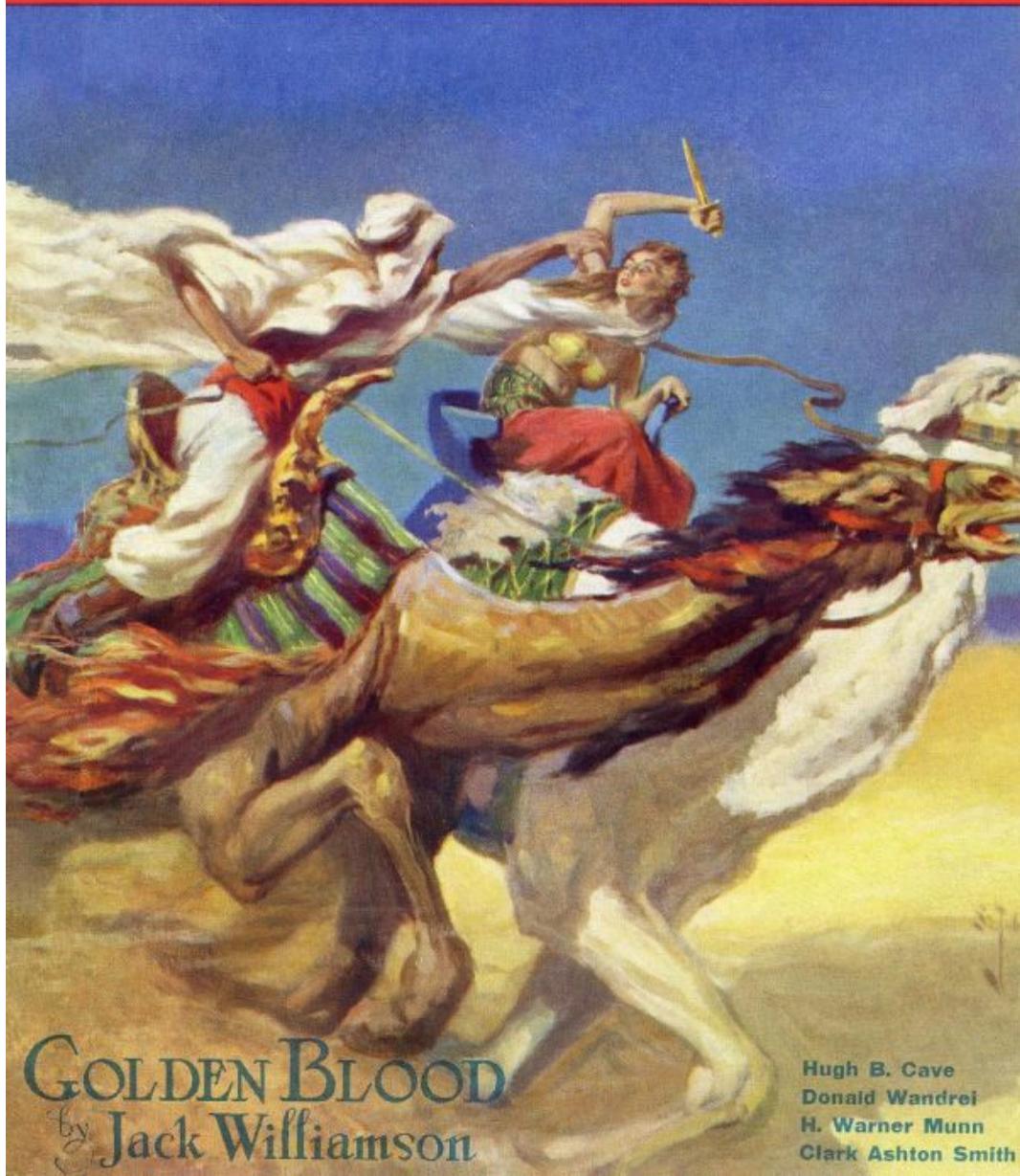


Weird Tales

MAY—25c



GOLDEN BLOOD
by Jack Williamson

Hugh B. Cave
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"He heard the teeth clash and grate on the linked iron."



