

THE CONJUROR PLAY

A Vicious Circle

by

David Cole

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Characters

GNOON, a ship's-carpenter and amateur conjuror who
has raised a devil and can't seem to lay it again.

PHLEGTHA, the devil he has raised.

TECKER } shipmates of GNOON (offstage voices)
XOXXIN }

Scene: The work-room of a ship; and then, not.

The audience is reminded that a Conjuror who has raised
a Devil is safe from it only so long as he remains
within the confines of his magic circle...

Note on pronuciation: The "g's" in both PHLEGTHA and
GNOON are pronounced hard. In PHLEGTHA, the
"e" is pronounced like long "a" in "stay";
the "th" is pronounced as in "thin."
XOXXIN is pronouncéd "Zox-zin."

(Up-right, a single flat representing part of the wall of the interior of a ship's work-room. In the wall is set a brass-rimmed porthole. Through the porthole can be seen a stylized pattern of waves-against-horizon, and a schematic gull.

Down-center, on the stage floor - which ideally should be raked - a conjuror's circle has been clumsily drawn in red chalk. Note: The "chalk" circle might actually be made of paper or cloth, since it must be removed in the course of the play. At various points around the circle are crudely chalked magical symbols and, scattered at intervals, little clumps of garlic and wild herbs.

In the circle stands GNOON, the ship's-carpenter: bristly salt-and-pepper beard, blue jeans, pale blue shirt, white sailor's cap, ridiculously short - it doesn't even reach his waist - red satin conjuror's cape. GNOON is intently leafing through an antique leather-bound conjuror's book.

Down-left stands PHLEGTHA, the devil GNOON has just conjured up and is now trying to dismiss. PHLEGTHA faces off-left, poised for take-off: left foot planted firmly in front of right, rigid hands pointed up at a slant, palms down, the left hand advanced a little higher than and ahead of the right.)

GNOON

(giving, apparently, the corrected version of a spell he has apparently given incorrectly a moment before)

"Ana - CElsus cru!

Back to your choir!

Having exhausted...

(He squints into the book.)

The...

(squints again)

Having exhausted ...

(again)

Having exhausted

The...

(squints again; PHLEGTHA all tense and expectant. GNOON suddenly, triumphantly, makes out the words:)

"Anacelsus cru!

Back to your choir,

Having exhausted

The pain of the fire!"

(GNOON slaps the book shut and looks eagerly toward PHLEGTHA, whose eyes are closed in blissful anticipation.

Pause.

PHLEGTHA slowly opens his eyes, puzzled. GNOON, disappointed, consults the book again, muttering to himself several variant versions:)

"The gain of the sire" ... "the strains of the lyre" ...

(PHLEGTHA drops his arms, turns and stares at GNOON in what appears a rather supercilious affectation of growing horror.)

PHLEGTHA

(plaintively, slapping his palm against his forehead in a "don't-tell-me!" gesture)

Aie, I haven't gone and got involved with an incompetent one again!

(GNOON, determined to get it this time, purposefully sets down his book open to the page he's been reading from, slaps his cheeks, pulls his cape straight, sits down on the floor with legs crossed, screws up his eyes, puts a finger in each ear, and very fast and mechanically repeats the incantation:)

GNOON

"Anacelsus cru!

Back to your choir,

Having exhausted

The pain of the fire!"

(GNOON stays all clenched up, eyes shut, as if trying to make the spell work by willing it very hard. PHLEGTHA smirks at GNOON, and several times flaps his arms derisively like wings in GNOON's direction; then drops it and turns away in disgust. GNOON slowly opens his eyes, not daring to look around him; suddenly he works up the courage, jerks around and sees that PHLEGTHA is still there. GNOON turns slowly out, his eyes full of the first inkling of an enormous fear.)

GNOON

(a nervous smile twitching his mouth)

Still with us.

PHLEGTHA

As you see.

GNOON

I said the words that are supposed to lay you!

PHLEGTHA

(with an ironically apologetic shrug)

Not accurate enough.

GNOON

(angered, turning to him)

Not - ?

(picks up the book, and with his finger on a word, makes as if to go show it to PHLEGTHA.)

PHLEGTHA

(with an energy and violence which, in the light of his urbanity thus far, is amazing)

STAY INSIDE THAT CIRCLE! - DO YOU WANT TO GET TORN IN SHREDS?

