



P E N G U I N  C L A S S I C S

**RAY RUSSELL**

*The Case Against Satan*

Foreword by LAIRD BARRON

## THE CASE AGAINST SATAN

RAY RUSSELL was born in 1924 in Chicago, Illinois, and served in the U. S. Army in the South Pacific during World War II. After the war, he attended the Chicago Conservatory of Music and the Goodman Memorial Theatre and soon became executive editor of *Playboy*, where he played a vital role in turning the magazine into a showcase for imaginative fiction. At *Playboy* Russell published such writers as Ray Bradbury, Kurt Vonnegut, Richard Matheson, Robert Bloch, and Charles Beaumont, while also editing many of the bestselling *Playboy* anthologies, including *The Playboy Book of Science Fiction and Fantasy* and *The Playboy Book of Horror and the Supernatural*. His first novel, *The Case Against Satan*, was published in 1962, and his best known work, *Sardonicus*, was called “perhaps the finest example of the modern gothic ever written” by Stephen King. His work also included publications in *The Paris Review* and several screenplays, including *Mr. Sardonicus*, *The Horror of It All*, and *X: The Man with the X-Ray Eyes*. Russell received the World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement in 1991. He passed away in Los Angeles in 1999.

LAIRD BARRON is an award-winning writer of horror fiction. He has received three Shirley Jackson awards, for his collections *The Imago Sequence and Other Stories* and *Occultation and Other Stories* and for his novella *Mysterium Tremendum*. He has also been nominated for the Crawford Award, the Sturgeon Award, the International Horror Guild Award, the World Fantasy Award, and the Locus Award. His other works include two novels, *The Light Is the Darkness* and *The Croning*, and a story collection, *The Beautiful Thing That Awaits Us All*. He currently lives in upstate New York.

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*Foreword by*  
LAIRD BARRON

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Version\_1

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For Henry

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Whether the insane man creates his hallucinations or whether insanity is precisely the power to perceive objective existences of another order, whether higher or lower, than humanity, no open-minded person can possibly pretend to say . . .

H. C. Goddard

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# Foreword

## *Diabolus Knocks*

“For the last few hours, time had been moving on wings of lead, dragged down by the relentless gravitational field of horror.”

—RAY RUSSELL

I am unable to read a book such as Ray Russell’s *The Case Against Satan* without experiencing a flashback to adolescence. My father, a Marine and Vietnam veteran, was also a determined agnostic. My mother converted to fire-breathing Christian fundamentalism during her late twenties. Try to imagine the breadth and depth of the resulting schism in our household. For many years our family resided deep in the Alaska wilderness in a rustic cabin. The isolation and inescapable proximity of one another lent an aspect of Spartan harrowing to my parents’ frequent pitched battles on the topic of spiritual belief as it pertained to life philosophy, and child rearing in particular.

Both parents read avidly. Despite her rigid faith that frowned upon a multitude of artistic expressions, my mother never could bear to destroy the trunks jammed with moldering paperbacks. Science fiction, westerns, pulp fantasy, and romance were represented, to be sure. However, scattered among this fare were darker, more subversive gems, such as *The Haunting of Hill House*, *Audrey Rose*, and *The Shining*. I read these and many others, always in secret, and always aware of the dire punishment that awaited should I be discovered polluting my mind with the literature of corruption. Consequently, I became quite fond of horror, the more blasphemous the better.

Always popular to some degree, visceral tales of the supernatural and the occult have resurged of late. Demonic possession, a staple of 1960s and 1970s cinema and book racks, powers recent film and television hits such as *The Conjuring*, *Oculus*, and the *American Horror Story* franchise. The aftermath of an exorcism as documented by reality television is the subject of *A Head Full of Ghosts*, a crime and suspense author Paul Tremblay’s new novel that received great attention when first acquired. There’s no question in my mind that Ray Russell’s *The Case Against Satan* is a primary source in the modern iteration of gothic horror. His novel preceded the new wave as well as canonical works of the occult such as Ira Levin’s *Rosemary’s Baby* and, of course, William Peter Blatty’s *The Exorcist*.

Russell ventured into the dark heart of the matter fifty-two years ago. *The Case Against Satan* chiefly concerns a triangle of human souls, two fighting to preserve the third from eternal damnation. Like all great struggles, it doesn’t lack for bloodshed or tears. Within this black triangle of two priests versus a young woman who may or may not be inhabited by Satan himself, there is an undercurrent of stylistic flourish. Russell writes with an austere, yet calculatedly lush, deployment of description that reminds me of Ingmar Bergman’s visual cinematic brilliance, and most especially *The Seventh Seal*. The tenor of the philosophical clashes between the old guard, Bishop Crimmings, and his younger protégé, Father Sargent, and, in turn, their sparring with the “demon,” is reminiscent of Bergman’s

knight crusader playing chess against Death. Bishop Crimmings remarks to Father Sargent, “with the years, we all become parodies of ourselves.” And in another instance, Russell describes the protestations of the “possessed” girl thusly: “She stopped laughing and screamed, like an animal falling upon a spear.” These lines embody a simple, incisive elegance that is indicative of the entire text.

That simplicity, that directness, is a potent technique. It enables the artist to best capture the essence of a subject that the mind’s eye has difficulty encompassing. The lack of padding or ostentation brings one oh, so very much nearer the howling truth scholars and poets have tried to broach for ages.

The story is ever the thing and stories that resonate the most are personal. During the latter years of my youth, I traveled across the Alaska Range and pedaled steadily behind a team of huskies along the frozen Yukon. There were moments when the sun coagulated between the teeth of distant peaks and the brass shell of sky peeled back to reveal the stars welded to a deeper darkness, and the moon would heave, yellow as an old cracked skull bone of some massive space-faring thing. I would be reminded with the cold that seeped up through the soles of my boots and stole into my blood that I was minute and impermanent, that every work of civilization is a speck upon the face of a speck floating upon an infinite abyss.

