

The Death of Halpin Chalmers

Perry Grayson

“The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is sarcasm, and the oldest and strongest form of cynicism is sardonic terror of the commonplace.”

-Timmeus Gaylord, *Sardonic Terror in Literature* (1926)

An incident regarding a man dead for half a century occurred while I was working on a newspaper article. Before February 1994 I'd never even heard the name Halpin Chalmers. When I'd been given a position with the *Partidgeville Gazette*, I was just a young writer struggling to make a living. I couldn't gripe about the stories I'd been sent out to cover, because no matter how oddball they were it put food in my belly and checks in the landlady's hands. Plus, I believe no one could possibly experience such a singular event slugging it out working at some fast food joint.

But certainly Halpin Chalmers, the occult author of *The Secret Watchers*, was much more than the sort of thing I'd spied pot-smoking pizza delivery boys rambling about. There was something in common between those two different types of people. I'd come across the word *narcotics* in a quote from the police officer who spoke to the press about Halpin Chalmers' 1928 death on microfilm in the *New York Herald Tribune* while visiting Miskatonic University by bus on my latest assignment.

The drug was called Liao, and pellets of this substance—similar to nuggets of hash—had been the only thing found aside from the body of Chalmers in a room above Smithwick & Isaac’s Jewelry Store. I’d never heard of Liao. I’d assumed it was a rarity piped over the Pacific from China and shuttled across the U.S. by illegal aliens scrambling through Chinatowns in various major cities across middle America. But to me, at first, Halpin Chalmers seemed no different a quack than Aleister Crowley, professing to behold visions of some supreme evil force at the center of the universe while smoking opiates through the snaking tubes of a hookah.

“Funny,” I thought to myself, “how they like to imitate the hashish-eaters. They’re ancient history and they professed to see not only the future, but through all layers of time and dimension—at once!”

Upon returning to Partridgeville, I decided it was time to check with the police about their records on the subject and ask some questions about *other things*. The station lies on the backside of Angell Hill, and the building hasn’t changed in the days since Halpin Chalmers and his friend Fred Carstairs once prowled the same streets in front of Smithwick & Isaac’s. I passed the old pharmacy on the corner. In the 1920s and thirties, I’m told it used to be called Korie’s “Candy Store” instead of “Pharmacy.” The whole idea of Halpin Chalmers’ death brought to mind the weird stories that I know filled the pulp magazines on those old candy store racks, with titles like *Strange Tales*, *Thrilling Mystery*, and *Horror Stories*—and suspicious author names on the covers, such as *Justin Case*, *Hugh Speer* and *Peter Held*!

In the bustling stationhouse I walked over the slippery, faded yellow linoleum towards the reception desk.

“Mitch Sonners here to see Sergeant Scholl in narcotics,” I told the blue-haired lady whose long acrylic nails were pounding away at a battered computer keyboard. I assumed the thing was once white, but it had taken on a sickly yellow tinge. If it’d been human, you’d think it had Hepatitis-C. The secretary finished squawking into a phone resting in the crook of her neck.

“Oh,” harped the old lady, as she brought her pink-tinted bifocals to rest lower on her nose. She craned her neck up from the phone, though her rapid typography continued. “Go right in,” one hand continued to type, the other pointed to the swinging partition across from the desk. “He’s expectin’ ya, sweetie.”

She buzzed a switch under the desk and I crossed through into the inner workings of the Partridgeville Police Department.

“Halpin Chalmers... Halpin Chalmers...” The man in the black uniform flipped his gray head to the side and whispered half to himself.

“That’s right, Sergeant, Chalmers was the man’s name,” I said with a stiff lip.

“Hmm... Now let me remember,” Scholl pinched the bridge of his nose between his forefinger and thumb and stepped over to a gigantic metal file cabinet taking up the entire wall opposite the Narcotics office.

“Ancient history, isn’t it?”

