

Victoria Tuck
27 Water Street
Wakefield, MA 01880
508-738-0506
vtuck87@verizon.net

Our Fearless Leader

“Oh, the glamour of the night!” said the Professor, tense against the wind, but grinning.

“Here we are,” said Larrabee, feeling his nose; it was almost numb.

They entered a small, non-descript neighborhood bar and stood in the doorway a moment, stamping snow from their boots and letting their eyes adjust to the gloom.

“Shut it!” whined a college student, shivering in the cloud of cold they’d let in.

They stepped inside.

“He’s not here, yet,” noted the Professor. “Come on, let’s grab a table while we can.”

“This place gets crowded?” sniffed Larrabee doubtfully. It was small and dark, crowded only with tables and chairs for the moment, an ancient bar looking oversized and intrusive.

“In an hour or so it will be,” said the Professor; he clapped his gloved hands together to warm them, gazed about the room as though for the best piece in a bowl of fruit, and chose a table near the back.

“He’s not here yet?” asked Larrabee, as they sat.

“Nope,” said the Professor, trying to draw the waitress over with his eyes. He was good at it; she was snagged almost immediately, came over and took their order.

“How can you tell he’s not here?” worried Larrabee.

“I’d be able to *sense* it,” said the Professor, eyeing the door. “Here’s Jane.”

Jane hurried in on high heeled boots, wrapped in an elegantly cut wool coat. She paused at the bar, gave an order to the bartender and joined them.

“Nasty out,” she said, pulling off her hat and unbuttoning her coat.

“Not a fit night for man or…” said the Professor and winked at both companions.

“I’m not convinced he’ll show up,” said Jane.

“Give the devil his due,” joked the Professor.

“I can’t believe we’re sitting here waiting for the devil,” marveled Larrabee.

The waitress brought their drinks and the Professor paid. “First round’s on me,” he said, then snapped his fingers and ran to the juke box. “Darn!” he said, returning.

“What?” asked Jane.

“I wanted to see if they had ‘Sympathy for the Devil.’ Wouldn’t that be a scream, to have it playing when he comes in?”

“This is serious,” said Larrabee.

“I know,” the Professor assured him. “I know.”

The door opened again and they all looked up, one nervously, one skeptically and one expectantly. It was a crowd of college kids and in their wake, dark-eyed, dark-haired Jass, the young Puerto Rican who completed their group. He saw them but stopped at the bar before coming over.

“Jass my boy,” said the Professor jovially as the intense looking young man sat down. Jass slipped off his coat with a nod meant for them all as his eyes probed all shadows of the room quickly and darkly.

“Cold, huh?” Larrabee said and the boy nodded distractedly, picked up his drink. Larrabee blushed a little; he was always saying things that sounded inane to Jass. Jass was spare with words and made Larrabee’s small talk sound like mindless babble.

“Of all places to meet,” said Jane, looking disapprovingly around the room, which was filling up, mostly with kids from the local college.

“It’s got atmosphere,” said the Professor. “Plus, it’s in a location easily accessible to all four of us. I thought that showed a certain consideration on his part.”

“I still can’t believe it,” said Larrabee, staring anxiously into his drink and stabbing at the ice cubes with his straw.

“Believe it, my man, believe it!” said the Professor.

One of the college kids, a tall, thinnish twenty-year old slipped a quarter into the juke box, jabbed a couple buttons and ‘Sympathy for the Devil’ blasted through the speakers. Swaying slightly, he looked over the other selections.

“Say, they *do* have it!” cried the Professor gaily. “Now what a great moment for him to walk in! Or manifest, or whatever.”

“You’re so theatrical,” said Jane.

“Good tune,” said Jass, mostly to himself.

The college kid came over and pulled out a chair at their table. He smiled vaguely at them and sat down. They stared at him.

“Uh, that chair’s taken,” said the Professor, after a moment. “We’re expecting a fifth.”

“You’re looking at him,” grinned the boy.

“No,” said Larrabee. “Come on.”

“What’d you expect?” the kid asked. “No, don’t tell me, I can guess. Jeez, I woulda cleared the place out like *that!* Be real.”

