



Illustration by Briggs

¶ I jerked spasmodically. I tried to free myself, but the devils in the wires were too cunning.

The Young Old Man

by Earl L. Bell

WE met the Young Old Man—Glenn Fleming and I—during our first campout in the heart of the Ozarks.

A cloudburst that sent the rain through the roof of our shack had ruined our cache of rations, and we decided to replenish at the nearest settlement, some ten miles distant, rather than cut short our vacation.

Our rickety car managed to carry us safely over the makeshift mountain roads, and we found that the settlement comprised only five or six scattered houses and one store, a typical crossroads affair, whose front bore numerous patent medicine and cut plug advertisements amid which could be discerned the lettering: CLINTON FANCHER—GENERAL MERCHANDISE.

Quite traditionally, the proprietor was sitting on a soap box inside the store engaged in the ancient art of whittling when we entered. There was something about him that focused our attention immediately he rose to greet us; and when he spoke, we knew he was no ordinary hillman.

“A particularly fine day after yesterday’s deluge, my lads. One of the heaviest rains these old hills have had in more than a decade. What can I do for you?”

In spite of his inordinate quid of tobacco, his articulation was perfect, but there was an alien quality in his voice that was baffling—a slight but peculiar accent that defied definition. His English was good, but it hinted of other tongues, a combination of them, in a most cosmopolitan sort of way.

Queer, that voice of his, but his appearance was even more bizarre. I remarked him closely as he was filling our order and noted that Glenn, who had strolled over to the

counter and picked up a book that lay by the cheese box, also was studying him.

There are men who are old for their years, and men young for their years, but there is always some clue—the eyes, as a rule—that enables one to come within ten years of their correct age, at the outside. But not so with the man before us. I first thought he was no more than forty. Then, noticing his graying hair and slight flabbiness of muscle, I guessed he was about fifty. But when I found opportunity to look closely into his eyes, I received such a shock that I wanted to shudder.

Set in a face almost youthful, they were ancient beyond reckoning, as are the Ozark hills.

Dewlapped, timeworn and sunken... Yet they were not the lackluster eyes of senility. There were life and light in them, but of a kind I did not know. Weariness—infinite weariness—was there, and a sorrowful sort of wisdom, as if they had gazed too long upon the Valley of Baca. Still, I repeat, they were not the watery eyes of age. Rather, I fancied, they were orbs such as the Sphinx might have, should she rise suddenly to vigorous life, under doom to remember all. Yes, that was it—the storekeeper’s eyes had seen too much, and were unable to forget.

I thought I had managed somehow to conceal my amazement, and was quite certain he had betrayed no embarrassment; but a moment later, none the less, he produced from his pocket a pair of dark glasses and put them on.

Glenn, registering puzzlement, was still thumbing the book when the grocer finished with our order, and when he laid the volume down, I noticed for the first time that

it had no cover.

“Well, boys, I presume you are strangers in these parts,” the merchant’s enigmatic voice put in, as we paid him and made ready to depart. “And camping out, I deduce.”

We introduced ourselves and informed him briefly that we were down from St. Louis for our first stay in the Ozarks, and were “roughing it” at Robin Creek, where the fishing had been very good until the recent rain.

“The water will be too muddy for any catch except catfish until tomorrow, I should say,” he commented. “Come to see me again before you leave, lads. I seldom see anyone from the outside. I have been living here twenty years and haven’t been ten miles from the hamlet in that time. I guess I’m getting lonesome—and loquacious. Sometimes I find myself looking out upon the hills and talking to them. I’ve seen nearly all the mountains in the world, boys, and I love the Ozarks best of all. They are so old they seem to be en rapport with one who has come to realize the futility of it all. They were once quite haughty hills, you know, but the eons have worn them down. The day will come when they shall be no more. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*” (Thus the world’s glory passes.)

“Then I take it you are not a native of this section, and must have traveled quite a bit,” I said, hiding my astonishment at his linguistic display.