“Uh, yeah. Chalmers, huh? Your boy’s Halpin F. Chalmers, one of the strangest cases ever in these parts,” answered Scholl, throwing down a legal-sized file folder on his desk. The label was typed in faded pica characters on the flimsy manila folder, which was once canary yellow but now looked like the beige color brush which lined the hills on the sides of the dry Miskatonic River.

“Well—” I began, “is there anything you can tell me that I don’t already know from the old *Gazette* article and oh bee? And what about...”

“Look, Sonners,” the Sergeant fumed, “you’ve got to keep a lid on this. This case was thrown in here like a mess over fifty years ago. We’re talkin’ cold case files here. *Dead* cold. We’re talkin’ Black Dahlia or Jack the Ripper here. Only much weirder. What d’ya want me to do, manufacture an answer out of my ass?”

“But... But you’re the only ones who could possibly know for sure—”

“Sonners, that old man Chalmers was a kook, a certifiable loon not far above Satan worshipers and religious zealots.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because his book, *The Secret Watchers*, was banned back in the Forties in every library from here to Auburn, California. They added this little update to the file,” Scholl slapped a grid-marked piece of paper in front of him.

“You’re right. All *but* Miskatonic University.”

Scholl paused and ran a wide hand through his gray flat top, shaking his head slightly.

“And about that drug?”

“I’ve been around here for years, Sonners, but I ain’t the one who first took this case, nor would I expect anyone to know much about the whole mess. Chalmers’ body was found with some kind of bluish slime all over it. It was like a blue elephant used him for a snot rag. But the coroner did an autopsy—” he kept looking at the old report, “and didn’t find much wrong with the cadaver—for most all respects Halpin Chalmers should’ve been able to walk up from that room and live just like you or I. It was as if everything in his body just stopped dead in its tracks, with no apparent cause. Probably over—”

“Probably related to his drug habit, right?”

“Yeah, that’s what they said then—and what I’m telling you now, Sonners. Halpin Chalmers was an old coot who smoked too much out of a bong. He probably got a taste for smack and startin’ havin’ a real party in his head. Says here the guy plastered up all the goddamn corners in that room he rented above Smithwick and Isaac’s, like some kinda paranoid schizophrenic lost in a world of his own.

“They all say it, ya know: ‘They’re coming to get me. They’re coming to get you.’ Ya know the deal?”

“And what about Liao—the drug?”

“Well, that’s another story. The forensics found only traces of an unknown substance in this guy’s bloodstream, and it can’t be proven that the substance is the same as in those pellets they found—nor if they’re actually what Chinamen call Liao. It’s a mythical drug—and if it were really here, then we’d have a hell of a lot of more nut cases to attend to than just these high school kids parading around on crystal meth. Next thing you’re gonna tell me there’s a craze among queers for shoving Liao suppositories up their asses.”

“So what you’re saying, Sergeant, is that you can’t—”

“Nope. Sorry, kid, this ain’t gonna be much, but I really can’t help you. The case was never officially closed. The coroner couldn’t find a cause of death, and this here file’s been sitting here away from the public eye for a while. If you want you, can have xeroxes of the whole thing, but it ain’t going to tell you much more than I’ve already said or that your boys at the *Gazette* already knew back in the Thirties, right after Chalmers kicked the bucket. They did a lot of prowling then for a coupla years...”

“And I’ll do a lot of prowling now, thanks.”

“Oh, and Sonners... You might wanna track down Fred Carstairs. *If he’s still alive*. Says here he never did really talk about the whole thing, even though he was the last person to see Chalmers. He clammed up for years, and the account he did write was fragmentary at best. The inspectors back then *knew* he was holdin’ something back—that he wasn’t givin’ ’em the whole picture.

“*Good luck* finding out any more from him than we already have—he might’ve left Partridgeville a long time ago. There isn’t a peep on him in these reports after the Thirties.”

“Okay, Sarge...”

