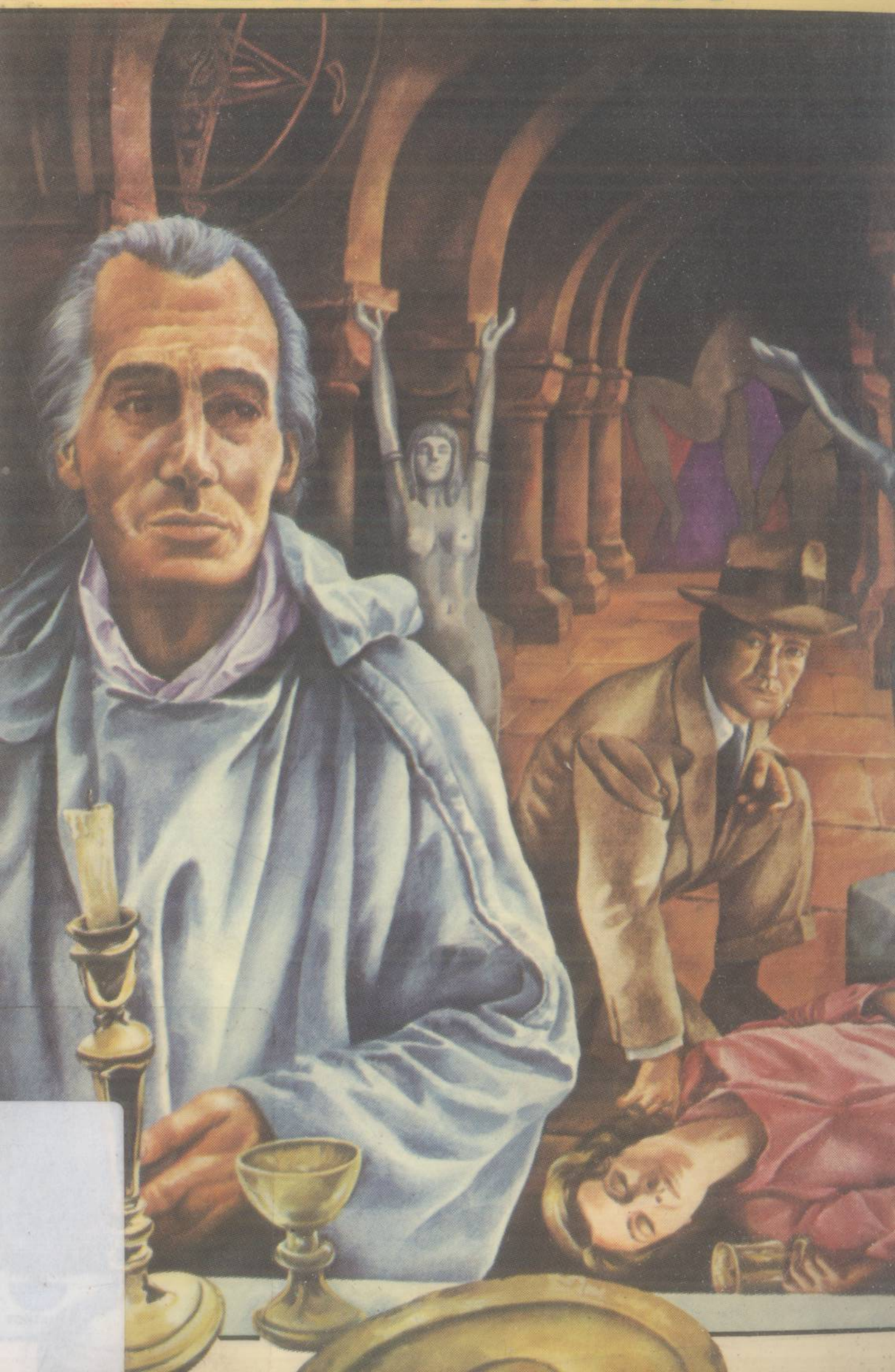


# NGAIO MARSH

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## DEATH IN ECSTASY





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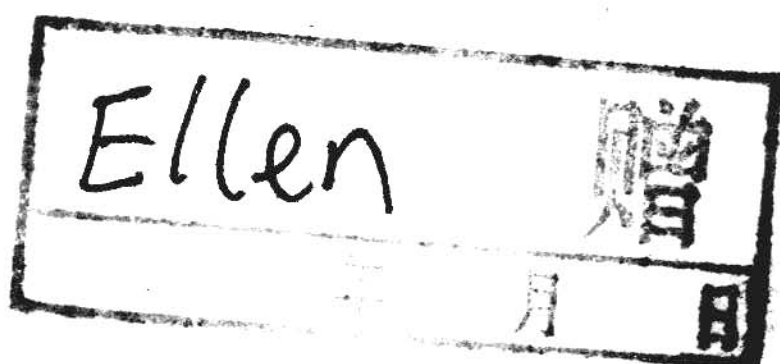
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DEATH IN ECSTASY

Dame Ngaio Marsh, one of the world's most popular detective novelists, has written twenty-two of her classical whodunnits since she published *A Man Lay Dead* in 1934.