The Beast of Averroigne

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

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The Beast of Averoine

By

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

Illustration by Jayem Wilcox.

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It came when the comet flamed red across the sky, a ravening monster that brought death and panic terror to a peaceful countryside

Old age, like a moth in some fading arras, will gnaw my memories oversoon, as it gnaws the memories of all men. Therefore I, Luc le Chaudronnier, sometime known as astrologer and sorcerer, write this account of the true origin and slaying of the Beast of Averoine. And when I have ended, the writing shall be sealed in a brazen box, and the box be set in a secret chamber of my house at Ximes, so that no man shall learn the verity of this matter till many years and decades have gone by. Indeed, it were not well for such evil prodigies to be divulged while any who took part in them are still on the earthward side of Purgatory. And at present the truth is known only to me and to certain others who are sworn to maintain secrecy.

As all men know, the advent of the Beast was coeval with the coming of that red comet which rose behind the Dragon in the early summer of 1369. Like Satan's rutilant hair, trailing on the wind of Gehenna as he hastens worldward, the comet streamed nightly above Averoine, bringing the fear of bale and pestilence in its train. And soon the rumor of a strange evil, a foulness unheard of in any legend, passed among the people.

To Brother Gerome of the Benedictine Abbey of Perigon it was given to behold this evil ere the horror thereof became manifest to others. Returning late to the monastery from an errand in Ste. Zenobie, Gerome was overtaken by darkness. No moon arose to lantern his way through the forest; but, between the gnarled boughs of antic oaks, he saw the vengefully streaming fire of the comet, which seemed to pursue him as he went. And Gerome felt an eery fear of the pit-deep shadows, and he made haste toward the abbey postern.

Passing among the ancient trees that towered thickly behind Perigon, he thought that he discerned a light from the windows, and was much cheered thereby. But, going on, he saw that the light was near at hand, beneath a lowering bough. It moved as with the flitting of a fen-fire, and was of changeable color, being pale as a corposant, or ruddy as new-spilled blood, or green as the poisonous distillation that surrounds the moon.

Then, with terror ineffable, Gerome beheld the thing to which the light clung like a hellish nimbus, moving as it moved, and revealing dimly the black abomination of head and limbs that were not those of any creature wrought by God. The horror stood erect, rising to more than the height of a tall man; and it swayed like a great serpent, and its members undulated, bending like heated wax. The flat black head was thrust forward on a snakish neck. The eyes, small and lidless, glowing like coals from a wizard's brazier, were set low and near together in a noseless face above the serrate gleaming of such teeth as might belong to a giant bat.

This much, and no more, Gerome saw, ere the thing went past him with its nimbus flaring from venomous green to a wrathful red. Of its actual shape, and the number of its limbs, he

could form no just notion. Running and slithering rapidly, it disappeared among the antique oaks, and he saw the hellish light no more.

Nigh dead with fear, Gerome reached the abbey postern and sought admittance. And the porter, hearing the tale of that which he had met in the moonless wood, forbore to chide him for his tardiness.

Before noons, on the morrow, a dead stag was found in the forest behind Perigon. It had been slain in some ungodly fashion, not by wolf or poacher or hunter. It was unmarked by any wound, other than a wide gash that had laid open the spine from neck to tail. The spine itself had been shattered and the white marrow sucked therefrom; but no other portion had been devoured. None could surmise the nature of the beast that slew and ravened in such fashion. But the good Brothers, heedful of the story told by Gerome, believed that some creature from the Pit was abroad in Averoigne. And Gerome marvelled at the mercy of God, which had permitted him to escape the doom of the stag.

Now, night by night, the comet greatedened, burning like an evil mist of blood and fire, while the stars blenched before it. And day by day, from peasants, priests, woodcutters and others who came to the abbey, the Benedictines heard tales of fearsome and mysterious depredations. Dead wolves were found with their chines laid open and the white marrow gone; and an ox and a horse were treated in like fashion. Then, it seemed, the unknown beast grew bolder—or else it wearied of such humble prey as the creatures of farm and forest.