He ushered me out into the hall and had me wait at the reception area, while he had a secretary fiddle with the copy machine in the corner. They handed me

a sheaf of flimsy papers, smudged because the copier couldn't really make clarity out of the faded type and pulpy paper from a bygone era. Just as I turned to leave two officers came waltzed in dragging a disheveled man with greasy salt and pepper hair and chalky, pale skin in a straightjacket. The man couldn't even stand on his own. The two policemen handled the oil-stained guy with latex gloves, as if he carried the plague. Maybe, I thought, they'd dosed him full of thorazine.

"Another one for the pen," called one of the officers. "Had to stun him. He was beginning to get violent."

I was heading out the door just as I heard the last bit from the second man in uniform, "May have to call Miskatonic State on this one—he's buck nutty."

I was beginning to feel swamped with all the work the *Gazette* was throwing me, so stopping to ask questions was out of the question. Instead, I decided to return to my apartment and go over what portions of the Chalmers file that had been given to me. Somehow I knew another reporter from the *Gazette* would get the scoop on the aggravated, mentally disturbed man who'd been downed with a stun gun.

"Cause of death," I read aloud to myself, "poison. Substance unknown."

The papers were flecked with gray blots and I rustled through them to find a letter and report from James Morton, chemist and bacteriologist for the Partridgeville Chemical Laboratories to Deputy Sergeant Douglas, then of the Partridgeville Sheriffs. Apparently the blue slime Chalmers was covered with had contained living matter, "*cells which didn't* contain the 'bodies' known as enzymes.

"But then," I ran my thumb over the stubble on my chin and leaned back on the couch, "most animals secrete enzymes in order to digest or ingest their food—like flies. *Flies?*"

It was like remembering some kind of thing I'd filed away in my head as a kid in elementary school science class: flies throw up on their food in order to ingest it. So, was Chalmers somehow being prepared to be *eaten*? I started to think just how absurd I was becoming just thinking of something so preposterous.

In the morning, back at the *Gazette* office, I spoke with the Book Review editor, Joshua Saint, about what Sergeant Scholl had told me the day before.

“Josh, the Sarge said that there was a chance this occult writer Halpin Chalmers—who I'm doing the article on—had a friend who's still alive today. Granted he might be dead, but if there's a chance that he's out there, I'll *need* to see him. Can you track something down for me on a guy named Fred Carstairs?”

“Sure, Mitch,” he nodded. “I should be able to find something out. See ya in a few minutes.”

I gave Josh a slap on the back and returned to my little cubicle outside in the main office. I used the time to pore over the photocopied reports again.

“Hey Mitch, found something,” came the call from the other room.

“What?” I came running.

“Frederick Carstairs Junior, was an occult author, friend and correspondent of Halpin Chalmers, according to the reference book *Modern Scribblers*. He was nicknamed Frank by your boy Chalmers because of his blunt honesty. Carstairs lived in Partridgeville for most of his life, save for a brief few visits to New York. According to this he was born in 1903 and lives on the edge of Mulligan Wood. In other words in the sticks.”

“Really? Does it mention anything about his still being *with us*, I mean with the living?”

“No, Mitch—the book's several years old, so you'll have to find that one out by yourself. But it does say that in 1975 he wrote a critical biography of his

friend called *Secret Watcher: The Life and Death of Halpin Chalmers*. And his agent is listed as one Peter Hughes, whose address is given as being in New York. Perhaps you might—”

“Look him up?” I asked. “Sure thing.”

“It does give a phone number, but again, this is a coupla years old. The publisher of the book, Bloomnote Press, went under about two and a half years back.”

“Thanks, Josh. You’re a lifesaver,” I remarked as I ran out of the building in search of a pay phone.

The booth was marked up with curious graffiti. One pocket knife carving depicted a giant octopus chomping up a tiny stick figure with the words “Yummy humans!!” beneath it.

I dialed the number while chuckling at the little cartoon under my breath.

“Yes,” came the voice from the dry throat on the other end.

“Mister Hughes? Peter Hughes?”

“Yes...”

