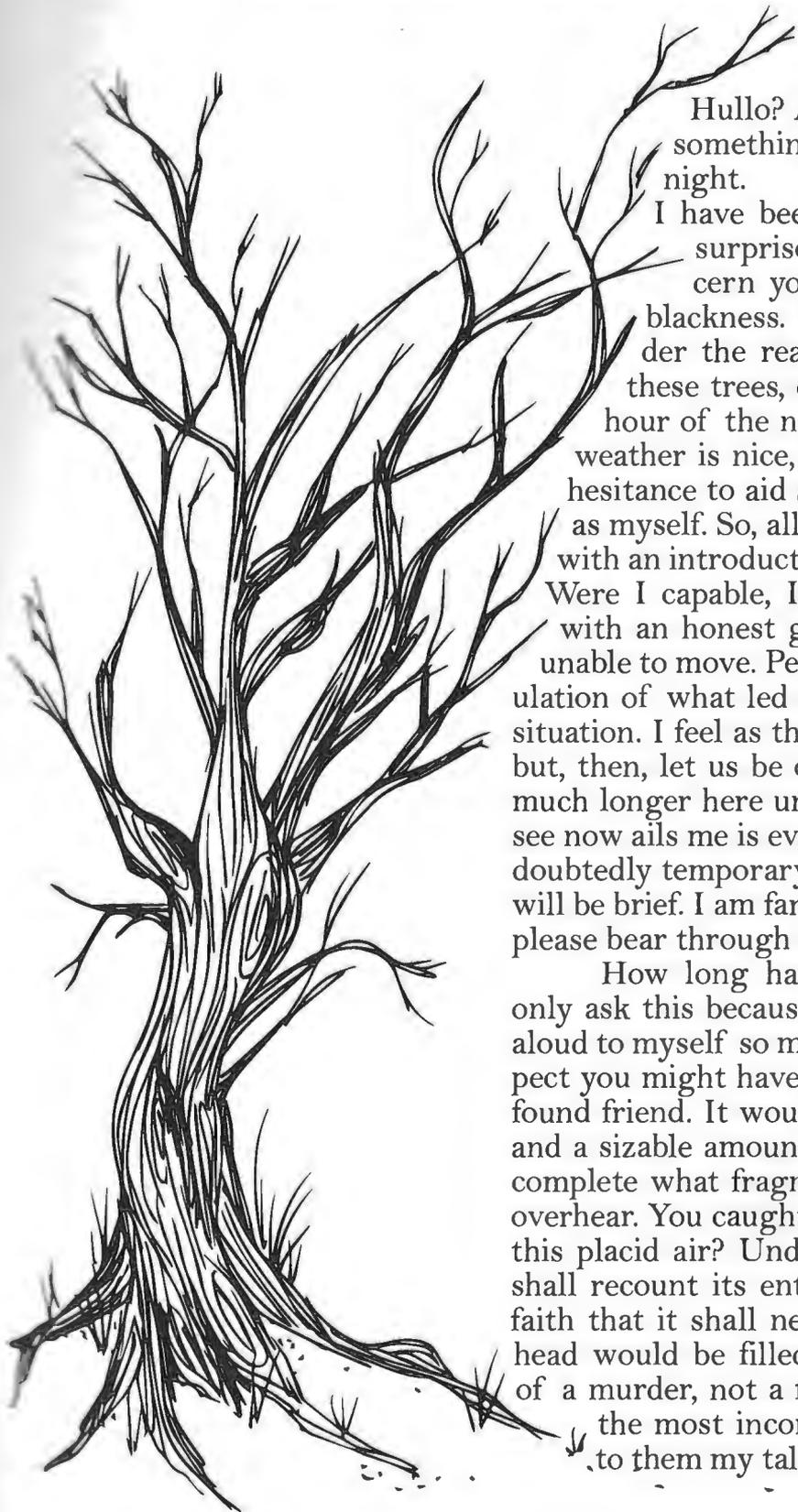


Friend to Fiend: A Letter of Consequence

by Lyman Hope



Hullo? Ah, yes! I was positive I heard something in this somber and ghastly night.

I have been discovered! What a splendid surprise. Where are you? I cannot discern your figure in this all-consuming blackness. Yes, I assume you would wonder the reason for my lying here beneath these trees, especially at such a godforsaken hour of the night as this surely must be. The weather is nice, though, and I understand your hesitance to aid such a suspicious-looking fellow as myself. So, allow me to ease your worries first with an introduction. My name is Jason Rawlings. Were I capable, I assure you I would greet you with an honest grip, but I am afraid I am quite unable to move. Permit me to share a short recapitulation of what led me into this visibly unfortunate situation. I feel as though an explanation is in order, but, then, let us be off, for I do not think I can last much longer here unaided. This wet cough that you see now ails me is even more worrisome than my undoubtedly temporary paralysis. For both our sakes, I will be brief. I am far from a raconteur, mind you, but please bear through to the end.