I would sometimes recall my mother’s severe conception of Almighty God, how time and space are naught save for the benefit of man’s feeble capacity to comprehend. The universe, vast beyond mortal reckoning, is a fixed point to the Lord. He exists outside such boundaries. *Within* those inconceivably vast boundaries, Lucifer holds dominion. No matter the distance, the Prince of Darkness is never farther away than a whisper.

Russell understood that fear and curiosity drive us. The ritual of exorcism is a compelling subject, and one that looms correspondingly large in the imagination. His descriptions do not flinch from sexuality or the grim reality of corruption and abuse within the Church, the family cell, or, indeed, all too many a human heart. His urbane approach belies a brutal, and occasionally savage, demolition of the polite and politic façade that adorns the basic infrastructure of civilization. Russell pits science and modern philosophy against tradition and superstition in a resulting classic. It’s the kind of book, brim with impertinent, perhaps even impious, queries that surely ruffled feathers in its time. Incest, rape, “whiskey priests,” vulgarity and lasciviousness, and yea, the moral failings of the men who wear the collar are confronted in their turn. I’ve no doubt this book will ruffle a few more feathers in years to come.

Any discussion of *The Case Against Satan* must level at least a mention of its relative, published eight years later, William Peter Blatty’s *The Exorcist*. In both novels, a pair of Catholic priests join forces to rid a young girl of an inhabiting demon. *The Case Against Satan* is enigmatic and elides a strict pronouncement of verified supernatural intrusion while *The Exorcist* drinks deeply of occult horror with a lurid fervor. Blatty’s novel is bombastic and sensationalistic, much further reaching in scope and setting; its protagonist, Regan, is younger, and the demonic presence, although denied at first by the parent, is eventually confirmed as a narrative reality. Blatty’s action is dramatic, his language explicit.

*The Exorcist* reads much like an expansion of Russell’s short novel, a supernatural thriller built upon the framework of a more naturalistic and restrained story, a story pared to its essential inspiration, a real-life exorcism. In its stripped refinement, Russell’s cuts a bit closer to the bone. The point of *The Exorcist* is the confrontation and ultimate (albeit at terrible cost and to temporary effect) defeat of evil. The point of *The Case Against Satan* is the discovery of truth. In both cases, the

participants meet with definitively mixed success.

Russell's subjects are timeless—the tension between rationalism and faith, and between the—  
aforementioned forces of good and evil. It is a tension ratcheted ever tighter by the verbal jousting of  
his protagonists, skeptic and true believer, respectively. Penitent and agnostic alike; Cro-Magnon,  
Neanderthal, and *Homo sapiens*—we have always longed for the numinous and the ineffable. From  
ancient petroglyphs to illuminated manuscripts to towering electric crucifixes, we have repeatedly and  
relentlessly demonstrated that longing.

We yearn for enlightenment regarding the elusive mysteries that attend death and what lies beyond  
its threshold. As long as we postulate the notion of an external force of malevolence, evil in the  
metaphysical sense, classic books squarely in the wheelhouse of the gothic and the occult, such as *The  
Case Against Satan*, will continue to enthrall modern audiences. To paraphrase the late Christopher  
Hitchens, religion was mankind's first and therefore worst tool for understanding the world. Yet for  
all that, mankind measures knowledge by the thimble. Scientific progress has diminished religion's  
absolute dominance over the hearts and minds of humanity, but inasmuch as traditions of millennia  
erode slowly and stubbornly, and inasmuch as the greater secrets of the universe remain a tantalizing  
mystery despite technological advances, holy texts and their teachings endure as sources of succor and  
fascination.

A tale well told regarding the struggle between good and evil will never go out of style. Good and  
evil are components of something larger than ourselves, an essential *something* we wish to understand  
yet likely never will in this existence and so resort to the wisdom of those who have taken a crack at  
it and come closest. Ray Russell is one who has assayed the challenge and, decades later, *The Case  
Against Satan* is our reward, a jigsaw puzzle that sketches the profiles of the divine and the infernal  
with a few pieces artfully left in his pocket.

LAIRD BARRO

## THE TWO SIDES OF MIDNIGHT

Perhaps because God has become a nodding Santa Claus with twinkling eyes and a spun glass beard; or because television spot announcements coo us into worship; or because posters painted by airbrush smoothies and written by slogansmiths assure us that the family that prays together stays together; or because religion has become an unnatural thing of all light and no shadow, a pious bonbon so nice, so sweet, so soporifically bland that a Karl Marx can call it the opium of the people not without justice; or because dread, blood, awe, the sense of primal forces and the element of terror—without which there can be no great love, great art, great faith—have been slowly and systematically subtracted from religion; perhaps for all or some of these reasons but, more likely, for reasons we are not equipped to understand, a priest of the Roman Catholic Church was put on trial one harrowing weekend in the second half of the twentieth century.

His trial began with a series of minor incidents worthy of remark. It is remarkable, for instance, that the parlor lights of St. Michael's rectory were blazing at the top of their wattage after midnight as the weekend began, for priests are forced by their profession to be early risers and early risers are generally early retirers.

It is still more remarkable that, for something more than an hour, two figures had been walking back and forth on the deserted sidewalk in front of the rectory, as if waiting for something or someone. A large man was one of these, a man burly of build and fiftyish of years; the other was a girl—pretty, pigtailed, in her teens, for her age precocious of figure.

As the door of the rectory finally opened, thrusting a yellow wedge of light into the darkness, these two made sure they were cloaked in shadow. A priest left the rectory. He walked half a block to a parked Buick, got into it, and was soon away. As the car turned the corner, the burly man and the teenage girl stepped out of the shadows, and began walking up the path in the direction of the rectory door. The girl hung back; the man seized her arm roughly and yanked her along, hissing angry words, but she escaped his grasp and ran away. The man started to call her, but thought better of making noise at such an hour. Resignedly, he walked swiftly after the girl.

It was a Friday night in late September, and unseasonably warm.