“Peter, my name is Mitch Sonners, I’m with the *Partridgeville Gazette*. I’m doing an article on—”

“It wouldn’t be about Halpin Chalmers would it?”

“How did you know?”

“Premonition, you might say. Now, what was it you wanted to ask me?”

“Well, I was told that a Mister Fred Carstairs was Chalmers’ best friend and that he might be able to provide some reminiscences and information on his friend for my piece in the *Gazette*.”

“I’m afraid that’d be quite impossible. You see, Fred’s been dead now for two years.”

“That’s too bad,” I said. “Did he have any relatives, anyone who maybe knew something about Chalmers?”

“Well, I’m afraid that Ida—that’s Fred’s wife—died about a year after he passed away. That was a year ago, by the way, and since then no one’s come forward with anything. Except me. I’m always interested in *Chalmersian* scholarship. In fact, I regularly contribute to *Chalmers Studies*—that’s a journal published by Secret Watcher Press in Arkham.”

“Carstairs’ entry in *Modern Scribblers* said you were his agent...”

“Not really *agent*, Mister Sonners. I sold a few things for Fred in his later years when he could no longer really do much work. Maybe a total of four in all, mostly articles rehashing the same old recollections of Halpin Chalmers that he’d made thirty or forty years ago.”

“Well, would you mind giving me just a little info?”

“As I said, I’m always interested in Chalmersian studies. You say you’re with the *Partridgeville Gazette*? Well, I have to come up there anyway, now that Fred’s family monument is to be engraved with his name, so perhaps we could meet later this afternoon.”

“Yeah, by all means. I’ll give you my address—”

Peter Hughes in person was a man of medium height and middle age, with a receding brown hairline, and crooked teeth. He wore weathered gray corduroy pants and a yellow shirt with a crooked navy blue tie. I led him to the couch and offered him some coffee, and we settled down for a few hours of talk.

“Well, you see Ida Carstairs was a very artistic—but not entirely sane—woman. You might say that she and Frank, I mean Fred—Halpin used to call him the former because he loathed Fred’s taste in realistic literature—was somehow so understanding of her grandiose thoughts of the opera and the stage. But she *hated* people who were interested in Fred solely for his association with Halpin. She used to call them *Chalmerdesians* or degenerates. And she even called Fred her little *idiot* sometimes. You know, like in Dostoyevsky?”

“Really? Sounds pretty sad.”

“Yeah, and she actually used, little by little, as time went along, Halpin’s letters to Fred to paper the cage of her pet bird! Can you believe it? The most incredible discovery in all of occult author studies and she let her parrot turd on them! It would’ve meant incredible things to me and the other Chalmers scholars.

“So there you have it, Sonners. It’s literally a load of crap. I know really no more than you do. Perhaps a little *more*, as I’ve read Halpin’s *The Secret Watchers* and also Fred’s memoir of Ech Cee, as we scholars like to call him.”

“There’s really no more you can tell me? What about drugs? Did Fred take them, or did he know exactly what Halpin Chalmers was popping?”

“Fred never touched narcotics in his life. An old friend told him he was ‘too sensitive an individual’ to smoke dope. People thought he did because of what he wrote, but the only thing he ever did was smoke a pipe—tobacco—and drink a lot of Chianti at dinner.

“And I really can’t say just what Ech Cee did, because I wasn’t there; I never knew him. He died back in 1928, remember.”

“Yes, I have the obituary copied from the *Gazette* microfilm.”

“Believe it or not, I actually have Fred’s personal copy of *The Secret Watchers*, which was inscribed to him by Ech Cee himself. But, pardon me, you’re not a collector.”

“Perhaps I should be, if it’d help with my article...”

“Mister Sonners, it’s getting late now, and I really have to get to my hotel room and prepare for the morning trip to the cemetery in Mulligan Wood.”

And with that Hughes left behind his drained coffee cup and sauntered off to his car to find a place for the night.