“You’re right, my friend. My natal cry was uttered far from these hills, and I’ve outdone the Wandering Jew himself in my day. Come over some time and let me bore you with some of my experiences.”

And then, to Glenn as we were starting the car: “You must come too, my lad, and I’ll tell you about that book, if you’ll promise to believe me.”

“IMAGINE a country storekeeper in this neck

of the woods using Latin and reading dog Latin. It’s uncanny!” Glenn’s voice rose above the rattle of the flivver.

“But not as uncanny as his eyes,” I responded. “Did you see them?”

“No, I was too interested in the book. So that’s why he put on his glasses?”

“I guess so, and I’m glad he did. His eyes really gave me the creeps. They’re incongruous. At once young and old, and there’s something odious about them—no, not that, but sadness and weariness so great as to make them repellent. I once read a gruesome tale about the dead alive, a group of people for whose souls life and death fought to a stalemate and finally arrived at a ghastly compromise whereby their victims must live forever in a plight that called for death. Well, I imagine those people must have had eyes like those of our friend back there.”

“Oh, wake up, Bill, you talk as though you had seen a ghost or a vampire,” my companion chided. “The fellow has some peculiar optical ailment, that’s all. But I’d like for you to tell me what he is doing with that book. It’s a medieval philosophical work and is written in a monkish sort of Latin that puzzles me. There was no way to tell who wrote it, nor when it was published. The binding and the title page were gone, and the name doesn’t appear at the top of the pages as in modern books. It must be hundreds of years old, and is worth a fortune, sure as your name is Bill Semms.”

Glenn was a hopeless bibliophile, and I knew he would not rest until he had learned the history of the volume. Therefore I expected him to propose that we pay the storeman another visit, and he did so, before we reached camp. I prevailed upon him, however, to wait until we broke camp and stop by the store on our way out of the mountains.

A VISITOR came to our shack that night, an old mountaineer named Harkins who lived

about a mile up the creek, and who had paid us a previous call. Long, lean, bearded and rugged, he was a typical back Hillman in all save one respect: he was garrulous—to a fault. “Come down this way this mo’nin’ bout noon to see ef the cloudburst had washed you all away,” he said by way of greeting, “and found you all gone. Reckoned you all had packed up and hit fer home, but heard your car a-rattlin’ over the hills while I was a-crossin’ the creek this evenin’ (afternoon), so I jest drapped in to tell you all that the fishin’ will be all right again in a day or tew.”

“The rain was too much for our roof and ruined the groceries we had in the corner over there,” I explained, “so we had to run up to the settlement and buy more.”

“Which settlement?”

“I don’t know its name. It’s about ten miles west of here.”

“That’s Rossville. So you bought ’em from that Fancher fellow, hey? Pecooliar old chap, ain’t he? They call him the ‘Young Old Man.’”

Glenn moved closer and handed our guest a cigar.

“We didn’t pay much attention to him,” I lied, trying to veil my curiosity. “Why do you call him peculiar?”

“Ef you had saw his eyes, you’d a-called him wuss than pecooliar. Guess he had ’em covered up, though. Most gen’ly does, now.”

“He did strike us as somewhat unusual,” I admitted. “Tell us something about him.”

“Well,” he began, lighting his cigar, “Fancher ain’t a bad sort o’ feller—‘ceptin’ his eyes. Nobody ’round here don’t know much ’bout him. He’s a mystery. Come to Rossville ’bout twenty year ago and bought out a sto’. He’s a furriner, all right, but nobody don’t know jest where he come from. Friendly enough, but never would say much ’bout hisself, or, ’bout anything else, for that

matter. They do say, though, that he’s kind o’ loosened up here o’ late. I ain’t saw him in nearly two year.”

He paused and stroked his beard.

“But his eyes—what’s the matter with them?” I prompted.