How long have you been within earshot? I only ask this because I've told and retold this story aloud to myself so many times as I lie here that I suspect you might have overheard parts of it, my new-found friend. It would save a small amount of time, and a sizable amount of patience, if I might merely complete what fragment you have possibly come to overhear. You caught none of it as it drifted through this placid air? Understood. That being the case, I shall recount its entirety to you. I do this in good faith that it shall never reach another's ears. Their head would be filled to the follicles with thoughts of a murder, not a favor, and that would put me in the most inconvenient position of explaining to them my tale. They would be unable to com-

prehend what transpired, as I believe you can. I sense that we think alike, you and I. But, I suppose I should cease my beating about the bush and enter the story.

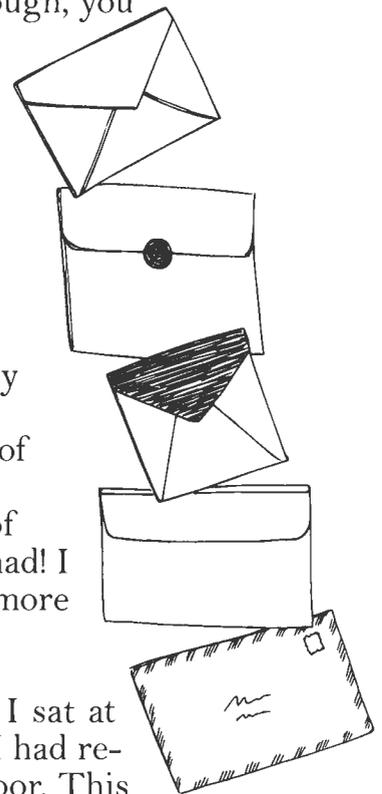
Back when I was in my young, and consequently ignorant, adulthood, I had the dearest of friends. Nay, he was more a brother. His name was John Stiplar. Pardon the blatant disgust that contorts my face whenever I utter his monicker, but it is inevitable. As you may have surmised, we had a sort of falling out. No more did we stroll together down the sleety streets late at night debating all manner of moot quandaries. No more did we delve through each other's consciousnesses, exploring and discovering all the obscure, unthinkable quiddities that make a man's companions so interesting. No more did we keep each other in check, as friends often have need to do. No, something happened. What exactly happened, though, you will forgive as the sole omission from this tale.

The situation was further degraded by several elusive factors. Perhaps, after years of pleasant arguing, we finally realized that we were far too different to enjoy each other's company, or perhaps it was Time's wedge slowly pushing us apart. Regardless, our roads went separate directions, and whenever we were ill-fated enough that our paths would cross, our mutual unspoken hatred was easily detected. My heart was blackened toward him, and from it sprouted great tendrils and veins of hatred that pervaded my being.

Time ground on, but even when I had not the bother of seeing him in actuality, he lurked through my mind and harrowed me to my core. I dwelled heavily on the injustice of our case and, I am ashamed to admit, nearly drove myself mad! I am able to laugh about it now, though. Here I shall become more detailed in my narration, for these events are the pith of the story.

You see, earlier this day, some hours before dusk, as I sat at my table sifting through the few pieces of impersonal mail I had received in the previous week, I heard a heavy knock at my door. This was somewhat odd. I was unaccustomed to having visitors of any sort, so it took me a moment to overcome my initial stupefaction. When I had, I swung wide the door and was taken aback. A moment had sauntered past before I shook clear my head. A few feet in front of me stood my own personal demon, Mr. Stiplar himself. He raised his head, which was slightly too large for his frame, and with the most personable tone ever used, offered a greeting to me. It took all I had not to fling both door and greeting back in his face, but I knew our tacit rules. Our hatred was never directly expressed; it was more hinted to in what we said, both verbally and through our gestures. This knowledge of our protocol, however, was not the sole reason for my notable restraint, no.