I took the opportunity to visit the Angell Hill Bookshop that afternoon, even though I doubted I’d find precisely what I was looking for. I pawed through bookcases riddled with just as many dust bunnies as paperback books. Most were old, worn, and tattered with yellow, waterlogged and dog-eared pages. The asking price for most was far beyond what I felt someone would pay for such inconsequential and undesirable books. Which is why they’d been sitting there for so long without a buyer. I must’ve prowled through the place about three times over when I came upon the revelation which caused my pulse to virtually double and the sweat to bead on my forehead. There, amongst the dust-jacketless book club editions of numerous 1970s new wave science fiction novels, was a misplaced copy of *The Secret Watchers* by Halpin Chalmers. My hands automatically rushed to open to the first leaf. \$7.50 seems to be the going rate at which books are sold when a dealer has no clue as to what their true value is. So, with a rapid heartbeat and shaky step, I hastily rushed to the counter and paid cash for the black-bound volume that was still in very good shape for its age. I might add it was *the only* copy in the entire store, which I thought of as odd, since Partridgeville was the birthplace of Halpin Chalmers.

While I was putting a ten dollar bill in front of the proprietor, he scrutinized my face, no doubt saying to himself, “What kind of sicko reads this sort of trash. Why it ought to be banned!” But he couldn’t argue with money going into his pocket.

He dug through his beaten register for change. “Oh crap! I’m all out of ones, and I don’t even have any silver...”

“That’s quite all right,” I said, trying not to betray the fact that the book could be sold in fine condition for four figures. “Keep the change. Much obliged!”

The book dealer didn’t even bob his head in response. I walked out, hearing the lonely chime of the rusty bell hooked to the wooden door.

I took the short distance up Angell Hill to my apartment on Doty Avenue by foot. The afternoon was beginning to dim as I put my key in the lock. Once inside I threw my wallet and keys on the dinner table and unrolled the sofa bed. I brushed the crumbs off the sheets and propped my weary head up on a pillow. Extracting *The Secret Watchers* from the plastic trash bag, I started first by running my fingers over the phosphorescent gold lettering on the spine and boards. I knew this wasn’t a cheap book. With the volume open in my hands, I wiped lines of dust from the first leaves and began reading the preface, written by Fred Carstairs.

It seemed to me that no one must’ve remembered that the foreword to the book was by Carstairs, as if they just blotted him from memory. A short time after I began Section One I must’ve dozed off. The book fell to rest at my covered knees, my glasses still dangling off my nose.

I awoke around dawn, about 5 a.m. in these parts, feeling as hot as though I’d been left out in the Sahara under the torturous red face of the sun. I hurled the covers off, sending the book clattering to the floor. It snapped closed, resting flat on the threadbare carpet. I had a cold shower while trying to recall just what it was I’d dreamed. It was all so opaque, the dream being lit by dark purples and deep murky blues, until finally all went into blackness. And of course there was that cascade of brilliant flashes, as if I was being bombarded by the explosive force of three white-hot stars revolving around each other. The vague notion struck me as the jets of water hit me. In the dream I’d imagined myself able to at once experience the past, present, and future all as if they were happening at the same moment.

“But that couldn’t possibly be,” I thought. “It must just be another one of those quirky things Chalmers wrote about.”

Breakfasting on a donut, some coffee, and a slice of cheese, I poked diffidently at the morning *Gazette*. It told of an inmate’s escape from Miskatonic State Mental Facility’s ITU—in other words the violent ward. I only read a fourth of the article before dumping a few things into my briefcase and heading for the door. My curiosity was somewhat piqued by the mention of a break-in at the hardware store on Angell Hill. It said that the only things stolen were two trowels and a couple of plaster canisters.

After reading the few pages of the book that I had, I resolved to pay a visit to Peter Hughes, who I knew I’d find in Mansfield Point Cemetery on the edge of Mulligan Wood. He said he’d be attending to the formalities around having Carstairs’ name engraved on the family obelisk—and that he even had Ida Carstairs’ ashes to distribute atop Fred’s grave.