Now in her seventies, she is New Zealand born and bred. Her first name (pronounced "Nye-oh") is a Maori word which can mean a tree, a bug that lives on it, a light on the water – or simply 'clever'.

Many of her stories have theatrical settings, for Ngaio Marsh's real passion is Shakespeare. Almost single-handedly she revived the New Zealand public's interest in live theatre, and it was for this work that she received what she calls her 'damery' in 1966.

Her most recent detective story, *Black as He's Painted*, was published in April 1974.



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NGAIO MARSH

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# Death in Ecstasy



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*For*  
THE FAMILY  
*in Kent*

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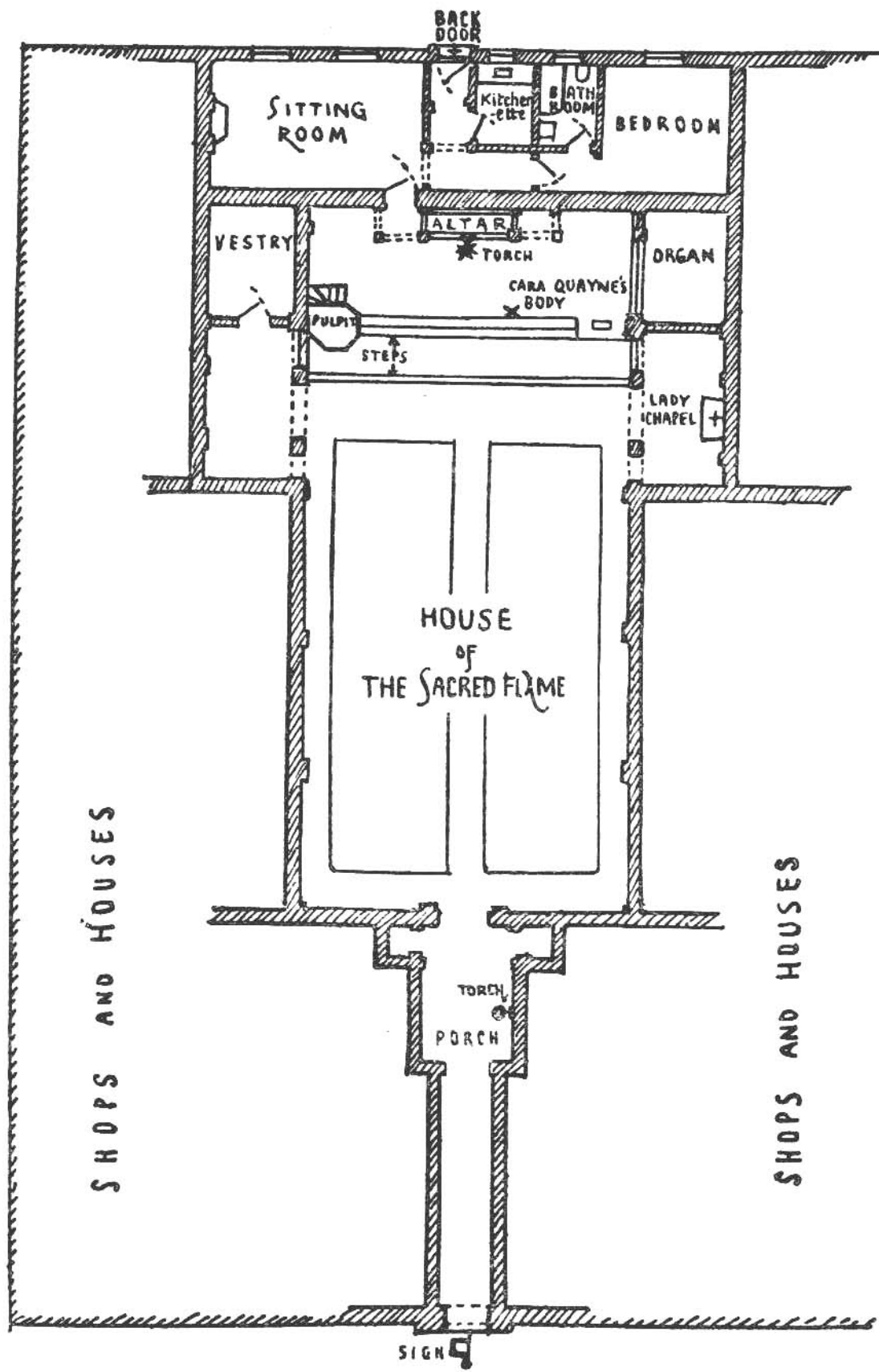
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CHESTER TERRACE