GNOON

(embarrassed to be caught in a stupid mistake)

Oh that, yes...

(then resentful)

But you! - watch your tone! Familiar! Minion!

(lifting his hand to curse PHLEGTHA)

Anacelsus cru!

(PHLEGTHA falls writhing in a fit for a few moments, and just as suddenly is on his feet again - but panting.)

That's just to remind you, I may be having a little trouble laying you, but it presents no problem at all to lay you flat.

PHLEGTHA

(unimpressed)

What, curse me into convulsions?

(shrugs)

Three times. Maybe four, if you

(pointing to one of the herb-clumps on the circle)

scattered the rosemary with special attention.

GNOON

(a sardonic imitation of being impressed)

Conversant.

(then getting an idea)

Conversant...

PHLEGTHA

(passing it off)

Oh, the scenario one suffers to...

GNOON

I'm afraid you've given away there's a little more to it than that - and a little more in it for me, this conversancy of yours. Your knowing that about the rosemary shows you've been in spots like this before.

PHLEGTHA

Not really the nature of the work, is it, for there to have been just some one time?

GNOON

But those other times, the conjuror who raised you must have known how to put you down again, since - here you are! Well, that means you've heard the words it takes to dismiss you; so tell them to me, and I'll dismiss you, and that'll be it.

(PHLEGTHA makes a gesture disqualifying himself.)

Oh, come. If the ramifications with the rosemary have stayed with you, surely the charm that frees you must have!

(PHLEGTHA looks doubtful)

Look, I know you're the boys that wrote the book, but what would be the point here?

PHLEGTHA

Of?

GNOON

Coyness; playing hard to get. I don't really have to make you a pitch; I have power where I called. I have only to frame the demand: "Devil!

(claps his hands twice)

the words of the dismissal!" and out they'll rattle!

PHLEGTHA

(suddenly very quietly serious, as if implying that the flippancy has gone far enough)

Oh, no.

GNOON

Are you trying to tell me that I've anything less than total command over a devil I've summoned?

PHLEGTHA

Surely you must see that doesn't include getting us to do your conjuring for you. Do you expect your spells to hold firmer than your own hold on them?

GNOON

I warn you: cheat, and I can just walk out of this circle.

PHLEGTHA

Oh, you think it'll be given to you to just decide that and step

out into the sunshine, eh? Well, let me tell you, that's the quickest way to get yourself torn into self-righteous little pieces. Anyway, where do you come off saying that Hell's cheating you: what did you expect - that we hover protectively over the heads of our less gifted conjurors?

GNOON

Come on, come on, you're not seriously hoping to create the impression you don't know the charm - of course I don't expect you to be exactly enchanted with the idea of having to tell it to me.

PHLEGTHA

(struck)

Why does that go without saying, that I just wouldn't, end-of-conversation? What, is it something I'm supposed to be holding behind my back, this charm of yours, - the correct number of jujubes in the bottle? That's a pretty vulgar conception.

GNOON

Well, if you bring it to that, this whole mechanism of an outer darkness

(indicates area outside circle)

literal as a pig's ass is a pretty "vulgar conception" in its own right. Honestly, to have it so that everything goes by where a toe

(sets his toe delicately on edge of circle)

finds itself vis-à-vis a chalk-marking...!

(pulls back his foot and shakes his head scornfully.)

PHLEGTHA

Well, no one's trying to get you to trip over your shoelace, you know. The correct frame of mind for damnation, that's it. Let

that come upon one and the machinery will know when to bow out.

GNOON

Tell me the words of the charm!

PHLEGTHA

Ah, the machinery has a lot more it can do for you, however.

GNOON

I'm not going to spend the rest of my life in this doodle,

(indicating circle)

tell me the words of the charm!

PHLEGTHA

I really -

GNOON

(in weary anticipation of a foreseen lie)

" - don't know them."

PHLEGTHA

Don't know them for you, anyway.

GNOON

(shaking his finger in sarcastic reproach)

Forgetful.

PHLEGTHA

Not really. I feel I should know them for a truer conjuror.

I just don't know them for you.

GNOON

Ah, now, there's a reflection truly calculated to make the hours fly, here in my circle.

PHLEGTHA

You don't need reflections to make the hours fly, I can bring you things - virtually anything.

GNOON

Where do I go from here, who do I see?

PHLEGTHA

Well, I wouldn't get to thinking of it in terms of who next to see, that "next..." You're going to get consecutive, what comes about next is damnation.