“Can we get you a drink?” the Professor asked him, deciding to be cool about it.

“No, wait a minute,” said Jane. “I’m sorry to be the skeptic of the group, but I’d like a little... well...”

“Proof?” asked the boy. “I predicted this. I just knew you’d get all excited about me coming, then suddenly have doubts and expect a demonstration. That’s what you have in mind, right? You want me to show my stuff, otherwise you’ll think I’m just some weird college kid playing games.”

He looked a little peeved.

“You have to admit,” said Jane, practically, “that you look nothing like what anyone would reasonably expect.”

“I take many shapes and forms,” the boy reminded her. “You’d know that if you read your B-I-B-L-E.”

“Still, it would be... kind of *fun*,” said the Professor. “To see what you can do.” He winked at Larrabee who was staring mesmerized at the kid.

“So indulge us,” added Jass, also staring, but calmly.

“Okay, okay, sure,” said the boy, leaning back in his chair. He seemed to be concentrating. Then he focused his gray eyes on Jane for a long moment. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“Okay, here’s something for you,” he said, still staring. “I’m going to tell you the first thing you did this morning when you woke up.”

“Oh, that’s so...” protested Jane, then broke off suddenly, looking uneasy.

“Picture this,” said the boy, gazing off over her head. “I’m seeing it. The alarm goes off at sevenish. You grope for it, switch it off. You mutter, ‘Oh, shit,’ because first thing, you remember you’ve got a dentist appointment. You stare moodily at the ceiling a minute. I’m seeing this clearly, it’s right in front of me, living color. You think, you really shouldn’t waste time but, what the hell, you kind of stretch and ease the sheets off you, you reach down...”

“Stop it!” snapped Jane, glancing around at the others with a stricken face. “That’s enough! This is ridiculous!”

“No, go on,” said the Professor. “What’d she do next?”

“I got out of bed, that’s what!” she told them, flustered, and oddly blushing. “What else would I do?”

“Is that what she did?” asked Larrabee. “Just got out of bed?”

The boy shrugged. His eyes shifted from gray to green to reddish brown and back again. Only Larrabee caught it, and almost swooned. This caused the kid to grin, showing teeth that were suddenly pointed like needles. Larrabee moaned aloud.

“Can we just drop this?” demanded Jane, and the boy smiled amiably, teeth and eyes perfectly normal.

“Now hold on here!” said the Professor, holding his hands up for silence. “We’ve got him here, we ought to at least give him a chance to show what he can do.”

Jane stared angrily into her drink, Larrabee glanced furtively at the boy who was humming, unconcerned, to the music. Jass nodded at the Professor, agreeing.

“Maybe you’d prefer to discuss this among yourselves,” said the young man. “I’ll give you a couple minutes.” He got to his feet, still humming, and headed back to the juke box, digging change out of his pocket. A faint wisp of smoke trailed briefly from his left ear as he moved – the Professor noticed, but the conversation resumed before he could comment.

“This is what we wanted,” Jass said to Jane. “Don’t blow it now.”

“It’s just not what I expected,” she said defensively. “That kid makes me nervous.”

“The Devil isn’t known for spreading warmth and peace,” the Professor reminded her. “If that’s what we wanted we would have conjured up the Easter Bunny with that board of ours.”

“We should talk to him,” asserted Larrabee. He’d already convinced himself that he had imagined the changing eyes and teeth. “He might get angry if we get him here and then... doubt him.”

A waitress stood over them, order pad in hand.

“We could all use another,” the Professor told her.

“Including your friend at the juke box?” she asked.

“Sure, get him...” the Professor broke off. “Where’d he go? He was there a second ago...”

The waitress giggled and sat down with them. Jane stared at her resentfully and said, “What kind of service is *this*?”

“Just what you wanted,” the waitress replied, crossing long legs. Her long, yellowed toenails, Jane saw, were curled down over the lip of her sandals. “You wanted to see what I could do, right?”

“You’re kidding!” said Larrabee, then added nervously, “I mean... that’s pretty good...”