At first, it did not strike at living men, but assailed the dead like some foul eater of carrion. Two freshly buried corpses were found lying in the cemetery at Ste. Zenobie, where the thing had dug them from their graves and had bared their vertebræ. In each case, only a little of the marrow had been eaten; but, as if in rage or disappointment, the cadavers had been torn asunder, and the tatters of their flesh were mixed with the rags of their cerements. From this, it would seem that only the spinal marrow of creatures newly killed was pleasing to the monster.

Thereafterward, the dead were not again molested. But on the night following the desecration of the graves, two charcoal-burners, who plied their trade in the forest not far from Perigon, were slain in their hut. Other charcoal-burners, dwelling near by, heard the shrill screams that fell to sudden silence; and peering fearfully through the chinks of their bolted doors, they saw anon in the starlight the departure of a black, obscenely glowing shape that issued from the hut. Not till dawn did they dare to verify the fate of their fellows, who had been served in the same manner as the stag, the wolves and the corpses.

Theophile, the abbot of Perigon, was much exercised over this evil that had chosen to manifest itself in the neighborhood and whose depredations were all committed within a few hours' journey of the abbey. Pale from over-strict austerities and vigils, he called the monks before him in assembly; and a martial ardor against the minions of Asmodai blazed in his hollowed eyes as he spoke.

“Truly,” he said, “there is a great devil among us, that has risen with the comet from Malebolge. We, the Brothers of Perigon, must go forth with cross and holy water to hunt the devil in its hidden lair, which lies haply at our very portals.”

So, on the forenoon of that same day, Theophile, together with Gerome and six others chosen for their hardihood, sallied forth and made search of the forest for miles around. They entered with lit torches and lifted crosses the deep caves to which they came, but found no fiercer thing than wolf or badger. Also, they searched the crumbling vaults of the deserted

castle of Faussesflammes, which was said to be haunted by vampires. But nowhere could they trace the monster or find any sign of its lairing.

With nightly deeds of terror, beneath the comet's blasting, the middle summer went by. Men, women, children, to the number of more than forty, were done to death by the Beast, which, though seeming to haunt mainly the environs of the abbey, ranged afield at times even to the shores of the river Isoile and the gates of La Frenâie and Ximes. There were those who beheld it by night, a black and slithering foulness clad in changeable luminescence; but no man saw it by day. And always the thing was silent, uttering no sound; and was swifter in its motion than the weaving viper.

Once, it was seen by moonlight in the abbey garden, as it glided toward the forest between rows of peas and turnips. Then, coming in darkness, it struck within the walls. Without waking the others, on whom it must have cast a Lethæan spell, it took Brother Gerome, slumbering on his pallet at the end of the row, in the dormitory. And the fell deed was not discovered till daybreak, when the monk who slept nearest to Gerome awakened and saw his body, which lay face downward with the back of the robe and the flesh beneath in bloody tatters.

A week later, it came and dealt likewise with Brother Augustin. And in spite of exorcisms and the sprinkling of holy water at all doors and windows, it was seen afterward, gliding along the monastery halls; and it left an unspeakably blasphemous sign of its presence in the chapel. Many believed that it menaced the abbot himself; for Brother Constantin the cellarer, returning late from a visit to Vyones, saw it by starlight as it climbed the outer wall toward that window of Theophile's cell which faced the great forest. And seeing Constantin, the thing dropped to the ground like a huge ape and vanished among the trees.

Great was the scandal of these happenings, and the consternation of the monks. Sorely, it was said, the matter preyed on the abbot, who kept his cell in unremitting prayer and vigil. Pale and meager as a dying saint he grew, mortifying the flesh till he tottered with weakness; and a feverish illness devoured him visibly.