KNOCKLATCHERS ROW

## THE CHARACTERS IN THE CASE

Jasper Garnette		<i>Officiating priest of the House of the Sacred Flame</i>
The Seven Initiates	Samuel J. Ogden	<i>Warden of the House. A commerical gentleman</i>
	Raoul de Ravigne	<i>Warden of the House. A dilettante</i>
	Cara Quayne	<i>The Chosen Vessel</i>
	Maurice Pringle	<i>Engaged to Janey Jenkins</i>
	Janey Jenkins	<i>The youngest initiate</i>
	Ernestine Wade	<i>Probably the oldest initiate</i>
	Dagmar Candour	<i>Widow</i>
Claude Wheatley		<i>An acolyte</i>
Lionel Smith		<i>An acolyte</i>
Dr. Nicholas Kasbek		<i>An onlooker</i>
The Doorkeeper of the House		
Edith Laura Hebborn		<i>Cara Quayne's old nurse</i>
Wilson		<i>Her parlourmaid</i>
Mr. Rattisbon		<i>Her solicitor</i>
Elsie		<i>Mr. Ogden's house-maid</i>
Chief Detective-Inspector Alleyne		<i>Criminal Investigation Department, Scotland Yard</i>
Detective-Inspector Fox		<i>His assistant</i>
Detecive-Sergeant Bailey		<i>His fingerprint expert</i>
Dr. Curtis		<i>His Divisional Surgeon</i>
Nigel Bathgate		<i>His Watson</i>

## FOREWORD

In case the House of the Sacred Flame might be thought to bear a superficial resemblance to any existing church or institution, I hasten to say that if any similarity exists it is purely fortuitous. The House of the Sacred Flame, its officials, and its congregation are all imaginative and exist only in Knocklatchers Row. None, as far as I am aware, has any prototype in any part of the world.

My grateful thanks are due to Robin Page for his advice in the matter of sodium cyanide; to Guy Cotterill for the plan of the House of the Sacred Flame, and to Robin Adamson for his fiendish ingenuity in the matter of home-brewed poisons.

N. M.

*Christchurch, New Zealand*

## PART I

### CHAPTER I

#### ENTRANCE TO A CUL-DE-SAC

On a pouring wet Sunday night in December of last year a special meeting was held at the House of the Sacred Flame in Knocklatchers Row.

There are many strange places of worship in London, and many remarkable sects. The blank face of a Cockney Sunday masks a kind of activity, intermittent but intense. All sorts of queer little religions squeak, like mice in the wainscoting, behind its tedious façade.

Perhaps these devotional side-shows satisfy in some measure the need for colour, self-expression and excitement in the otherwise drab lives of their devotees. They may supply a mild substitute for the orgies of a more robust age. No other explanation quite accounts for the extraordinary assortment of persons that may be found in their congregations.

Why, for instance, should old Miss Wade beat her way down the King's Road against a vicious lash of rain and in the teeth of a gale that set the shop signs creaking and threatened to drive her umbrella back into her face? She would have been better off in her bed-sitting-room with a gas-fire and her library book.

Why had Mr. Samuel J. Ogden dressed himself in uncomfortable clothes and left his apartment in York Square for the smelly discomfort of a taxi and the prospect of two hours without a cigar?

What induced Cara Quayne to exchange the amenities of her little house in Shepherd Market for a dismal perspective of wet pavements and a deserted Piccadilly?

What more insistent pleasure drew M. de Ravigne away from his Van Goghs, and the satisfying austerity of his flat in Dover Street?