“Nobody don’t know what in tarnation’s the matter with ’em. They was kind o’ pecooliar when he fust come here, and they been gettin’ wusser and wusser ever since. Got so bad ’bout five year ago that the young uns at Rossville thought he was the bogeyman and were scairt to go to his sto’, even for the scraps o’ candy he’d give ’em now and then. He started to wearin’ a pair o’ big black glasses ’bout that time, and I hyears he’s scarcely ever seen without ’em, now. He can see out o’ them eyes o’ his’n good as anybody, though.”

“Why do they call him the ‘Young Old Man?’” Glenn put in.

“I was a-comin’ to that. It’s mostly ’cause o’ his eyes. Ef you had saw ’em, you’d understand. Bet old Methuselah hisself didn’t have a set o’ eyes any older lookin’ than Fancher’s. They look like they had saw the flood, the locusts and all them other plagues the Bible tells ’bout. Ef it warn’t for that, he could pass for a man o’ forty-five, easy. And that’s the funny part o’ it—’ceptin’ his eyes, he don’t look a year older than when he fust come here. Yes, sir, there’s somethin’ mighty pecooliar ’bout Fancher. But he’s a pretty good sort, jest the same, and will do anybody a favor ef he can. The smallpox broke out in these parts ’bout ten year ago, and Fancher closed his sto’ and nussed at least a dozen families. Didn’t seem scairt at all.”

THREE days later we heard the Young Old Man was dead.

Found lifeless in his bed in the room back of his store, according to old Harkins, who brought the news to us.

But the excited Harkins had no

particulars. In fact, he wasn't certain the report was true. He had "hyeared" it, he said, and was preparing to go to Rossville to investigate. "Mought be a murder," he added, morbidly, if not hopefully. "We ain't had no excitement in these hills in three year."

Glenn proposed that we ride over and see for ourselves. I surmised he was anxious about the fate of that book, but what he meant to do about it, if the owner was really dead, was more than I could fathom.

We invited Harkins to accompany us.

The coroner had claimed the body when we arrived, and there was to be an inquest shortly, the agitated villagers informed us.

A few minutes later, after Harkins had lost himself in the crowd, Glenn and I, accompanied by the coroner, viewed the Young Old Man's remains.

It was evident that he had died without a struggle. The body, fully clothed and face up, lay across the bed. His weird eyes were forever closed, yet there was something unearthly about his features—an expression of transcendent joy that centered in the strangest smile I have ever seen on the face of the dead. Not inscrutable, that smile. It told of long sought surcease of flagellating weariness; of infinite gladness at having laid the burden down.

"I can't understand it," the coroner's voice interrupted my thoughts. "He looks like he is glad he's dead. A plain case of heart failure, I guess, but I must go through with the inquest soon as the doctor arrives."

The room of death was small and sparsely furnished. The bed, two chairs, a trunk, a table and a small oil stove were about all it contained. An oil lamp stood on the table, and beside it lay a coverless book and the Young Old Man's dark glasses. The walls were bare save for a cracked mirror on one side of the fireplace, and what appeared to be a framed motto on the other.

Glenn moved over and picked up the book soon as it caught his eyes.

"This is a valuable volume," he said to the coroner. "I would have given him a hundred dollars for it."

"Well, you may be able to buy it from Preacher Fellows," the official drawled. "I understand Fancher made some sort of a will a few months ago and left the pastor everything he had."

"Where does the minister live?" Glenn asked, eagerly.

"In that little white house over yonder," pointing out of the window to a cottage about two hundred yards away. "Preacher Fellows is a superannuated circuit rider, and is going blind. He was Fancher's closest friend."

Glenn laid the book down reluctantly and walked over to the motto on the wall.

"Come here, Bill, you and the coroner," he beckoned a moment later. "This is interesting."

It was not a motto. It was part of Walt Whitman's chant to death:

"Come lovely and soothing Death,
Undulate round the world, serenely
arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later, delicate Death,
Dark Mother, always gliding near on
soft feet,
Have none chanted for thee a chant of
fullest welcome?
Then I chant for thee, I glorify thee
above all,
Approach, strong deliveress."