See, upon my first perceiving my short-statured fiend, I fancied it was his less-tangible doppelgänger paying me a visit, an occurrence to which I was accustomed, and was swift to imagine all the ways I could make my revenge if ever he



were actually before me. It was only after I had arranged and consolidated the most effective and practical of my plans into a solid, simple one that I realized this shade, indeed, belonged to the physical realm, not the metaphysical. My plan was laid, however, and it began with the cordial treatment of this beloved old friend, against whom Time, and my ever-rational mind, had appeared to have erased all accounts. A hidden leer, masquerading as a genuine smile, overtook my face. I grasped his hand and shook it heartily as I, apparently unable to restrain my joy, exuberantly slapped him upon his shoulder. Appearing to have released my pent-up friendliness, I released his hand as well. I enthusiastically beckoned him through the door and bade him sit down at my table that we might discuss the happenings of each other's lives and perhaps refresh ourselves with some bread and milk. We did so. All the while, I sat with my arm resting on the table, my thumb viciously rubbing against my middle and index fingers. This was, to my knowledge, the only discernible evidence of my conniving thoughts. My mind worked as two, though no reluctance was present. The left-half listened to Stiplar's anecdotes and queries and formulated appropriate responses that would fail to arouse any suspicions while the right-half ran through my plan repeatedly and imagined various outcomes, all equally grievous. I would not have been confounded in the least if my long-absent friend had made remark upon the fact that my face hung unevenly upon my skull, the right side in a mindless, friendly smile and the left in some malicious sneer.

We conversed for several hours about the contents of the past few years. We took turns withdrawing a particular situation from the basket of the past, showing it off in great detail, and passing it to the other that he might examine it more closely before withdrawing a situation of his own that he thought strikingly resembled the former, thus enabling the discussion to continue and evolve. I would be remiss not to mention how remarkably difficult this was for me. You see, I have never been too keen on holding long conversations, nor have I ever been very skilled in the art of spontaneously making up elaborate stories. Through this entire time, however, I was forced to do both. I made up semi-believable stories with not even a small truth at the core on which to base them. The only truth I could tell, but that I dared not, was that I, in the years following our unfortunate ordeal, had done nothing of any consequence, nothing that would make a suitable tale, even when embellished. My sole activities were surviving and brooding. Though, I suppose they could be deemed a single activity, for they were done simultaneously. I mention brooding not as a dash against myself, mind you, but because it was impossible not to dwell on the torments to which I had been subjected.

My thumb had almost worked my fingers smooth by the time I noticed dusk approaching. With the falling sun came the next step in my felling of the devil. An idea suddenly lit my face and jolted my frame. This shock seemed transferred to my companion through my sudden start and dish-rattling slap upon the table. Aiming my nearly-raw forefinger at him, I spouted forth my idea that we should go for a stroll and continue our discussion on the roadsides, as we had done in our past life together. He seemed to admire this proposal greatly and eagerly retrieved his overcoat. I do not fully understand the reasoning behind his bringing such a heavy coat. The temperature outside was moderate. Upon stepping outside, we felt nothing, no breeze, no sunshine,

no temperature whatsoever. It seemed as though the goddess of weather was having a bout of abulia. Perhaps two more wandering souls silently praying for their preferred weather would aid in her recovery.

We stepped through my door, and as I turned to secure the same, Stiplar, heedlessly bounding down my steps, was struck by a street-vendor's cart. He expelled a barrage of curses at the humble man, and we laughed hollowly at his carelessness as we continued on. My laugh rang as a shell because of my feigned enjoyment at the poor man's expense, but why did Stiplar's ring so, you surely must wonder. Well, I'll tell you. His voice was always tinged, slightly discolored by an inexplicable hollowness. Inexplicable, indeed, if you believe nothing of the Other Worlds. Aye! But the mien alone of this creature was enough to bring faith to the doubting masses. His deeply-inset eyes seemed to make his skull protrude toward the perturbed gazer, and his long nose, with an ever-slight crook in it, did nothing to alter this perception. The hair that covered his head, face not excepted, bore a dark brown hue. Only a sporadic sprinkling of Age's white warriors assaulted the universality of his hair and, although severely outnumbered, swore they would inevitably overtake their brown foes. This tangled crop of threads flowed down from atop his head and drooped to a point off his chin, threatening at any moment to fall to the ground in frizzy drops, much to the bewilderment of any onlookers.

Anyhow, we ventured on into the gray streets stained by wide, shallow puddles; down foul-smelling alleyways; through prestigious, perfectly-kept courtyards; and past modern, brick buildings that paled in comparison to their ancient stone neighbors until, at length, we had confabulated our way to the edge of town. Crowded between two immense Stygian forests, the road rose unhurriedly up the slope of a large hill before arriving at its destination: the pin-pricked heavens. Ah! What a sight it was! The entire landscape, both hillside and trees, was silhouetted against the light-speckled backdrop of the night sky. To my astonishment, Stiplar's wandering eyes completed the journey on which I had been subtly leading him for nearly an hour and a half. He had descried the small path winding off from the right into the depths of the overgrown forests, his wicked eyes a shine with determination and resolve. Apparently this forest was a challenge fit for a demon, and this demon had every intention of confronting it, no matter the cost.

