



**TRAPPED
INSIDE
THE STOKER**

**BY
JACK KETCHUM**

TRAPPED INSIDE THE STOKER

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I like this house. I really do.

Not to start out crass but what the hell, I like the fact that for one thing, I didn't have to pay for it. Except in the way you always have to pay for everything in some damn currency or another. Blood, sweat. Fears, years. The currency of sheer persistence.

But this time none of my own cash was involved for a change. Not a dime.

Which was lucky. What little cash I had at the time couldn't even have purchased the shrubs -- at least I *think* they're shrubs -- around the side.

The house was handed to me actually by a group of friends and admirers. Just like that. Right out of the blue. It's possible they were aware of my state of mind throughout the previous year and decided that the house would cheer me up. Be a welcome lift from a very bad patch financially speaking and a painful rejection by my British lover. Who had borne me four bastard sons by then. Or maybe five. But that's another story.

And it *was* a lift. It *did* cheer me up. I couldn't have been more delighted.

See, it's the house itself.

I like walking around inside here. The ancient solidity of the place, its strange angularity, its gables, peaks and chimneys, its garret with the small oculus window, the gargoyles poised above the threshold. The essential darkness within despite the big bay windows in back looking out on the blasted garden.

I've always found darkness very comforting. I'm a night person I guess. Daylight always comes as a kind of rude surprise to me. I prefer my dream-world to the crisp outlines of buildings against the sunlit sky, to the narrow flat lines of streets and the polished glare of the cars which glide along them. Prefer it even, I have to admit, to most of the people I know. The people who inhabit my dreams are almost always more interesting.

Plus they change faster.

So I'm very at home here. It's just my kind of place.

I have plenty of company to amuse me. I have a very large thousand-legged sort of insect thing which creeps back and forth through the second-floor window on the left side of the house into the master bedroom and then out again through the window in back. This goes on all night long. I don't mind.

I've cleared a good wide space for the thing so it doesn't smash the furniture in the process. I like the sound of its feet pattering paradiddles across the floor and windowsill like a tap dancer, its antennae delicately exploring the shutters. It never seems to stop to eat and I wouldn't know what to feed it.

It doesn't seem to have a mouth anyhow. At least none that I can see.

There's a turret on the second floor around to the right. Only one -- which is odd because usually they come in pairs. Apparently whoever designed the house favored some measure of asymmetry. In the open window of that turret a watcher stands guard, sharp of tooth and narrow of skull, his long cloak bunched around his wrists. Whether he's actually just standing guard there or waiting to leap down unexpectedly on anyone foolish enough to approach is an open question. I've never asked him.

The fangs could argue either way.

In the first floor parlor window are my bird-heads. Over half a dozen at least though it's hard to count them because they're extremely fast. And one or more is always darting out the window to climb the side of the house and bedevil the poor thousand-legger on its ceaseless second-floor rounds.

I call them bird-heads though others call them lizard-heads. I don't think it matters much either way. Think *Archeopteryx*. Though they do have long rows of very sharp teeth so we could all be mistaken and they might be something else entirely.

The back door's always opening and closing. Those rare occasions I used to go out to what passes for the garden I could see a huge pair of hands -- human hands -- opening and closing it incessantly. Though when I went back through that door, the passage to the kitchen was always empty. It's as though somebody were constantly just about to call me in

for lunch and then got to thinking better of it. Like maybe lunch was never quite ready.

Another mystery.

Finally there's the troll in the chimney.

From the yard you can just see the top of his head and maybe the bridge of his nose and deep-set eyes and pointy ears.

He looks like a chimney-stop but isn't.

Obviously I've never used that fireplace, that chimney. I use the one on the other side.

Which so far is clear.

I build all my fires there.

As I say, I have plenty of company. Company's not the problem.

The problem is that much as I like the house, I seem to be *trapped* here.

The house has gained a kind of *thickness*.

It's getting hard to move inside. Like moving through hardening plaster.

I can't make it to the back door passage anymore. I can hear the hands opening and closing the door but that's all. I can barely make it to the kitchen to cook myself a steak or pour myself a scotch. Both of which always seem to be there when I need them, thank god.

I've never been able to get out through the front door at all.

Nobody can get in either.

Here's why.

Say you're a visitor. You go to the paneled wooden door, grasp the handle, pull and it opens. But then what you're looking at is a *second* door. This one *without* a handle. Set directly into the thickening space of the house itself -- by what means I don't know. This second door's made of brass and carved with the inscription

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So now I ask you, what the hell am I supposed to make of this?

How are my publishers going to find me? Or I find them? Not that they've ever come beating down my door in the first place. Which is maybe why I'm *here* in the first place. Why my friends and admirers have put me here, given me this space, allotted me this oddly safe-feeling haven on some side street apart from the *main*, in some quiet place away from the *stream* of things. Where I can live comfortably amid my crawly, climbing, watching, paradiddling friends.

There are others just like me, I know. In similar houses all across

the country.

Plenty of them.

And it's not that we don't like where we are. We do. And it's not that we're not grateful. We are. It's just that it gets strange and isolated here sometimes and the walls get thicker and thicker and the need to *break out* just grows and grows.

Maybe I will and maybe I won't.

Break out I mean.

We'll see.

Meantime while I still can, I think I'll build another fire.

It's what I do.

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-- for Theo Levine