Some would say it was Saturday morning, for midnight had come and gone, but Father Gregory Sargent had other ideas. He and his predecessor, Father James Halloran, had returned to the rectory a short time before. Father Sargent, lifting a decanter, had asked, "A drop of brandy, Father Halloran? It's been a long day."

"No thank you," Father Halloran had replied.

"Do you mind if I . . ."

"Not if you wish."

Father Sargent, pouring himself a small pony of the liquor, had smiled. "I sense disapproval in your voice, Father."

"I'm sorry."

"And I know why—because you think I'm breaking the rules. But I'm not, really. Let me explain. We're required, of course, to abstain from such refreshments until at least after morning Mass. And because it's just past midnight, it's technically morning. That's your thinking, isn't it?"

"Well, yes . . ."

"Ah!" said Father Sargent triumphantly. "There's the rub, you see. You're working on Daylight Saving Time."

"And you?"

It was an old set piece of Father Sargent's. He always relished a short pause before springing the punch line. "God's Time, of course! According to Him, you see, it won't be tomorrow for another—" he consulted his wrist watch—"fifty-seven minutes. Therefore . . ." He lifted the glass to his lips and sipped the brandy.

Father Halloran tried, without too much success, to enter into the spirit. "Ingenious," he said.

Gregory Sargent was all too aware that the pleasantry had—as his theatrical friends would say—bombed. He knew Father Halloran was a rather humorless man, in addition to being in the neighborhood of sixty and thus some fifteen years Gregory's senior. Also, Father Halloran was tired, as was Gregory, for they had just returned from a final series of visits with certain parishioners, an affair designed to ease Gregory into his new parish.

"It's too bad," said Gregory, "that you have to leave just before the parish's big feast day."

"Yes," agreed Father Halloran. "I've always enjoyed St. Michael's Day—the special Mass, the special music. But the orphanage needs someone to take charge immediately."

"Are you sure you won't stay the night? It's terribly late."

"No," Father Halloran said. "If I start driving now I'll be at the orphanage before dawn, in time to get my work started. You see, they're expecting me in the morning, and I don't want them to be disappointed in me at the very beginning. It has taken longer than I planned to finish up things here at St. Michael's."

"But when will you sleep?"

"I don't sleep very much these days."

*Nor do I*, thought Gregory, *but what's your trouble?* Aloud, he asked, "Do you think you'll like the orphanage?"

"I think I will be useful there. I am looking forward to it."

"I can see that," said Gregory. "One might even say you can hardly wait to get away from St. Michael's."

"No," Father Halloran said quickly, "not at all. The people here are very good people, on the whole. Oh, there have been vexations, of course. A man named Talbot, a pamphleteering hate-monger, for instance . . ."

"But no parish is complete without one of those," said Gregory.

"That's right. I've made friends here. I've been happy. There have been only the usual problems."

"Well," drawled Gregory, "perhaps a *few* unusual ones, eh?"

Father Halloran looked up suddenly. "What do you mean?"

Gregory smiled. "That business executive we met today, what's his name, Mr. Glencannon?"

"Yes."

"I can see he, at least, is going to present a unique problem. Has he ever approached *you* with that idea of his—that he be allowed to mail in his confession on a dictation record and receive absolution by phone?"

Father Halloran nodded. "Once or twice. He is hard to discourage."

~~"And the druggist—does he always expect you to deliver prescriptions if you're 'going that way'?"~~

"You mustn't be hard on him. He only does that when he knows I'm going to visit an ailing parishioner who happens to be one of his customers. I don't mind. This parish is something like a small town, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"That's one of the pleasant things about it."

"That very old gentleman," Gregory continued, "Mr. Sowerby. I'm glad you prepared me for him. It must have been unnerving for you to administer last rites on three separate and distinct occasions, only for him to rally and live happily ever after, each time."

"Yes, that has been extraordinary, I will admit."

"What about this Barlow family? The husband seems nice enough, rather placid, but the wife's personality struck me as being—well, distilled to triple-strength. Is she always so forceful, so domineering?"

"Mrs. Barlow is a very respected woman," said Father Halloran, "and considered somewhat of a leader among the ladies of the parish. She is quite active socially. In a way, I suppose she is an attractive person."

"I suppose."

"The family I worry about," said Father Halloran after a short pause, "is not the Barlows, but the Garths."

"Isn't that the family we just left? The man and his daughter?"

"Yes," said Father Halloran. "It's a difficult problem, and complex. The girl—she's sixteen, mother dead—is very disturbed, mentally. She has—fits. She's seen doctors, and I strongly urged her father to take her to a psychiatrist as well. . . ."

A sixteen-year-old girl with "fits." Gregory smiled inwardly: it was such a quaint, old-fashioned word, "fits." In young women, they were so often rooted in sexual hysteria. Sex, that great raw force that seethed and snarled for release, took strange forms.

Gregory had often thought of it as a wildly onrushing river terminating in a roaring waterfall. Two men, coming upon the tumult of that waterfall, might react to it in two different ways. One man might be unconsciously repelled by such a display of mindless ferocity, of nature unrestrained; his inner reaction, though he himself might not know it, tends toward a desire to somehow stop it, or, failing that, to block off the rushing river, make it go away so he won't have to look at it. It is too big and unharnessed for him, it offends him.

The other man, of quite different stamp, says to himself: Ah! What a wonderful, wild, untamed force! But how wasted. This divine giant's power can be channelled and used for good works. So he builds a dam that does not stop the raging water but makes it work for him, turning wheels, generating electric power, irrigating parched lands. That attitude toward the waterfall is the Catholic attitude toward sex, Gregory had always liked to think; the other attitude was Protestant. ("But then," he was in the habit of shrugging, "I'm prejudiced.")

Father Halloran was looking at his watch. "I'm afraid I must be going," he said. "Daylight Saving Time, it's getting late. I have quite a drive ahead of me."

"You're all packed?"

"My bags are in the car." He stood up. "Good-bye, Father Sargent."