“How’s your drink?” she asked. They saw that their glasses had been refilled. Jane seemed loathe to touch hers. Larrabee covertly glanced around for the young college student and when he looked back found the brazen smile of the waitress upon him.

“Anything else I can do for you?” she asked.

“No, um,” murmured Larrabee. “I’m fine.”

“Anything at all,” prompted the waitress. “Anything. Come on. There must be something. Is there some woman you desire? Want to retire early? Want revenge on someone?”

“You’re awfully generous,” noted the Professor. “But aren’t you notorious for dirty deals? There must be some catch here, mustn’t there? You’re not just going to offer ol’ Larrabee here his heart’s desire and get nothing in return, surely.”

“Like his soul?” asked the waitress wearily. “Or his first-born? Oops, actually that was G-O-D who did that. I ain’t the only ruthless one, you know.”

She looked back at Larrabee. Now come on, what do you want? Name it.”

“May as well ask,” said Jass, eyeing Larrabee with amusement.

“I just...” stammered Larrabee, self-conscious under all their stares. “I can’t... I just can’t *think!*”

The waitress sighed and shook her head. “Then I’ll just have to guess,” she said patiently. “Let’s see. What would Larrabee here want as a little present? I have a feeling there’s something... Oh, I know. Seems to me there’s an item you’ve wanted for awhile now, but you can’t bring yourself to go in a store and buy it.”

“What’s that?” asked Jane. “What wouldn’t he go into a store for?”

“Well, said the waitress, answering for Larrabee. “The kind of store that sells this kind of item... Hell, Larrabee’s a respectable person; he doesn’t want to be seen frequenting shops like that. Someone might think... But tell you what,” she looked brightly at Larrabee’s miserable face. “When you get home you’ll find it waiting for you. I’ll leave it on your night stand.”

“I don’t know what it could be,” murmured Larrabee, crimson.

The waitress shrugged then looked over at the bar. “There’s the bartender glaring at me. Dumb idea to dress like this, now he wants me to work. Be right back. Gotta straighten him out.”

She left and the Professor chuckled, shaking his head. “Never you mind, Larrabee,” he said. “None of *our* business. Just enjoy.”

Larrabee gulped his drink.

“I just don’t know what to think,” said Jane. “I just don’t know.”

“I’m the first to admit,” said the Professor, “he... or she or whatever’s not exactly what I expected, but... Uh oh, get ready, here we go again...”

An elderly man shuffled over to them and gazed blearily around at each of their faces. “Buy me a beer?” he suggested. “Beer for an old man?”

“Sit right down,” invited the Professor, merrily nodding at the empty chair. He scanned the bar quickly; sure enough, no sign of the ‘waitress.’

“You’re good people,” said the old man, sitting down.

“Outa my bar,” growled the titanic black man, striding over to their table. “I don’t want any stiffs in here.”

“Leave me alone!” whined the old man. “I’m with friends!”

“L...leave him alone,” agreed Larrabee worriedly.

“I don’t like this riff raff drifting in here, bugging my paying customers,” said the bouncer, roughly taking the old man by the collar and leading him out the back way.

“Uh, he wasn’t really bother...” began the Professor, but the bouncer was gone.

“Jeez,” said Jane. “I’ve got the creeps. There’s going to be trouble back there.”

They were clearly surprised to see the bouncer return in one piece. “Sorry about that,” he said, stopping at their table. “They’re bold as brass, those bums. Anything I can get you folks?”

“Uh, we’re all set,” said the Professor.

“Come on, anything at all, just ask,” urged the bouncer with a voracious grin.

“You’re...” began Jane, startled. “Oh.”

The bouncer sat down with them.

“We thought for sure you were the old man,” Larrabee said, shaking his head, confused. Jass was smiling, quietly pleased.

“Maybe I *was* the old man,” said the bouncer. “Now I’m the bouncer. You want to see the first bouncer, he’s out back in the ally. All *over* the ally, heh, heh.”

“You’re too much!” grinned the Professor, and the bouncer shrugged, smiling. “Hey,” he said. “I’m out to impress.”

“Is the... you know, the *original* bouncer...” said Jane, hoarsely, “Is he really... Did you...”