"SO you want to buy the book ? I don't know its value, but I think the hundred dollars you offer is too much, my son. I'll take it, though, for God knows I'll need it before long. It's a strange volume, isn't it? Fancher used to pore over it all the time, but he'd never tell me

what was in it.”

We were sitting in the old circuit rider’s humble parlor. It was night. The Fancher inquest had been late in starting and had lasted until nearly sunset. The verdict was death from natural causes.

Glenn gave the minister the money and we prepared to depart, but he entreated us to stay a little longer. It seemed that something was troubling him.

“I’m worried, my young friends,” he admitted after a while. “There’s something I want to show you. You say you are college men, and maybe you’ll be able to help me.”

He reached into a drawer of the small table around which we were sitting and produced a large envelope.

“I suppose I should have opened this before the inquest was held,” he said, “but was so shaken over my friend’s death that I forgot it.

“Fancher made a will shortly before he died, and his wish was that I sell his store and keep the money against the day when these cataracts have finished blinding me. The same day he drew up the will, he gave me this letter. I was to open it on the day he died. I had just finished trying to read it when you knocked at the door. My eyes are so bad I couldn’t study it closely, but I read enough to make my reason totter. God knows I believe Fancher was insane when he wrote it—insane all the time—and we didn’t know it.

“Here, my son,” handing me the letter, “read it aloud. I want to know just what it means before I show it to the coroner. I’m just a plain old country preacher and know almost nothing about the things he mentions. But I pray that Fancher’s story isn’t true. A suicide’s soul—no, I won’t say that. Go ahead with the reading, son.”

He turned the flickering flame of the kerosene lamp a bit higher, and this is what I read:

THE TRUE STORY OF THE LIFE OF CLINTON FANCHER, 1269_1926

I, Clinton Fancher, alias numerous other names, being in full possession of all my faculties and having determined to die, write this, my life story, on the day that marks the 657th anniversary of my birth.

Knowing that none will believe, I will be brief. And knowing that the English used by the old friar and myself is scarcely intelligible now, I will be modern.

I was born in the year 1269, in the ancient town of Basingstoke, which is in Hampshire, England.

It was in my twenty-fifth year that I met the thaumattirgist and traded life for *life*.

He was known as the Sorcerer, and I met him near Ilchester, in Somerset, in 1293, the year before he died.

He was an old man of nearly 80 then, and had returned to Somerset, the place of his birth, to spend his last days after a long imprisonment.

The sorcerer was a Franciscan of Oxford, and one of the most famous men of his day. A devotee of knowledge and a man of science, his renown had spread over most of Europe. He probably did more than any other man toward ushering in the Renaissance. He prophesied the airplane, motor vehicle, steamship, submarine and many other inventions which I have lived to see perfected. His scientific discoveries were among the first ever made by an Englishman. His writings marked him as probably the greatest philosopher since the Greeks.

So great were his accomplishments, that they proved his undoing and made of his life an intellectual tragedy. He had always been considered a rebellious member of the Franciscan order and was distrusted by his fellow friars. At length he was accused of dealing in black art, and finally, when the church condemned his books, was thrown into prison for fourteen years.

He had pursued his writings and investigations while in prison, and it was rumored he had emerged with the formula of an elixir that would enable one to live forever.

I had been ill three years with a disease which was later to become known as tuberculosis. I felt I couldn't live much longer. And I was in love. She was a bonny Hampshire lass with eyes like lapis lazuli.

And that is why I left Basingstoke and made my way to the house of the sorcerer.

He received me kindly, did this old friar of the broad brow and piercing eyes, whom prison suffering had wasted to a shadow.

"So you would like to live forever, my lad?" he asked after hearing my story. "I wouldn't advise it, even if it were possible. The man who discovers an elixir such as you mention would be the greatest malefactor the world has known. No, I have no such formula. Don't you see, I'd be burned at the stake for witchcraft if what you have heard were true?"