More and more, apart from this haunting of the monastery, the horror fared afield, even invading walled towns. Toward the middle of August, when the comet was beginning to decline a little, there occurred the grievous death of Sister Therese, the young and beloved niece of Theophile, killed by the hellish Beast in her cell at the Benedictine convent of Ximes. On this occasion the monster was met by late passers in the streets, and others watched it climb the city ramparts, running like some enormous beetle or spider on the sheer stone as it fled from Ximes to regain its hidden lair.

In her dead hands, it was told, the pious Therese held tightly clasped a letter from Theophile in which he had spoken at some length of the dire happenings at the monastery, and had confessed his grief and despair at being unable to cope with the Satanic horror.

All this, in the course of the summer, came to me in my house at Ximes. From the beginning, because of my commerce with occult things and the powers of darkness, the unknown Beast was the subject of my concern. I knew that it was no creature of earth or of the terrene hells; but regarding its actual character and genesis I could learn no more at first than any other. Vainly I consulted the stars and made use of geomancy and necromancy; and the familiars whom I interrogated professed themselves ignorant, saying that the Beast was altogether alien and beyond the ken of sublunar spirits.

Then I bethought me of that strange, oracular ring which I had inherited from my fathers, who were also wizards. The ring had come down from ancient Hyperborea, and had once been the property of the sorcerer Eibon. It was made of a redder gold than any that the Earth had yielded in latter cycles, and was set with a large purple gem, somber and smoldering, whose like is no longer to be found. In the gem an antique demon was held captive, a spirit from pre-human worlds, which would answer the interrogation of sorcerers.

So, from a rarely opened casket, I brought out the ring and made such preparations as were needful for the questioning. And when the purple stone was held inverted above a small brazier filled with hotly burning amber, the demon made answer, speaking in a shrill voice that was like the singing of fire. It told me the origin of the Beast, which had come from the red comet, and belonged to a race of stellar devils that had not visited the Earth since the foundering of Atlantis; and it told me the attributes of the Beast, which, in its own proper form, was invisible and intangible to men, and could manifest itself only in a fashion supremely abominable. Moreover, it informed me of the one method by which the Beast could be vanquished, if overtaken in a tangible shape. Even to me, the student of darkness, these revelations were a source of horror and surprize. And for many reasons, I deemed the mode of exorcism a doubtful and perilous thing. But the demon had sworn that there was no other way.

Musing on that which I had learned, I waited among my books and alembics; for the stars had warned me that my intervention would be required in good time.

To me, following the death of Sister Therese, there came privily the marshal of Ximes, together with the abbot Theophile, in whose worn features and bowed form I descried the ravages of mortal sorrow and horror and humiliation. And the two, albeit with palpable hesitancy, asked my advice and assistance in the laying of the Beast.

"You, Messire le Chaudronnier," said the marshal, "are reputed to know the arcanic arts of sorcery, and the spells which summon and dismiss demons. Therefore, in dealing with this devil, it may be that you shall succeed where all others have failed. Not willingly do we employ you in the matter, since it is not seemly for the church and the law to ally themselves with wizardry. But the need is desperate, lest the demon should take other victims. In return for your aid we can promise you a goodly reward of gold and a guarantee of lifelong immunity from all inquisition which your doings might otherwise invite. The Bishop of Ximes, and the Archbishop of Vyones, are privy to this offer, which must be kept secret."

"I ask no reward," I replied, "if it be in my power to rid Averoigne of this scourge. But you have set me a difficult task, and one that is haply attended by strange perils."

"All assistance that can be given you shall be yours to command," said the marshal. "Men-at-arms shall attend you, if need be."

Then Theophile, speaking in a low, broken voice, assured me that all doors, including those of the abbey of Perigon, would be opened at my request, and that everything possible would be done to further the laying of the fiend.

I reflected briefly, and said:

"Go now, but send to me, an hour before sunset, two men-at-arms, mounted, and with a third steed. And let the men be chosen for their valor and discretion: for this very night I shall visit Perigon, where the horror seems to center."