"You're sure you won't stay the night?"

"I really can't."

Gregory accompanied the elder priest to the door. “Good-bye, then, Father Halloran. And thank you again for easing me into my new post here. I’m very grateful.”

At the door, Father Halloran turned and said, “Her name is Susan.”

“Whose name?”

“The Garth girl. The one with the fits.”

“Oh yes. Susan. I’ll remember.”

“I wish I had time to go into her problems in more detail. I’m afraid I wasn’t much help to her. But you’re a smart man, Father, you’re versed in psychology and such things. I’ve read some of those magazine articles of yours . . . I think you are more qualified than I to help the child. Be very kind to her. Please.”

“I will.”

As Father Halloran shook hands with Gregory for the last time, Gregory gently ribbed the more eccentric parishioners, and Father Halloran managed to summon a flinty smile. They parted on a key of ersatz joviality.

But when the door clicked shut, Gregory’s gay mood dropped from him like a cape. He tossed off the remainder of his brandy in a gulp, and fell into a chair, his face buried in his hands.

Then he raised his head and looked about with distaste at the parlor of his new rectory. He took in its scattering of vases and ash trays and doilies, its aggressively middle-class wallpaper, its bad holy pictures, its obtrusive pillars of dark wood. Sighing, he lifted himself from the chair and fetched his breviary from a nearby table. Before settling down to read his Office, he removed his jacket, for the weather was oppressively close.

He found it hard to concentrate on his Office. His mind kept drifting, his eyes wandering from the pages of the book. He found himself again taking in the crushingly bourgeois look of the rectory. He couldn’t help comparing it to the rectory of St. Francis, with its large, beautifully appointed rooms, its décor a tasteful balance between traditional and contemporary design. He remembered his friends of the other parish: men and women with lively minds, writers, architects, stage directors, actors, musicians, teachers. He remembered his select little rectory dinners and after-theatre suppers, the fine cuisine, the old wine, the hours of stimulating, satisfying talk. The plans to collaborate with a psychoanalyst friend on a book.

Gone, all gone.

He was starting from scratch again, in a small parish, among good gray people whose simplicity and warmth could not replace the vigor of the people he had known. Starting from scratch at forty-five.

Music, that might help. Gregory rose from his chair and snapped on the hi-fi set. He poked desultorily among his record collection. Respighi was not among his favorite composers—indeed, Gregory found him to his taste only in his arrangements of old Italian tunes—but now he pulled out a recording of the *Vetrata di Chiesa*. “*Church Windows*,” Gregory said drily, aloud. Perhaps it would be salutary, he told himself, slipping the record out of its liner and over the turntable spike.

He sat down and opened the book again. Respighi’s first movement, *The Flight into Egypt*, lulled him into a receptive state with its gentle, nocturnal blandishments. The strains were almost Gregorian—a kind of music which Gregory (not, he hoped, because of the accident of his name) found peaceful and from which he was able to draw profound serenity. The flight into Egypt. *The little caravan proceeded through the desert, in the starry night, bearing the Treasure of the World*. Gregory, his Office read, closed his eyes and let the tension seep slowly out of his body. He floated on the music and his mind was mercifully empty. The movement quietly ended.

A howling whirlwind smote him: a rising and falling whine of immense size. He frowned, jolted on

of his calm. The second movement, *St. Michael the Archangel*, had begun with a surge. The spiral of sound—at once divine and infernal—reached high, plumbed low, dizzily spinning and twisting. *And a great battle was made in the heavens: Michael and his Angels fought the dragon, and fought the dragon and his angels. But these did not prevail, and there was no more place for them in heaven.*

No place in heaven. The battle music swirled around Gregory like a palpable thing, like Godwrath, like Hellfire. His moment of peace had been brief. His eyes grew wet and two words escaped his lips. “Dear God.”

The music was now so furious that he almost did not hear the doorbell ring.

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## II

# BLACK FIRE

The housekeeper was asleep, so Gregory arose to answer the door himself. First, he turned off the eruptive, whirling music. As he walked to the door—passing into a vestibule cluttered with halltrees and umbrella stands—he could only think this late caller must be Father Halloran, who had perhaps forgotten something.

He unlatched and swung open the heavy door.

“It’s awful late I know, Father,” said the large man who stood before him, “but it’s about the girl here.”

The girl, of high school age, would not allow her blue eyes to meet Gregory’s.

“That’s all right,” Gregory found himself saying, “if it’s really important.”

“It is,” said the man. “Sort of an emergency.” Gregory led them into the parlor, offered them chairs—the girl would not sit down—and quickly struggled into his jacket again.

“Now then,” said Gregory. “Don’t tell me. You’re the Garths, aren’t you? Susan and—”

“Robert,” said the man.

“Of course. I’ll get all these names straight soon. You know, it’s odd, but Father Halloran—he just left—was speaking about you and your daughter only a moment ago.” The oddness of the coincidence was more of a conversational opener for Gregory than a true expression of personal bemusement. He had lived too long, and been on the receiving end of too many coincidences, to feel other than mere intellectual surprise. Emotionally, it was old stuff and he was used to it. He had but to ask himself “What ever became of Father John Doe?” in order to receive a letter or phone call from Father John Doe the following day; or to suddenly remember a long-forgotten Bible verse and then, beginning to search for it, have the Bible fall open to the exact page and the verse leap to his eyes. And yet Gregory was not so vain as to think himself unique in this: coincidence, he knew, occurred in the lives of everyone with such frequency that it seemed almost the norm, and was met by most people not with the blink of astonishment but with the half-smile and casual nod usually accorded a regular and welcome visitor. Gregory asked Garth, “What can I do for you?”

Garth told his daughter to sit down; she did; then he said, “We been walking up and down in front of the rectory. I could see Father Halloran was here. I didn’t want to bust in, so I thought we’d wait until he left. When Father Halloran introduced us to you today, Susie took a shine to you, and I sort of did too. And then later, something happened that—” He interrupted himself: “You say Father Halloran told you something about her?”