But I pleaded with him to try at least to heal me. I told him of the lass back in Hampshire. At length he promised to dose me.

"Come back tonight, my son, and I'll see what I can do," he said, a strange light coming into his eyes.

THAT light was burning fiercer when I returned. I was almost afraid of him. But he took me by the hand reassuringly and led me into his study.

"There is no drug that will heal you," he said. "You must waste away and die unless—"

"Unless what?" I cried.

"Would you really like to live indefinitely, my son?"

"Yes, forever—forever and a day."

"Yours is the voice of youth," he meditated. "You do not know what you say. I do not want the stain of a suicide's blood on my soul. The very knowledge that one had

interminable life would lead to self-destruction. No, lad, life is usually too long as it is."

"But not for me," I protested. "I am only twenty-four, and must die—die without having lived."

"It is so," he agreed. The strange light in his eyes flared up again, brighter than the ray of the candle on the table between us. "Come with me."

He was trembling so violently he could hardly pick up the candle. "Come with me."

He led me into another room and pointed to a silver crucifix on the wall.

"You are of the faith?"

"Yes, Father."

"Then kneel before the crucifix and swear by all the saints that you will never reveal, while I am living, what I am about to do."

I swore.

When I rose he had opened a cleverly concealed trapdoor in the floor behind me. There was a ladder leading to the basement. I followed him down.

The cellar was not more than ten feet square: A table stood in one corner. On it was a sizable black box with wires running from it.

The old friar set the candle on the table and placed a hand on the box.

"I'm not certain it will grant you immortality," he said. "If I were, I would not have brought you here. But it may heal you, at least. And if it does more than that, may God forgive me."

"What is in it?" I gasped. Had Lucifer and all the hosts of Hell sprung from the box I would not have been surprised. You must remember that it was still the Dark Ages.

"Ah, that I knew what it contains," the old man replied. "But it has no life, as we understand the term. And it cannot harm you, though it may cause you to fall asleep for a while. Are you ready, my son? If so, bare your wrists and ankles."

The seeming necromancy of the proceedings almost paralyzed my medieval mind. Grim fear gripped me and for a moment I wanted to cry out and flee the house. Would to God I had!

That the sorcerer was in league with Satan I had no doubt. And probably he was trying to betray me into selling my soul. No, I told myself, I would have none of it. But at that instant the old man's eyes gleamed once more with that unholy light—hypnotic, I suppose—and my fear subsided.

Stupefied, I began rolling up my sleeves, and when the candlelight accentuated the emaciation of my arms, I no longer hesitated.

The sorcerer must have sensed my decision. He began fumbling with the wires that ran from the box, and I noticed there was a metal clasp at the end of each of them.

At his gesture I moved nearer the table and he fastened the clasps about my limbs. I fancied his lips were moving in prayer.

“Ready, my son?”

“Ready, Father, and God help me!”

There was a sort of key in one side of the box. The sorcerer gave it a turn.

A thousand fires began racing through my veins. I jerked spasmodically. I tried to free myself of the clasps, but the devils in the wires were too cunning. A sputtering sound was coming from the box, and my horror-dilated eyes beheld small streams of purple sparks issuing from the holes where the wires emerged. In spite of my pain, I was fascinated. I had never seen fire so beautiful, I thought, and thinking, lost consciousness.

I WAS stretched on the cellar's earthen floor when I revived. The sorcerer was bending over me solicitously.

“You are all right now,” he said. “I'm sorry it hurt you. I did not know.”

“How long was I dead?” I asked, rising and finding that the clasps had been removed.



“You slept only a few minutes. It was a slumber I don't understand.”

I glanced at the box. It had ceased its sputtering.

“The devils in the box—where are they?” I inquired.

“There were no devils, my son. It was a natural force. Let's return upstairs—it's too damp down here—and I will try to explain.”