“Fred was so poor at the time of his death,” Hughes had said, “that he was buried in the most thrifty of coffins. Somewhere I’ve got a picture of me standing beside it. They brought the convicts out from Phillips Island to dig the grave at the height of a storm.”

I drove my dented shit-brown Ford Mustang out to the edge of Mulligan Wood, where the road starts to wind and is littered with potholes and caked with dust. I didn’t expect to find anyone in the guard shack when I drove up, but a withered, gray-haired man in a plaid flannel shirt greeted me.

“Hiya, sir. Anything I can do?”

“I’m looking for the Carstairs plot, the Fred Carstairs family plot,” I responded.

“Carstairs... Sure I’ve heard the name before, but I don’t think there’s a Carstairs plot in Mansfield Point. Wait—” he dug into a rusty metal file bin and pulled out a battered map book.

Somehow it didn't surprise me that this combination undertaker and guard hadn't ever heard of Fred Carstairs. It seems not many folks cared to know who he was. But I was amazed to find out that he hadn't talked to Hughes as he passed by the entrance on the way to conduct business matters and visit his one time acquaintance Mr. Carstairs.

While charting his way on the map, he asked, "Friend o' yours?"

"Nope. Just a wacky old occult writer."

"Ah, that explains it..."

"You mean no one's come here asking about visiting the Carstairs plot today?"

"Nope. You're the first one."

Scratching my head, I squinted into the sun and thought that perhaps Hughes hadn't arrived yet. At any rate, I figured I'd meet him at the plot.

"Here we go," he drawled. "Says here that tall monument of da Carstairs family's between Henderson and Symmes up in the far north corner of the cemetery. I've got a photocopy here for you."

The guard nodded as he drew a big "X" in black ink on the blurry sheet.

"Have a good one," dozed the guard, stretching against the back of his chair."

I trudged off in search of the Carstairs plot, and it took a full fifteen minutes to find the damned thing. It was half-hidden by overgrown brush and tall bushes, not to mention a bunch of other monuments in the same area that weren't marked on the map. Finally, after pulling back some dry vegetation from in front of a gravestone, I came upon the name Charles O. Carstairs, marked as having lived from 1859-1906.

“That must’ve been his grandfather.” I scratched my right ear. “The one who was in charge of sanitation on Ellis Island when the Statue of Liberty was installed.”

I stood for half an hour in front of the Carstairs monument, looking at the newly engraved “Frederick Carstairs (1901-1994)” plaque. Hughes had said that Fred was a bit coy about his age, but at this point Peter Hughes was becoming more than a little unreliable, as I distinctly recall him having said he’d be at the cemetery by 10 a.m.

‘Well, I’ll catch up with that flake later. Time for me to hit the road again and do some research.’

Part of Carstairs’ preface to *The Secret Watchers* had been printed in abridged form in a chapbook distributed to an elite group of aspiring young occult writers, much like an amateur press association, according to the edition I had picked up the day before. So, knowing I’d have a good chance of finding such materials in only a large university library, I set out to take advantage of Miskatonic University, where my *Partridgeville Gazette* ID allowed me all expenses paid access to otherwise costly materials.

That afternoon was mostly spent rifling through an actual old mailing of Chalmers’ old cronies’ small publications. Their amateur press association was called the Obscure Order of Tindalos, and most of their periodicals contained verse littered with allusions to Satan in one form or another—and far too many exclamation points. I did, however, find an annotation mentioning a semi-legit New England journal called the *Goodberg-Lockwood Weekly*. The librarians scurried around trying to help me out, though a couple of times I was brought the wrong journal or microfilm. Turning through three spools, I finally came upon a single half-page letter from Halpin Chalmers in *Goodberg-Lockwood*. The letter came in defense of Fred Carstairs’ first book of verse, *A Man from Krakatoa and Other Poems*, which had been privately printed by another member of the circle of Chalmers correspondents in an apparent limited edition

of 25 copies. Turning back to my battered old Mustang in the pay parking lot, I hightailed back to Partridgeville to catch Hughes.