“Well, a little, yes,” said Gregory.

Nodding, Garth said, “See, Father Halloran he said she should go to a doctor. A specialist. He said she needed, you know, help, mental help. He said *he* didn’t know what to do for her. I guess he figured she was—well, crazy.” Quickly, he added, “Not that I’m blaming Father Halloran. I mean, he sure had plenty of reason to think she was—not right—after what happened.”

“What exactly did happen?” Gregory asked.

“Didn’t he tell you?”

“He only told me—” Gregory felt the girl’s eyes on him, and said, “Perhaps Susan would rather wait in another room while we talk.” And, saying this, he turned to find her eyes looking into his own, no longer evasive. Yet her voice—she spoke now for the first time—was soft and shy:

“No, Father. I want to stay here. You don’t have to keep things from me.”

A bit surprised by her directness, Gregory only said, “Fine, fine,” then turned again to the girl’s father. “Well, Mr. Garth, Father Halloran only told me that Susan was very—disturbed—and had the seizures every so often, and that he recommended she see a doctor.”

“A psychiatrist,” amplified Susan.

“Well, yes.”

“And that’s all he told you?” asked Garth.

“That’s all. Did you take her to a psychiatrist?”

Susan said, “No.”

“Oh, she wanted to go,” said Garth, “but—well, in the first place, Father, those guys cost an awful lot of money. I just don’t make that kind of money.” He frowned. “And in the second place—”

“Dad,” said Susan.

“In the second place, my daughter is not *crazy*. Why, there’s never been anything like that in my family. Or in her mother’s either, rest her soul. So how could she all of a sudden be crazy? Now, those fits of hers—that’s something else again. I thought maybe it might be this epilepsy? I had an uncle, on my mother’s side, my mother’s brother he was, *he* used to take fits like that. Epileptic fits. So I figured, well, could be it turned up again in Susie. So we went to a doctor—not a headshrinker, a regular doctor, went to two of ’em in fact—and they both examined her, put her through some kind of electro something or other—”

“Electroencephalograph,” said the girl, quietly.

“Yeah. And nothing.”

“Nothing?” asked Gregory.

“That’s right. She’s not an epileptic. Two different doctors said so.”

“I see. And did they say anything else?”

“No, that was about all.”

“They said,” Susan insisted, “that I should see a psychiatrist.”

Gregory had an idea. “Mr. Garth,” he said, “I realize the economic factor can be an obstacle . . . I mean, money doesn’t grow on trees and, as you say, psychiatrists do run pretty high. But what if that part of it were taken care of? You see, I have a very good friend—a brother-in-law, in fact—who is also a very good psychiatrist, and—”

“No,” Garth said flatly, “nothing doing.”

“But I’m sure I could persuade him to take the case for next to nothing.”

“The money is only part of it. Don’t you see, Father? How can I send my own daughter to a—to a nut doctor, someone who treats loonies? She’s not crazy!”

“It’s not a question of her being crazy. A psychiatrist can—”

But it was a sore point with Garth. His lips and eyes went tightly closed and he shook his head vehemently. “No. No. I know what they do in their offices, these head doctors. They drag everything out of you. They get you to talking and talking—about everything. They don’t have any sense of what’s decent or proper or . . . They just want you to talk about every nasty, filthy thing that ever passed through your mind. I sure wouldn’t allow a girl her age to go through something like that. I ju

won't buy it. I don't believe in it. And I'm surprised you do, Father. Isn't the Church against all that stuff?"

"No," Gregory said simply. "The Church doesn't endorse it all, I must admit, but—"

"There, you see?"

"—but it does *not* dismiss or condemn it." Gregory wanted to tell him about Father Devlin of Chicago, a Catholic priest who was also a practising analyst; he wanted to say that the Church does not make snap judgments, that it sifts and examines evidence for years, sometimes for centuries, before it accepts or rejects a thing; he wanted to tell Garth it took the Church four hundred years to recognize Joan of Arc as a saint and it was as recent as 1954 that it made the Assumption of the Virgin Mary a definite dogma. So it couldn't be expected to come out for or against something as comparatively brand-new as psychiatry—but he knew these arguments would fall upon heedless ears, for Garth was shaking his head stubbornly again, his mouth and eyes closed. So, instead, he said: "What's the difference, Mr. Garth, between the psychiatrist's office and the confessional box?"

"Why—"

"A great deal of difference, to be sure—I'm not trying to pretend they're one and the same or that psychiatry can replace the Church, but when you speak of—"

"Father," Garth cut in, "I guess I should tell you why I brought Susie here."

"Yes," agreed Gregory, "I guess you should."

Garth cleared his throat and began. "Tonight, soon after you and Father Halloran left our place, I walked into her room—and do you know what I caught her doing?"

"What?"

"Packing!" cried Garth. "Packing a suitcase! Getting ready to run off! 'Where do you think you're going,' I says. 'Anyplace,' she says; 'anyplace you can't find me.' 'Why,' I says. 'Because I want to see a psychiatrist,' she says, 'and you won't let me!' How do you like that? No money, not a dime to her name, gonna run off and *walk the streets I suppose* to get enough money to pay some headshrinker—" Garth stopped for breath. "I finally got her to agree to come here and talk to you. I know it's late and I wouldn't bother you like this if it wasn't an emergency, but I think she'd listen to you." Turning to his daughter, he said sternly, "Now you listen to the Father here. *He'll* tell you I'm right."

Those direct blue eyes again. "Is he right, Father?"

Gregory smiled at her. Garth was about as unright as a person could be, but it would accomplish nothing to say so now. "He certainly is right," Gregory therefore said, "about this business of running away. With no money, all alone, it *would* be pretty silly, wouldn't it?"

"But somebody has to help me, Father," she said.

"That's my job. If we talk this over, all three of us, maybe we can come to an understanding. My brother-in-law, for instance—"

"There'll be none of that!" said Garth.