Remembering the advice of the gem-imprisoned demon, I made no preparation for the journey, except to place upon my index finger the ring of Eibon, and to arm myself with a

small hammer, which I placed at my girdle in lieu of a sword. Then I awaited the set hour, when the men and the horses came to my house, as had been stipulated.

The men were stout and tested warriors, clad in chain-mail, and carrying swords and halberds. I mounted the third horse, a black and spirited mare, and we rode forth from Ximes toward Perigon, taking a direct and little-used way which ran through the werewolf-haunted forest.

My companions were taciturn, speaking only in answer to some question, and then briefly. This pleased me; for I knew they would maintain a discreet silence regarding that which might occur before dawn. Swiftly we rode, while the sun sank in a redness as of welling blood among the tall trees; and soon the darkness wove its thickening webs from bough to bough, closing upon us like some inexorable net of evil. Deeper we went, into the brooding woods; and even I, the master of sorceries, trembled a little at the knowledge of all that was abroad in the darkness.

Undelayed and unmolested, however, we came to the abbey at late moonrise, when all the monks, except the aged porter, had retired to their dormitory. The abbot, returning at sunset from Ximes, had given word to the porter of our coming, and he would have admitted us; but this, as it happened, was no part of my plan. Saying I had reason to believe the Beast would re-enter the abbey that very night, I told the porter my intention of waiting outside the walls to intercept it, and merely asked him to accompany us in a tour of the building's exterior, so that he could point out the various rooms. This he did, and during the tour, he indicated a certain window in the second story as being that of Theophile's cell. The window faced the forest, and I remarked the abbot's rashness in leaving it open. This, the porter told me, was his invariable custom, in spite of the oft-repeated demoniac invasions of the monastery. Behind the window we saw the glimmering of a taper, as if the abbot were keeping late vigil.

We had committed our horses to the porter's care. After he had conducted us around the building and had left us, we returned to the space before Theophile's window and began our long watch.

Pale and hollow as the face of a corpse, the moon rose higher, swimming above the somber oaks, and pouring a spectral silver on the gray stone of the abbey walls. In the west the comet flamed among the lusterless signs, veiling the lifted sting of the Scorpion as it sank.

We waited hour by hour in the shortening shadow of a tall oak, where none could see us from the windows. When the moon had passed over, sloping westward, the shadow began to lengthen toward the wall. All was mortally still, and we saw no movement, apart from the slow shifting of the light and shade. Half-way between midnight and dawn the taper went out in Theophile's cell, as if it had burned to the socket; and thereafter the room remained dark.

Unquestioning, with ready weapons, the men-at-arms companioned me in that vigil. Well they knew the demonian terror which they might face before dawn; but there was no trepidation in their bearing. And knowing much that they could not know, I drew the ring of Eibon from my finger, and made ready for that which the demon had directed me to do.

The men stood nearer than I to the forest, facing it perpetually according to a strict order that I had given. But nothing stirred in the fretted gloom; and the slow night ebbed; and the skies grew paler, as if with morning twilight. Then, an hour before sunrise, when the shadow of the great oak had reached the wall and was climbing toward Theophile's window, there came the thing I had anticipated. Very suddenly it came, and without forewarning of its nearness, a horror of hellish red light, swift as a kindling, wind-blown flame, that leapt from the forest gloom and sprang upon us where we stood stiff and weary from our night-long vigil.

One of the men-at-arms was borne to the ground, and I saw above him, in a floating redness as of ghostly blood, the black and semi-serpentine form of the Beast. A flat and snakish head, without ears or nose, was tearing at the man's armor with sharp, serrate teeth, and I heard the teeth clash and grate on the linked iron. Swiftly I laid the ring of Eibon on a stone I had placed in readiness, and broke the dark jewel with a blow of the hammer that I carried.

From the pieces of the lightly shattered gem, the disemprisoned demon rose in the form of a smoky fire, small as a candle-flame at first, and greatening like the conflagration of piled fagots. And, hissing softly with the voice of fire, and brightening to a wrathful, terrible gold, the demon leapt forward to do battle with the Beast, even as it had promised me, in return for its freedom after cycles of captivity.