If this question had been put to these persons, each of them, in his or her fashion, would have answered untruthfully. All



of them would have suggested that they went to the House of the Sacred Flame because it was the right thing to do. M. de Ravigne would not have replied that he went because he was madly in love with Cara Quayne; Cara Quayne would not have admitted that she found in the services an outlet for an intolerable urge towards exhibitionism. Miss Wade would have died rather than confess that she worshipped, not God, but the Reverend Jasper Garnette. As for Mr. Ogden, he would have broken out immediately into a long discourse in which the words "uplift," "renooal," and "spiritual re-generation" would have sounded again and again, for Mr. Ogden was so like an American as to be quite fabulous.

Cara Quayne's car, Mr. Ogden's taxi, and Miss Wade's goloshes all turned into Knocklatchers Row at about the same time.

Knocklatchers Row is a cul-de-sac leading off Chester Terrace and not far from Graham Street. Like Graham Street it is distinguished by its church. In December of last year the House of the Sacred Flame was obscure. Only members of the congregation and a few of their friends knew of its existence. Chief Detective-Inspector Alleyn had never heard of it. Nigel Bathgate, looking disconsolately out of his window in Chester Terrace, noticed its sign for the first time. It was a small hanging sign made of red glass and shaped to represent a flame rising from a cup. Its facets caught the light as a gust of wind blew the sign back. Nigel saw the red gleam and at the same time noticed Miss Wade hurry into the doorway. Then Miss Quayne's car and Mr. Ogden's taxi drew up and the occupants got out. Three more figures with bent heads and shining mackintoshes turned into Knocklatchers Row. Nigel was bored. He had the exasperated curiosity of a journalist. On a sudden impulse he seized his hat and umbrella, ran downstairs and out into the rain. At that moment Detective-Inspector Alleyn in his flat in St. James's looked up from his book and remarked to his servant: "It's blowing a gale out there. I shall be staying in to-night."

## CHAPTER II

### THE HOUSE OF THE SACRED FLAME

In Chester Terrace the wind caught Nigel broadside-on, causing him to prance and curvet like a charger. The rain pelted down on his umbrella and the street lamps shone on the wet pavement. He felt adventurous and pleased that he had followed his impulse to go abroad on such a night. Knocklatchers Row seemed an exciting street. Its name sounded like a password to romance. Who knows, he thought hopefully, into what strange meeting-place I may venture? It should be exotic and warm and there should be incense and curious rites. With these pleasant anticipations he crossed Chester Street and, lowering his umbrella to meet the veering wind, made for the House of the Sacred Flame.

Two or three other figures preceded him, but by the time he reached the swinging sign they had all disappeared into a side entry. As he drew nearer Nigel was aware of a bell ringing, not clearly, insistently, like the bell of St. Mary's, Graham Street, but with a smothered and inward sound as though it was deep inside a building. He turned left under the sign into shelter, and at that moment the bell stopped ringing. He found himself in a long covered passage, lit at the far end by a single lamp, or rather by a single light, for as he approached he saw that a naked flame rose from a bronze torch held in an iron sconce. Doubtless in deference to some by-law this unusual contrivance was encased in a sort of cage. Beyond the torch he saw double doors. A man came through, closed the doors, locked them, and seated himself on a stool under the torch. Nigel furled his umbrella and approached this doorkeeper. He was a thinnish young man, pale and spectacled, with an air of gentility.

"I'm afraid you are too late," he said.

"Too late?" Nigel felt ridiculously exasperated and disappointed.

"Yes. The bell has stopped. I have just locked the doors."

"But only this second. I saw you do it as I lowered my umbrella. Couldn't you open them again?"

"The bell has stopped."

"I can hear that very well. That, too, has only just occurred. Could not you let me in?"

"I see you do not know our rules," said the young man, and pointed to a framed notice which hung beside the doors. Nigel turned peevishly and read the sentence indicated by the young man: "The bell ceases ringing as the Priest enters the temple. The doors are then locked and will not be reopened until the ceremony is ended."

"There, you see," said the young man complacently.

"Yes, I see. But if you will allow me to say so, I consider that you make a mistake in so stringently enforcing this rule. As you have noticed I am a new-comer. Something prompted me to come—an impulse. Who knows but what I might have proved an enthusiastic convert to whatever doctrine is taught behind your locked doors?"

"There is a Neophytes' Class at six-fifteen on Wednesdays."

"I shall not attend it," cried Nigel in a rage.

"That is as you please."

Nigel perceived very clearly that he had made a fool of himself. He could not understand why he felt so disproportionately put out at being refused entrance to a ceremony of which he knew nothing and, he told himself, cared less. However he was already a little ashamed of his churlish behaviour and with the idea of appeasing the doorkeeper he turned once again to the notice.