Gregory fought down an impulse to insult the man. Soothingly, he said, "Mr. Garth, I'm just trying to help . . ."

But Garth did not permit him to finish. He had gone crazy on the subject. "I tell you that's the one thing she don't need!" he said. "There's been enough filth—" He caught himself and stopped cold.

But Gregory had heard the word. "Filth? What do you mean?"

"Never mind . . ."

"Dad," Susan quietly said, "I think you'd better tell him. If you don't, I will."

"*How can you?*" Garth asked with astonishment. "How can you tell it yourself? *I* can't even tell it, and I'm a man, a man fifty years old. How can *you* tell it—a little girl?"

“I’m not so little. Tell the Father.”

Garth’s face was flushed and glistening: he wiped it with a handkerchief. “Oh God,” he said, and then, in a toneless voice, he told the story.

He told of the whiteness of Father Halloran’s face—“People talk about faces turning white, but they don’t really mean white,” he said. “But that time in the rectory here, Father Halloran’s face was *white*. White as his collar.” He told of Father Halloran’s difficulty in speaking, of how he kept swallowing, of how his voice shook, of how his hands shook, of how he looked out the French windows of the parlor, looked at the walls, looked at the floor, looked at his fingernails, looked at Garth’s necktie, looked everywhere but at Garth’s face.

“And when he was through talking,” said Garth, “he just sort of stood there for a second, and then he walked out of the room. Just like that, no handshake, no good-bye, just out. A few weeks later, we heard he was going to be transferred. Something about an orphanage, and how he had always wanted to take charge of an orphanage, but I knew better. I told myself I’ll just bet he asked to be transferred. Because he thought he’d failed, I guess. ‘I cannot help her,’ is what he told me. ‘Only the grace of God can help her.’ But the way he said it was like he was saying, ‘*Not even* the grace of God can help her.’”

Gregory assured Garth Father Halloran couldn’t have meant that. Then he asked Susan, “But what kind of help? From what do you want to be saved, my dear?”

The blue eyes were clouded, the soft voice hollow. “From Hell. From being damned forever to Hell.”

“I read in a book once,” she went on, “that the fire of Hell is black and gives no light, and damned souls burn forever in darkness, heaped one on top of another so tight they can’t move even to brush away the worms that eat their eyes . . . and there’s nothing but terrible noise and pain and stench and darkness forever and ever and ever . . .”

“Don’t worry about Hell, my dear,” said Gregory. “Nobody has said you are damned to Hell.”

“I will be. For what I did. For what I do.”

“You see,” Garth continued, “I’d been having this trouble with her . . .”

The trouble concerned church. Apparently, Susan had been until recently a devout girl who attended Mass regularly. On an otherwise ordinary Sunday morning, she started out with her father, dressed in her Sunday best, a picture of purity with her starched cotton dress, old-fashioned pigtails and pretty, unpainted face. They lived within walking distance of the church, and when they turned a corner and came in sight of the spire, Susan stopped. She turned around and began to walk home. Garth asked her what was wrong, had she forgotten something? She said no, she just wanted to go home. Was she sick? No. Further questions yielded no further answers, so Garth wisely let her have her way. They returned home. The following Sunday, she again donned her Sunday dress, and again went out with her father. When they reached the crucial corner and saw the spire of the church, again she stopped.

This time her father became angry. “Don’t start anything funny with *me*, young lady!” he said. “You are going to church!” He took her arm and led her along. She pulled back. “Come *on*,” he ordered. And then she began to weep. But Garth, relentless, continued to drag her along the sidewalk, closer and closer to the church.

She screamed. “Don’t make me go in there! *Please*, Daddy, don’t make me go in that place!”

Garth snarled, “This is just *church*! You’ve been here hundreds of times before! What’s the *matter* with you?”

Other parishioners, powdered and pressed for Sunday morning Mass, had begun to turn and look, frowning with disapproval at this sully of the quiet. Garth, self-conscious, released her arm.

She broke into a run and ran all the way home. “So fast,” in Garth’s words, “I couldn’t catch up with

her. I'm not a well man; I can't run like that."

"Listen, you," he said, breathless and sweating, after they had gotten into the house, "I'm going to get on that phone and call a taxi. And we're going to get in that taxi and go to church if I have to hogtie you!"

"I'm not going."

Garth hit her. ("You know," as he explained it to Gregory, "a slap, a little slap across the mouth, that's all.")

She held her hand to her stinging cheek and looked him straight in the eye. And in a voice not like her own—yet not angry and strident, but calm, weighing every word—she quietly said:

"I hope you rot in Hell for eternity, you lousy son of a bitch."

• • •

Gregory got up and lit a cigarette.

Garth said, "You got to understand, Father—this is a girl who never talked like that before. Not once, ever, did I hear her say a thing like that. A very good girl, a clean-talking sweet little girl. So when she said that, I was *stunned*. Because they weren't just empty cuss words. I could tell she meant every word."

"You don't know that," said Gregory.

But the girl said, "I meant every word."

And added, a moment later, "Well—when I said it, I meant it."

"Why?" asked Gregory. "Because he hit you?"

"Yes . . . I think so . . . I don't know . . . it was as if somebody else said that, somebody who *meant* it."

Schizophrenia was, of course, a word that at once burst upon Gregory's mind. And so it was the schizophrenia trail that Gregory followed for many minutes, with an image of Eve's famous three faces—or was it four?—strong before him. Questions and answers followed each other rapidly, but the questions could never be of the sort that would start Garth off again with his cry of *Filth!*—and though schizophrenia seemed, at times, almost tracked to its lair, Gregory still could not be sure, was in fact very far from sure, and he had to conclude the inquiry with a lame, and rather worn, joke. "Look, I have a deal with the local psychiatrists. I promise not to treat patients if they promise not to say Mass."

Some polite questions followed ("How long has your wife been dead, Mr. Garth?" "About six years, yes, six years. Susie was only ten when she died; she's sixteen now").