The Miskatonic search had again turned up very little. It might've been just the sort of esoteric find that a Chalmersian scholar would publish in a modern occult journal, using the discovery as their claim to fame. But for me, it was just another indication of Chalmers' bizarre antics—and how his reputation far eclipsed that of his friend Fred Carstairs.

“Perhaps,” I thought, “my article should be more about Carstairs than his best friend! That might even spark some comments in *Chalmers Studies*, that mag Hughes mentioned.”

More than thirty miles went by on the nearly deserted highway as I made my way back to the office to report in. When I reached my desk around 4:30 p.m. there was a late-afternoon edition sitting smack-dab in the middle of it.

“NY Literary Agent & Editor Hughes Found Dead at the Partridgeville Inn,” ran the headline on the front page. I read further along: “Peter Hughes' body was found naked and splattered with traces of a slimy blue substance. Next to the body were found two tiny black and green pellets. The pellets and fluid were sent to the Partridgeville Chemical Laboratories for examination.”

“What?” I nearly shouted aloud to myself. “No wonder why he wasn't there!”

“Some of the room's furniture was thrown haphazardly into the locked bathroom. A trowel and container of plaster were also found amongst the materials in the back half of Hughes' hotel room,” the article went on.

“Sheesh!” I shook my head. “Just as crazy as all the others, huh? What a world!”

On my way out of the double doors in front of the *Gazette* Building I was stopped by Joshua Saint.

“That little headline I threw on your desk ought to add a bit to your article on that Chalmers fellow.”

“Right,” I said. “Always thinking of your bros, Josh,” I said, shaking his hand and heading out to the car.

Josh smiled. “But I don’t cater to buffoons!”

On my way up to the apartment, I recalled the headline from the early morning *Gazette*.

“Hmm... Hughes isn’t the only one who was a bit off his rocker. And what about that guy they had to taze and bring into the pen at the Partridgeville PD Station? He looked like he could’ve escaped from a state mental ward. Ah well, it takes all kinds these days. All kinds.”

I turned the key in the rickety lock and threw my stuff down on the scuffed secondhand coffee table, moving it out from in front of the sofa bed.

“Damn, Chalmers again,” I thought as I picked up the black book resting on the table.

“Might as well,” I said to the walls.

I rested my head against the cushions and began to peruse the second section of *The Secret Watchers*. The clock had barely struck nine by that time, and I’d only taken a break to wolf down a quick microwave dinner from the freezer. Once back in bed with the Chalmers volume, I leaned one arm against my right temple and continued to deluge my brain with Chalmersian references to beings that might possibly have originated in a fourth dimension beyond what is known to man—and that these entities could see all things on Earth and in the furthest reaches of the cosmos at once. Their native habitat, according to Chalmers, was in some kind of desert abyss in the depths of angular space.

“Bullshit!” I told myself aloud. “Angles and curves exist together on Earth just as much as up where the shuttles go up every few months.”

I can remember reading the final paragraph of Section Two before finally blacking out. Three names remained in my head while I had another pitch black dream. “Einstein and John Dee are strange bedfellows,” Chalmers had said. “Then, too, we cannot discount the accomplishments of Olaus Wormius and the often quoted Ibn Schacabao, without whom Dee would not have achieved the *English* translation.”

Right before falling into an unconscious state I asked myself, “What book is Chalmers referring to here? Did I miss something—did I forget to go to the bottom for a footnote?”

Ibn Schacabao sounded almost vaguely Latin to me, but somehow I couldn’t help thinking of how Chalmers mention of a desert and the intense heat of my apartment the night before conjured up images of the Middle Eastern landscape. Was there another name I’d forgotten—or that I’d seen mentioned in one of Fred Carstairs’ prose poems earlier in the day at Miskatonic U.?

