He shook his head. "That's not right."

"No, it's not," I said. "At first I didn't see it was wrong because the fly covered it, the same old fly that was gobbling up the ink in *The Necronomicon*."

"A carrier," he said slowly. "It's carrying the poison that it contracted from the ink."

We looked at each other and, as the knowledge came clear to me, I cried out: "*The fly!*" Then, just as if we had rehearsed to perform the single action together, we rushed to the window.

But out there in the sleepy southern Sunday morning would be countless indistinguishable green flies, feeding, excreting, and mating.

## **END OF STORY**

Copyright 1995 Fred Chappell  
All rights reserved