"Well," Gregory said at last, "it's awfully late and we should be getting our rest . . ." He did not look forward to the day ahead: in the evening, dinner with the Barlows; in the afternoon, a visit from Bishop Crimmings. A casual visit, His Excellency had implied, just dropping in for a few minutes on the way to other places in this area. But bishops are not in the habit of just dropping in—they are accustomed to having parish priests come to them—so Gregory was not anticipating a pleasant social afternoon. His Excellency, notwithstanding a thin veneer of *bonhomie*, was a man forged platonically under extreme pressure out of some igneous, molten magma of the spirit. His faith and his attitude toward dogma were both as strong and imperishable as rock. And as rigid. The old fellow would chuckle and talk about old times, drop one or two nuggets of epigrammatic wisdom, and then slowly circle around to the subject Gregory wanted desperately to avoid. It would be a trying day; he would need his sleep.

He began to create the atmosphere for dismissal. “We can talk more about this later in the week,” I said. Then he rose. “For tonight, Susan, I want you to promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“That you will not, absolutely will *not* try to run away again. Promise?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Fine!” He started ushering them toward the door, saying to Garth, “Suppose I call you later in the week when I’m free? This unfortunate business has been going on for some time now, so a day or two more shouldn’t make much difference. When was that, how long ago, the Sunday morning when Susan said that terrible thing to you?”

“Well, let’s see,” mused Garth. “It was just a month or so before Father Halloran announced he was leaving. I remember because right after she said that I went to Father Halloran for some advice and he said he’d have a long talk with her. So the very next day we came here to the rectory to see him.”

“Then apparently,” Gregory said to Susan, “you don’t have as much difficulty entering the rectory as the church itself?”

“No, Father.”

“Thanks for small mercies, eh? Perhaps you and I can have a little private talk here sometime, just the two of us.” And he laid a hand on her shoulder.

She drew away quickly.

“Yeah,” said Garth, shaking his head sadly, “that’s what Father Halloran said when I brought her here to see him. Wanted to talk to her alone in his study, so I waited here in the parlor. I don’t mind telling you I was pretty nervous. The way she’d been behaving was beginning to get me down. I guess I’d been waiting here for about, oh, twenty, thirty minutes, maybe not so long, when all of a sudden I heard a noise in there in the study . . .”

“A noise?”

“Just a sort of a thump or something, like if something had been knocked over maybe. And then I heard a voice—for a second I didn’t recognize it, then I could tell it was Father Halloran. He seemed to be saying *Stop* or *No* or something like that. And then I got scared because he yelled out real loud . . .”

“Yelled what?”

“Just—*Help!* Like that. *God help me!*”

A fierce sob was ripped from Susan’s throat. Gregory wheeled around to find her placid face distorted with weeping. When his arms reached out to comfort her, she only sobbed louder and shook him off. He turned, puzzled and helpless, to Garth, and then all thought of ending the audience fled his mind. He sat down on a hard wooden chair.

“Please go on, Mr. Garth,” he said.

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### III

## HE ATE HIS CHILDREN ALL BUT THREE

“Lies. Half truths. Propaganda. Censorship. Book burning. Thought control.” John Talbot paused over his coffee. The sounds of the little short-order restaurant clanked in the background. They were Saturday sounds, a touch forlorn and lonely after the rush of weekday business. Talbot’s eyes had not left Robert Garth’s face for the past five minutes. “What do those words remind you of?” he asked.

“Well . . .” Garth hesitated. “Russia? Communism?”

“That’s right. And the Church.”

Garth made a movement of scorn. “Come on now, Talbot, that’s pushing it kind of far, isn’t it? I mean, I don’t swallow everything the Church hands out, I got a mind of my own, but you can’t say the Church is like Communism! Why, they hate each other!”

“Of course they do,” said Talbot eagerly. “Because they’re so much alike! Exactly alike. They’re both totalitarian. You know what that means?”

Garth was not sure.

“*Total*, that’s what it means. Total power, total control. Control over everything—over the body, over the mind. The Communists tell you what books you should read and what books you shouldn’t. So does the Church. They write history to please themselves. So does the Church. Ideally, they’d rather you didn’t read at all. So does the Church—why, they not only have their own distorted version of the Bible, but they *actually discourage* laymen from reading it! It’s up to them to—‘interpret’ it for you! And the torture chambers of the Soviet secret police?” Talbot shrugged. “Remember the Inquisition?”

“Yeah, sure,” said Garth, “but that was way back in the old days. They don’t pull that sort of stuff now.”

“Of course they don’t. They’re more subtle now, more foxy. But underneath they’re the same, Garth. The *same*.” He sipped at his coffee. “That’s why I don’t understand you. I will never understand why you took your daughter to Halloran. And I’ll never understand why you’ve taken her to this new one, this Sargent.”

“I needed help, like I told you. I was afraid I’d lose her. Who could I go to? I don’t know anybody who could talk to her and make it stick. I didn’t *want* to get mixed up with priests, but damn it, Talbot, once a Catholic, always a Catholic, and—”

“And so you naturally went to the only source of authority and solace you knew. Yes. I understand—I guess. But it was dumb, Garth. She’ll be destroyed.”

Garth frowned into his cup. “Aw—you make too much out of it, Talbot. You got some good points I’ll say that for you, but . . . What do you mean, destroyed? How?”

“I don’t know how. Oh, I don’t imagine he’ll crush her feet in the Spanish boot,” he said, smiling grimly. “I didn’t mean that. But he’ll badger her with questions, frighten her with threats of eternal torment, fill her already confused mind with twisted, dangerous, useless ideas . . .” Talbot was an

accomplished performer: his voice dropped to near-inaudibility and he said, quite simply, “He’ll drive her mad.”

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“But why? What’ll he gain by driving a little girl nuts?”