My ears are normally sensitive, and I awake frequently some nights to the sound of car alarms going off two miles away on the other side of Angell Hill. From out of the pit of slumber, I cracked an eyelid halfway and thought I heard labored breathing coming from somewhere in the apartment. Somehow, before I’d fallen off to sleep, I must have flicked the switch on the bedside lamp, enveloping the studio apartment in inky darkness.

Carefully, without rustling, I attempted to reach for the light cord and turn the switch on. Just as I was doing that I heard the distinct scuff of shoes on the carpet. Then a fumbling, as if for something that fell on the floor.

The fluorescent light flickered on to reveal the matted, wiry salt and pepper hair of the strange stunned man I’d seen at the police station only two days before. My heart jumped into my throat. I blindly reached for something to help protect myself against the intruder.

Apparently he hadn’t noticed me yet. Nor had he taken aback to the light coming on. His arms were stretched out feebly towards the floor as if he was

straining against something in order to pick up the book that had tumbled from my chest onto the floor. His pupils were dilated and the whites of his eyes were bloodshot. His gaze was distant, as he ground his filthy, long nails into the volume and shakily put it in his grasp.

“They’re coming,” he mumbled, but not to me, to himself. “They’re almost here!

“I’ll have to be quick. I can smell them,” the maniac spoke in a hushed tone, as if he were talking to an unseen familiar, resting on his shoulder. “They are lean and athirst!”

I raised the long-necked metal stapler over my head to ward him off in case he tried anything, but apparently the lunatic’s eyes just burned right through me and saw past the walls as well. He had opened one palm, in which I noticed was one black pellet, which he brought up to his face, searching direly for his limp mouth.

“Huh? They’re watching me, they’re playing games with me, like some kind of cat and mouse before the pounce,” he raved. “*He’s* one of them now. I notice the lines of *his face!*”

I grabbed the cordless phone, dialed the police—and actually received a quick answer. Fortunately, I managed to keep an eye on the intruder’s blankly staring eyes while opening the front door and hurling out the trowel and plaster bucket the maniac must’ve brought with him.

“Right away, Mister Sonners” said the operator on the other end as I dropped the cordless phone and raised the stapler further, in case the intruder made another move.

“This is *his* book,” the intruder began rambling again, froth coming to his lips. “And *he* wants to come back. He won’t let me have it! *He wrote it.* But *he* seemed human—then.”

“What?” I asked to myself silently. “What the hell is he talking about?” I started to hear the sirens approaching. “Jeez, am I lucky I only live down the hill from the police station,” was all I could think as I kept glancing from the lunatic to the door, as he began pushing around the room in vain, looking for the stolen hardware that he’d brought with him. I’d thrown them out the door, but he obviously didn’t see me do it.

“They’re coming, they’re right before me now. Must block them out with the *sphere*. I can see *his* angles.”

I ducked into the kitchenette.

It was as if the intruder sensed the stolen materials were now outside the open door. He floundered toward it. This happened just as the cops had mounted the stairway to my apartment. Their guns were poised at the ready, I could see, just from leaning out the door after the escaped mental patient. One even had a stun gun raised high. Before the officers could shoot a charge or bullet at the flailing man, his voice capitulated into a high-pitched scream.

“Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! *Chaaaaalmers-s-ss—*”

Suddenly the intruder dropped dead—motionless—to the pavement with a resounding thud. It was as if his heart just stopped functioning. No convulsions, no writhing, nothing.

The police queried me for the reports. And I obliged them by telling precisely what I knew, just in case they might help me in turn with information on the whole sequence of events.

A gloved inspector had opened up the plaster can to find human ashes intermixed with the pasty substance, presumably *Ida Carstairs*’. The next day her urn had been discovered missing from the cemetery.

And the intruder’s name? I saw the police confiscate his wallet for evidence—the driver’s license read “James Morton II.” It was behind celluloid on a faded and torn business card from the Partridgeville Chemical Laboratories.

I could tell more, but it'll all be in a *Partridgeville Gazette* article in another couple of days. I'll have to use a pen name, of course, because all this mingling with occult writers could ruin *my reputation!*

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