Noticing my synthetic hesitation to venture down such an untamed trail, he strolled over to the path entrance and said, "You know, Rawl," he said, "You know, Rawl, for reasons that escape me, we never wandered into woodland areas in our night walks of old, but I am sorely tempted by this Colossus. I must brave the seas of leaves between its knees. Old traditions are all well and good, but new times call for new traditions. To be sure, we are age-old friends enacting equally-old habits, but what say you that, in celebration of our newly-overcome estrangement, we venture into these darkened, mysterious woods, effectively breaking the spell of history's reminder? To the Devil with the traditions of days gone by! Let this new custom, or at least this one-time adventure, be a bookmark in our past that ever reminds us from whence we came as we turn with light fingers the pages of the present!"

Intentionally, I misgave myself further. I mentioned how it would surely be muddy and filled with all manner of snaggy branches; it'd be the end of our clothes,

our shoes. Ha! And, for that, he had the nerve to call me overly conventional. Rich! I also pointed out that we should surely get lost, having never been down the way before this bearing less night. His rebuttal was less than impressive as he simply stated that he would not lose his way, and if he did, that it would just make it an even more worthy adventure. Reluctantly, I gave in to his remarkable persuasive abilities, and with cheers to reborn friendships and spontaneous traditions, we hurled ourselves into the hands of nature like two young boys.

Not surprisingly, implementation began to prove my previous apprehensions correct. We were perpetually losing our footing as we clambered over the muddy hillside, and the many arms of the flora clawed at us, clung to us, and swatted at us as we passed. Even in my comparatively advanced age, the horror of these arms was amplified by the unseen in the blackness that engulfed me. Terror incited my pulse to quicken. Not only had I the invisible monsters for my mind to contend with, but, worse still, the barely-visible form that trod the path in front of me. They, being rooted in the same timeless evil, combined themselves in my mind. In my imagination, all these claws and tentacles that snagged and tore at my clothing and flesh sprouted grotesquely from his dim, ghostlike form to make their assault on my physical and mental well-being.

As the hours passed, I began to doubt my judgment. Surely a monstrosity such as he would be more than a match for the mortal me, were I to assault him. However, cold resolve flooded back into my veins with a remarkable vigor when we paused at the crest of a small, yet steep, hill. A break in the overarching tree canopy allowed the dim moonlight to temporarily dispel my target's inhuman appendages, making the two of us equal foes. Little did it matter, though, for I was rapid in my movements and hesitated not a moment. I grasped a large rock, which you may now spy on the earth next to me, and swung it square into his back. A breathy grunt was uttered as the wind was forced from his lungs and he was sent face-forward down the opposite bank of the hill. My relief was thick but brief. For, having not let go of the rock in a timely manner, I was pulled over the edge as well. My hands released the rock mid-flight and stretched out to absorb my impact. They did little, however, to slow my fall as my head contacted the stone that had hit the ground a moment before I became reacquainted with it. My head snapped sideways, allowing me to glimpse the crumpled form of my enemy at the base of a stout tree. At least, I am rather sure that is what I saw before my vision turned into a dark swirl as I tumbled limply farther down the mossy hill.

Admittedly, that was not the ideal conclusion to my enterprise, but the deed has been done, and the consequences I endure now are but a small price to pay for my liberation from such dark forces. That which was meted out was deserved. Though, I had rather thought it all over for me until I heard you, my unexpected savior. I did not anticipate any soul to come this way. I, being the one who prepared this path over the years, had been quite sure that I am its only traveler. Ah, well, it matters little now, for you are here. I cannot tell you how maddening it was to lie here for so many countless hours, unable to move, and with nothing to occupy my mind but my own retelling of recent events, jubilant though they may be. Now, come, lend me your shoulder that we may get back to town and to the doctor, by Heavens! My nerves are not faring too well

amidst these formless shadows that clumsily lurk about us. What? What do you mean you are “incapable of assisting” me? Why the Devil not?! Your ability to traverse such a treacherous path as this suggests you are able-bodied enough to aid a helpless and newly disabled stranger. Would you be so cruel, so heartless as to leave me in these unvisited woodlands to merge with this wet earth? I find myself gravely mistaken; you do not share my method of thought. You are *mad*, man.

Ah, but do you feel that? The weather goddess has made up her mind at last! Some determined nip has sought me out even in this dense foliage and seeks to settle itself in my marrow. What is that you say, my brother? You say you feel the same stony chill that creeps through me?