It closed upon the Beast with a vengeful flaring, tall as the flame of an auto-da-fe, and the Beast relinquished the man-at-arms on the ground beneath it, and writhed back like a burnt serpent. The body and members of the Beast were loathfully convulsed, and they seemed to melt in the manner of wax and to change dimly and horribly beneath the flame, undergoing an incredible metamorphosis. Moment by moment, like a werewolf that returns from its beasthood, the thing took on the wavering similitude of man. The unclean blackness flowed and swirled, assuming the weft of cloth amid its changes, and becoming the folds of a dark robe and cowl such as are worn by the Benedictines. Then, from the cowl, a face began to peer, and the face, though shadowy and distorted, was that of the abbot Theophile.

This prodigy I beheld for an instant; and the men also beheld it. But still the fire-shaped demon assailed the abhorrently transfigured thing, and the face melted again into waxy blackness, and a great column of sooty smoke arose, followed by an odor as of burning flesh commingled with some mighty foulness. And out of the volumed smoke, above the hissing of the demon, there came a single cry in the voice of Theophile. But the smoke thickened, hiding both the assailant and that which it assailed; and there was no sound, other than the singing of fed fire.

At last, the sable fumes began to lift, ascending and disappearing amid the boughs, and a dancing golden light, in the shape of a will-o'-the-wisp, went soaring over the dark trees toward the stars. And I knew that the demon of the ring had fulfilled its promise, and had now gone back to those remote and ultra-mundane deeps from which the sorcerer Eibon had drawn it down in Hyperborea to become the captive of the purple gem.

The stench of burning passed from the air, together with the mighty foulness; and of that which had been the Beast there was no longer any trace. So I knew that the horror born of the red comet had been driven away by the fiery demon. The fallen man-at-arms had risen, unharmed beneath his mail, and he and his fellow stood beside me, saying naught. But I knew that they had seen the changes of the Beast, and had divined something of the truth. So, while the moon grew gray with the nearness of dawn, I made them swear an awful oath of secrecy, and enjoined them to bear witness to the statement I must make before the monks of Perigon.

Then, having settled this matter, so that the good renown of the holy Theophile should suffer no calumny, we aroused the porter. We averred that the Beast had come upon us unaware, and had gained the abbot's cell before we could prevent it, and had come forth again, carrying Theophile with its snakish members as if to bear him away to the sunken comet. I had exorcised the unclean devil, which had vanished in a cloud of sulfurous fire and vapor; and, most unluckily, the abbot had been consumed by the fire. His death, I said, was a

true martyrdom, and would not be in vain: the Beast would no longer plague the country or bedevil Perigon, since the exorcism I had used was infallible.

This tale was accepted without question by the Brothers, who grieved mightily for their good abbot. Indeed, the tale was true enough, for Theophile had been innocent, and was wholly ignorant of the foul change that came upon him nightly in his cell, and the deeds that were done by the Beast through his loathfully transfigured body. Each night the thing had come down from the passing comet to assuage its hellish hunger; and being otherwise impalpable and powerless, it had used the abbot for its energumen, molding his flesh in the image of some obscene monster from beyond the stars.

It had slain a peasant girl in Ste. Zenobie on that night while we waited behind the abbey. But thereafter the Beast was seen no more in Averoigne; and its murderous deeds were not repeated.

In time the comet passed to other heavens, fading slowly; and the black terror it had wrought became a varying legend, even as all other bygone things. The abbot Theophile was canonized for his strange martyrdom; and they who read this record in future ages will believe it not, saying that no demon or malign spirit could have prevailed thus upon true holiness. Indeed, it were well that none should believe the story: for thin is the veil betwixt man and the godless deep. The skies are haunted by that which it were madness to know; and strange abominations pass evermore between earth and moon and athwart the galaxies. Unnamable things have come to us in alien horror and will come again. And the evil of the stars is not as the evil of Earth.

[The end of *The Beast of Averoigne* by Clark Ashton Smith]