At the top was a neat red torch set in a circle of other symbols, with most of which he was unfamiliar. Outside these again were the signs of the Zodiac. With a returning sense of chagrin he reflected that this was precisely the sort of thing his mood had demanded. Undoubtedly the service would be strange and full of an exotic mumbo-jumbo. He might even have got a story from it. A muffled sound of chanting beyond the doors increased his vexation. However he read on:

In the Light of the Sacred Flame all mysteries are but different facets of the One Mystery, all Gods but different aspects of one Godhead. Time is but an aspect of Eternity, and the doorway to Eternity is Spiritual Ecstasy.

JASPER GARNETTE

"Tell me," said Nigel, turning to the doorkeeper, "who is Jasper Garnette?"



"Our Founder," answered the young man stiffly, "and our Priest."

"You mean that not only does he write about eternity but he actually provides the doorway which he mentions in this notice?"

"You may say," said the young man with a glint of genuine fervour in his eye, "that this *is* The Doorway."

"And are you fated to stay for ever on the threshold, shutting out yourself and all late arrivals?" inquired Nigel, who was beginning to enjoy himself.

"We take it in turns."

"I see. I can hear a voice raised in something that sounds like a lament. Is that the voice of Mr. Jasper Garnette?"

"Yes. It is not a lament. It is an Invocation."

"What is he invoking?"

"You really should attend the Neophytes' Class at six-fifteen on Wednesdays. It is against our Rule for me to gossip while I am On Guard," pronounced the doorkeeper, who seemed to speak in capitals.

"I should hardly call this gossip," Nigel objected. Suddenly he jumped violently. A loud knock had sounded on the inside of the door. It was twice repeated.

"Please get out of the way," cried the young man. He removed the wire guard in front of the torch. Then he took a key from his pocket and with this he opened the double doors.

Nigel drew to one side hurriedly. There was a small recess by the doors. He backed into it.

Over the threshold came two youths dressed in long vermilion robes and short overgarments of embroidered purple. They had long fuzzy hair brushed straight back. One of them was red-headed with a pointed nose and prominent teeth. The other was dark with languorous eyes and full lips. They carried censers and advanced one to each side of the torch making obeisances. They were followed by an extremely tall man clad in embroidered white robes of a Druidical cut and flavour. He was of a remarkable appearance, having a great mane of silver hair, large sunken eyes and black brows. The bone of his face was much emphasised, the flesh heavily grooved. His mouth was abnormally wide with a heavy underlip. It might have been the head of an actor, a saint, or a



Middle-West American purveyor of patent medicines. Nigel had ample opportunity to observe him, for he stood in front of the torch with his short hands folded over an unlighted taper. He whispered and muttered for some time, genuflected thrice, and then advanced his taper to the flame. When it was lit he held it aloft. The doorkeeper and the two acolytes went down on their knees, the priest closed his eyes, and Nigel walked into the hall.

He found himself in a darkness that at first seemed to be absolute. In a few seconds, however, he could make out certain large shapes and masses. In the distance, perhaps on an altar, a tiny red light shone. His feet sank into a thick carpet and made no sound. He smelt incense. He felt the presence of a large number of people all close to him, all quite silent. A little reflected light came in through the doors. Nigel moved cautiously away from it towards his right and, since he met with no obstruction, thought that he must be in a cross-aisle. His eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he saw veils of moving smoke, lighter shapes that suggested vast nudities, then rows of bent heads with blurred outlines. He discovered that he was moving across the back of the church behind the last row of pews. There seemed to be an empty seat in the far corner. He made for this and had slid into it when a flicker of light, the merest paling of gloom, announced the return of the priest—surely Jasper Garnette himself—with his taper. He appeared in the centre aisle, his face and the rich embroidery of his robe lit from beneath by the taper. The face seemed to float slowly up the church until it changed into the back of a head with a yellow nimbus. The taper was held aloft. Then, with a formidable plop, an enormous flame sprang up out of the dark. The congregation burst into an alarming uproar. An organ uttered two or three of those nerve-racking groans that are characteristic of this instrument and red lamps came to life at intervals along the walls.

For several minutes the noise was intolerable, but gradually it revealed itself as a sort of a chant. Next to Nigel was a large lady with a shrill voice. He listened attentively but could make nothing of her utterances, which seemed to be in no known language.

“Ee-ai-ee-yah-ee,” chanted this lady.

Presently the organ and the congregation together unex-