“Yes, it was a natural force, my lad,” when we were back in his study and I had sipped a glass of his wine. “The ancient Greeks called it *elektron*. Thales of Miletus experimented with it 600 years before Christ lived. I think it's the same phenomenon that causes lightning.

“I have gone much deeper into the mystery than did Thales—too deep, perhaps. I have learned how to produce it and partially control it. I have also discovered that it can kill, as does the lightning, and that, while it cannot produce life, it can prolong it *ad infinitum*.

“And since I have been out of prison I have made a prodigious step. *I have isolated its life element.*”

“The fire you saw coming from the box, my lad, was literally the spark of life.

“I first applied the life element to species of the Ephemera, insects that live only a few hours, and the result was that they lived for weeks. I next tried it on small animals, mostly mice, but it is too early to remark its effects on them. I noticed, however, that diseased rodents were immediately restored to health and that the same was true in the case of a dog that was nearly dead when it came into my hands.

“Therefore, my young friend from Basingstoke, I believe you need have no further fear of the disease that has been consuming you. And if the life spark has given you physical immortality, forgive me, my son, and curse me not in the dreary days to come.

“Go you back and wed the maiden, and my blessing be upon you and yours forever.”

AND back to Basingstoke I hurried, leaving the house of the sorcerer the next morning and carrying with me one of his books which he had given me as a remembrance. As I trekked my way homeward I knew I had been healed. I could feel life—new life—surging through me, bringing vigor I had never known, and ere I reached Basingstoke, firm flesh had filled out my frame.

But I was never to wed the lass with eyes like lapis lazuli; nor, through the more than six centuries that have followed, any other.... The spark of life, in giving life, had killed the life within me.

I remained in Basingstoke twenty years without aging a day in appearance. Then the townsfolk began to accuse me of having bartered my soul to Satan for eternal youth. I tried to explain. They laughed.

And then I began my wanderings, the loneliest, most accursed of mortals, an object of curiosity or suspicion wherever I tarried long; driven from clime to clime by fear and

sensitiveness; an anachronism spurred ever onward by a life that prayed for death.

I was in Germany when the Black Death swept Europe; in France, that day in May when Joan of Arc was burned in the streets of Rouen. The Maid was a pathetic figure, weeping as she walked to the stake. And, seeking death in battle, I fought under many flags. I was with the German troops when they pillaged Rome; with Blake when he destroyed the Spanish fleet at Teneriffe; with the Royalists against Cromwell, fought against my native land when the American Colonies struggled for freedom; with it again in its wars against Napoleon. Wounded only once.

But I said I would be brief.

I have been in America now since 1880. Twenty years ago I came to the Ozarks, seeking sanctuary in their loneliness. My respite is ending. The friendly hill people have begun to wonder. They are calling me the Young Old Man—a name I have had in many lands. Even the children sense my anomalousness. They are afraid of my eyes.

It has been said in truth that the eyes are the windows of the soul. Mine reflect my weariness, if not my age. But it is only in the last few years that their incongruity has grown into gargoyle hideousness. The soul is bursting through the windows at last.

I am weary for oblivion. For five hundred years I have sighed for the waters of Lethe. But I have been a craven coward, afraid, because of the medieval superstition that still lies coiled in my soul, to summon death. An eternity of monotony behind me; centuries of memories that will not fade. An eternity of loathsome life before me. A thousand years of it, perhaps. A thousand years! It shall not be. I will not go on. If it is true that God has existed from eternity, I am sure He will understand.

I have the formula of a potent but kindly poison I have remembered from the Dark Ages. I will brew it soon and drink it,

and drinking, sing out with the poet,
“Approach, strong deliveress!”

The sorcerer, in the book he gave me,
cried out against the futility of life. The name
of the volume is *Opus Tertium*. I still have it,

though I destroyed its binding and title page
centuries ago when priestly prejudice still
execrated the memory of its author, whose
name was ROGER BACON.