“No, not really,” admitted the large man. “Actually, I was the bouncer from the start. I don’t know where that little old guy came from. I kicked him outa here, that’s all.”

“This is weird,” said Jane. She saw that the hands on the bouncer’s watch were spinning around and around at a blinding speed. As she stared, the entire watch melted and oozed off his wrist, dribbling to the floor.

“Weird? Are you kidding?” asked the bouncer. “This is par for the course. Say, Professor,” he said, turning to face the other. “This isn’t fazing you a bit, is it? You’re taking it right in stride, aren’t you?”

The Professor chuckled. “I told myself to expect anything,” he said in a jovial way. “I hardly thought this would be your run of the mill encounter.”

“Good for you!” said the bouncer. “Open mind. I like that. It’s refreshing and I want to reward it. Professor, this is your life!”

“Pardon me?” smiled the Professor, uncertain.

“Take a look over there,” ordered the bouncer. “Now there’s a face you’ve been yearning for a glimpse of for the past two months. Just a *glimpse*, you told her on the phone, just

a fleeting look to get you through the long, cold night. That's all you needed, all you wanted from her. Just one more *look*."

He was pointing now, and all four stared across the bar at an attractive, forties woman, a little overdone, cuddled up against a big man, possibly ten years younger.

"Margery," said the Professor.

"Wouldn't even let you get one last little look at her," mourned the bouncer. "Good thing you've got friends like me."

"Your wife," said Larrabee. "What's she doing here? Who's that guy?"

"Who cares about the guy?" demanded the bouncer. "He wanted one more glimpse of, what's her name, Miriam's face."

"Margery," said the Professor, staring.

"Margery's face," amended the bouncer, "and I've provided that for him. Well, now she's on to bigger and better things, you've glimpsed her face and everyone's happy, right?"

"Right," said Jass.

"Hey, the band's starting up," observed the bouncer, and waved at a waitress for another round. "Come on," he said to the Professor. "Quit staring. You can't see her face now, anyhow, it's all covered up with that guy's mouth."

At the bouncer's demand, they all turned their chairs toward the stage as the band tuned up. The noise level in the bar rose drastically in anticipation.

One of the guitarists yelled something about shit-kicking rock ‘n roll and the band blazed into ear-splitting life. The lead singer dashed onto the stage, grabbed the mike and began to howl.

“This is awful,” murmured Jane, her voice lost even to her own ears. Larrabee looked pained, the Professor numb and Jass tranquil.

The music sounded like a deliberate series of tortuous mischords, the lead singer’s voice doing something all on its own as though hearing its own private backup. Larrabee helplessly turned to the bouncer, but he was gone. Looking back at the stage he saw the lead singer leering wickedly down at him.

“It doesn’t even sound like music,” said Jane, but she saw that, incredibly, almost everyone in the bar was hypnotized by it, were on their feet, moving. They weren’t exactly dancing, because they couldn’t catch hold of a rhythm or steady beat to follow – the band seemed deliberately to scorn such restrictions, indulging instead in a study of chaos.

“That’s *right!*” wailed the lead singer, delightedly. “Move! Move! Feel the music!”

The audience tried to obey the impossible command and gyrated grotesquely and energetically, searching the crazed noise from the stage for a clue as to how to make their confused bodies follow.

“They look deranged,” commented the Professor, stonily, watching Margery jerk, twitch and whirl, enslaved by the band’s pandemonium.

“That’s because *he’s* up there!” Larrabee told them and the lead singer howled again, “Feel the music! You can do anything! Anything at all!”

Someone smashed a beer bottle on a table and the noise triggered something in the already maddened crowd. More smashing of glass was heard and someone slammed a wooden chair against a wall. Another began throttling his partner. The mob went mad with sudden violence, as though all at once they had discovered the way to respond to the lead singer’s command.

“Feel the music!”

“We’ve got to get out of here!” Jane said, panicking. Even the usually unflappable Jass wore a slight frown and this added an even sharper edge to her urgency. The four of them were rising from their chairs when a half dozen policemen burst into the room and began trying to subdue the crowd and confiscate makeshift weapons.