“Look, my friend. What did they gain by burning Joan of Arc? The Church is *afraid* of the nonconformist, the renegade, afraid of anything it can’t understand. It’s afraid of your little girl. So she has to be hammered into shape. By fair means or foul. Most likely foul. Because, Garth: these priests play dirty.”

“I gotta go,” said Garth.

“Stick for a minute,” Talbot urged. “I’ll tell you something that will warm the cockles of your heart . . .”

“I *need* something to warm the cockles of my heart, all right. A drink. Want to drop across the street to the bar?”

“I don’t drink,” said Talbot flatly. “Listen, Garth. Before I opened my own print shop, I used to work as night clerk in a hotel. You learn a lot in a job like that. People come and go—good people and bad, most of them bad. And you get to know everything about them, every mean little nasty vice. The old sugar daddies come in with their eighteen-year-old girls. Eighteen? Seventeen, sixteen, younger! Mr. and Mrs. Smith. Ha! The faggots come in: the boys with pancake makeup on their faces, their hair dyed and marcelled. And the priests come in. Oh yes. With their coat collars turned up, thinking they’re fooling everybody. But they never fooled me. Yes, the priests come in, Garth. With their frightened little girls. And little boys.”

“I really gotta go,” said Garth.

“Listen to a joke first,” Talbot insisted, suddenly turning on the casual camaraderie. “It’s a good joke. This girl—of good family, you see—gets herself pregnant. Her parents are shocked, horrified. What can they do? They phone the family doctor and start hinting around. He says, ‘If you expect me to perform an abortion, you can stop right there. I won’t. But I’ll tell you what: you take the girl up to my country home and when the time comes, I’ll be on hand to deliver the child. Now, right near my country home is a sanatorium where I often perform surgery. There’s always some old girl who needs a gall bladder removed. I’ll perform such an operation—then I’ll bring her your daughter’s child. I’ll tell her there’s been a mistake all along—she was pregnant, it wasn’t gall bladder at all. Simple.’ So: everything goes as planned, but after the doctor delivers the baby, he discovers there *is* no gall bladder patient in the sanatorium—except a priest. He’s thrown by this at first, of course, but he decides to stick to his guns. Takes the baby into the priest and says, ‘Father, the Lord has seen fit to make you the instrument of a miracle. You have just been delivered of a fine baby boy.’ The priest is overjoyed—what evidence of A Divine Hand! what an honor! and all that . . .”

“Look, Talbot, I gotta shove off.”

“All right, all right, I’ll wind it up. The kid is raised as a miracle child. Members of the parish contribute to his education, he goes to the finest schools, and so on and so on. When he’s in college, he gets word that his father, the priest, is dying. He rushes home to his bedside. Kid says, ‘You’ve been so good to me, Dad, how can I repay you?’ Priest says, ‘By forgiving me for a terrible deception. All these years I told you I was your father. But it’s not true’—and he tells him the whole story. ‘So you see, my son, I’m not your father at all. I’m your mother. *The Archbishop is your father.*’” Talbot laughed. “Get it?”

“Yeah,” said Garth, smiling weakly, “pretty funny.”

“It’s more than funny. There’s truth there. They’re dirty, all of them. Believe me. And if you want more proof—”

“I’m going.”

“Sure. But take this magazine with you.”

“I got it at home, I think. Got a subscription.”

“That’s all right. Take this copy. I’ve marked off a paragraph on page 34. Pretty sexy stuff. And pretty surprising—considering who the author is.”

Garth rolled up the fat issue of the popular magazine and put it under his arm. “So long, Talbot. See you around. Maybe you’ll be here tomorrow?”

“No, I’ll be working tomorrow.”

“On Sunday?”

“Why not on Sunday? If I have a sabbath, it’s today.”

“Saturday? You’re not a Jew, Talbot, are you?”

Talbot wrinkled his nose. “You know better than that. No, I like Saturday because it’s named for Saturn, a Roman god. He ate his own children, all but three of them. How do you like that! In ancient Rome they used to hold festivals in his honor, big orgies. Saturnalia, they called them. ‘The children of Saturn shall be great jugglers and chiders, and they will never forgive till they be revenged of their quarrel.’ I like the sound of that. No, I make a point of working on Sundays.”

“Well then, maybe you’ll be around here later on today, this evening?”

“Maybe.”

“I like talking to you.”

“I like talking to you, Garth.”

Garth left the eating-place, the coffee sour in his stomach, his spirit equally sour with worry and fear and doubt. Talbot was a good talker; he seemed to have an answer for everything. Garth could not accept much of what Talbot said, and yet . . . where there’s smoke, there’s fire. Perhaps, just as Talbot insisted, it had been a bad idea to bring Susie to the Fathers for her trouble. The Church was old-fashioned, full of antiquated notions. Maybe one of those psychiatrists would have been better. More modern. More scientific.

But what good would it do Susie to spill her guts to a psychiatrist? Why not let her forget the bad things? Why bring them up again? Why talk about them?

Still, there was no assurance Father Sargent wouldn’t make her talk about them. And that she must not do.

She would probably be sitting at home now, perhaps doing her homework, watching television, reading. She was a great one for reading. Smart as a whip, and only sixteen. *The old sugar daddies with their sixteen-year-old girls* . . . Garth’s hands clenched. The thought disturbed him deeply.

Wordless images crowded his mind: bald old men from whom the thrust of youth had fled, men who needed the dewy skin, the heart-melting innocence of extreme youth to kindle the fire in them again. Bug-eyed and gape-mouthed over the smooth bodies of young girls, the spittle hanging in strings from their lecherous lips, dripping upon clean flesh, loathsomely festooning the buds of breasts and round little bellies . . .

Garth gritted his teeth.

He was home now. He walked up the two flights of stairs, his heart pounding from the effort, and with his key let himself into the flat.

Silence met him, and the staleness of closed windows. “Susie,” he called softly. He opened a window, but the weather was clogged and fetid. He called his daughter’s name again, casually looking through the rooms. She was not home.

Well, it was Saturday . . . maybe one of her little girl friends had come by and they had gone

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