“All right, come on folks, you’re coming with me.” One of the policemen grabbed Jane’s arm and the Professor’s. “Come on, the group of you. Downtown for some questions, move it!”

“We... we had nothing to do with this!” pleaded Larrabee. “We were trying to stay out of it! We weren’t involved!”

“You sound intoxicated,” noted the cop. “How many have you had?”

“Just... Not that much...”

“Lost count? Come on, outside. Everyone in this joint’s going to be questioned. Move it!”

Resignedly they let themselves be herded to the door. Just as they were stepping outside the cop turned and grinned at them.

“It’s *me!*” he snickered. Larrabee quickly looked back at the stage. The band members were milling about, looking confused and disoriented. The lead singer was no longer there.

“How’s *that* for bringing down the house?” gloated the cop. “Come on, let’s get you out of this place. Next they’ll burn it down. Crowd’s out of control.”

“Where are we going?” demanded Larrabee who, with the Professor in his numbed state, had grown a bit assertive.

“Why, I’m going to walk you to the bus stop,” said the policeman. “You *are* ready to call it a night, aren’t you?”

“I’d say so,” Jane weakly agreed, and the cop smiled benevolently at her. He chatted animatedly as they hurried down the frigid sidewalk. They observed that the pavement cracked and split behind him as he moved along. Larrabee hopped to avoid the sudden crevasses. “Step on a crack, break your mother’s back,” lilted the cop. “I think that’s how it goes. Oh, there’s the bus.”

Indeed, in the distance they saw the bus pulled up to a corner and the silhouette of the driver, slouched down and reading the paper.

“Lousy shift,” said the Devil. “Night run.” They approached the bus. The driver looked reluctantly from his paper, seeing them, and let the doors open.

“I guess this is where we part company,” said the Devil. “I’ve got other fish to fry. Things to do, people to meet.”

“Thank heavens,” muttered Jane, and the Devil smiled gently down at her. “Bit off more than you could chew?” he asked softly. Jane flushed and looked away.

“Nighty night, kids,” waved the Devil from the sidewalk, as they climbed aboard and took seats widely apart from one another. They were the only ones on the bus. The driver glanced at his watch, muttered something, and put away his paper.

“Don’t be strangers,” called the Devil cheerfully, waving at them as the bus pulled away from the curb and headed downtown.

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

“When’d your wife leave you?” Jane asked the Professor at last, not unkindly.

“Couple months ago,” he answered. Then he heaved a deep sigh and stared at his reflection in the night blackened window.

“Hell,” said Larrabee. “I don’t want to go home.” He was wondering what would be sitting on his night stand when he got there. “I vote we go someplace else for another drink. One more.”

“Why not?” said Jane. “Jass?”

Jass looked up, startled from his thoughts. “Sure,” he said.

“Where y’all getting’ off, now?” asked the bus driver’s loud voice. They all looked up to meet his twinkling eyes in the mirror over his head. “Anywhere you want, now, anywhere at all!” He chuckled. Jane moaned quietly.

“Let us off this minute!” demanded newly assertive Larrabee, but even he was surprised when the driver immediately obliged. Promptly he pulled the bus over, waited politely and patiently as they filed quickly out, each glancing with wary dread at him as they passed.

“Nighty night,” he whispered to them, and swung the doors shut again. The bus trundled off into the darkness.

“Christ, are we going to keep seeing him every time we turn around?” wondered Jane, shaking her head.

“He’ll get tired of us,” the Professor predicted weakly. “He’s got the whole world to fool around with.”

“Where’s Jass?” Larrabee shrilled suddenly. Jass, stepping from a shadow, quirked an eyebrow at him.

“I’m on pins and needles!” snapped Larrabee, irritated at himself for yelping. “All right, now, where to? I think there’s a couple good places nearby.”

“Mike’s Tavern is around here somewhere, isn’t it?” asked Jane.

“Do you think he’s really gone?” fretted the Professor, looking around.

“Mike’s it is,” said Larrabee. “Jass, that okay with you?”

“Anything you want,” said Jass, smiling broadly at him. “Anything at all.”