(GNOON sits and buries his head in his hands.
Pause.)

GNOON

(looking up)

You said something about "bringing" me things?

PHLEGTHA

Since we can wait till you've come to the end of your resources, we'll gladly replenish them: Pleasures, news, friends...

GNOON

All brought me here?

PHLEGTHA

From the four quadrants of your imagination!

GNOON

I just...?

PHLEGTHA

Express a wish.

GNOON

(sudden illumination)

That's why I don't seem to be able to dismiss you - you haven't

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been on an errand yet! I can't just raise you and not make a use and then just expect you to flutter back to the pit again, can I? It'd be tantamount to a slap in the face.

(with a rueful little laugh)

Hm! Here I've been agonizing over magic words and all the while ignoring the basic contours of the situation. So!

(rubbing his hands together)

Let's see, what can it be? Any wish ought to do it... uh...

(first thing that comes into his mind)

Bring me a dead fish.

PHLEGTHA

(begins to exit, all business; then turns back)

Only, one thing -

GNOON

Oh, but come on! We're not going to founder in technicalities the first time out, are we? Talk about vulgar!

PHLEGTHA

It's just, you have to tell me -

GNOON

(sardonically urging him on)

That's right, Phlegtha, fall to it, set out the snares.

(bowing floridly)

Your most obedient entangled foot.

PHLEGTHA

Honored master -

GNOON

"Honored Master!" Oh, we're going to make some bad jokes at the

expense of the trapped one, is that it? That we won't have.

Anacelsus cru!

(PHLEGTHA falls to the ground, writhes in agony for a few moments, remains panting on the ground.)

PHLEGTHA

(restraining his anger with difficulty, but determined to restrain it)

I'm sorry, I intended no mockery. I just wanted to ask if when you say a "dead" fish, you mean I should find a dead one, or get one and kill it for you, or wait for a dead one to come drifting by, or -

GNOON

That's very interesting and important, devil. Ana -

PHLEGTHA

Stop it! That's legitimate, now.

GNOON

And if pre-dead, how long dead, and of what causes; and if to be killed, how killed; and if to wait, how long a wait; and for that matter, what kind of fish, anyway (please indicate one of the following forty thousand varieties) - so that for weariness one never seems to get as far as the first wish; until eventually the possibility begins to present itself of taking things into one's own hands, dropping a hook on one's own initiative. Whereupon: one ventures a toenail beyond the circle. Whereupon: -

(mimes a grotesque caricature of a fiend pouncing; then slumps back shaking his head)

Cheap. Murderous.

(as if finding the not juste)

Facile.

PHLEGTHA

(controlling himself)

The degree to which we succeed in gratifying your wishes is not a matter of personal concern to me.

GNOON

(as if introducing a fresh subject)

Don't you have some fishing to do?

PHLEGTHA

We just... feel better if it comes out something close to what the conjuror wanted.

GNOON

Considerate.

PHLEGTHA

(really stung)

Why in the world not considerate? Why in the world not?

GNOON

(pretending to ignore PHLEGTHA and think aloud)

Now if he is intent on making a difficulty, he hasn't chosen his grounds too thoughtfully. I mean, we are on a ship, this is the middle of the ocean; so that for him to be experiencing any real difficulty in coming by a dead fish...

PHLEGTHA

Oh, all right, all right!

(PHLEGTHA makes as if to swish out of the room, but at the last moment does a sort of lightning pivot and reaching into the folds of his costume produces a stylized golden fish and crosses to GNOON, holds it out to him.)

GNOON takes it, handles it, suddenly shudders and drops it outside the circle.)

PHLEGTHA

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(resentful)

What's the matter with it? You didn't specify -

GNOON

It STINKS! It smells AWFUL!

PHLEGTHA

Well, you didn't ask for a dead tulip. You might have foreseen -

GNOON

Not me! Anytime I have a craving, there's always something awful in a part I forgot about. You go to see a temple, and there'll be the refreshment-booth. In the port-bar sits a sentimental lady always; yet one forgets. The countryside will be sure to feature dead animals, the sailor to forget this. Always something awful in a part one's forgot... That's why I forsook going ashore, that's the whole explanation.

PHLEGTHA

You never go ashore?

GNOON

I can't remember the last time I put my foot off this ship.

PHLEGTHA

Well, what must you not fear, if a dead fish can do this to you.

GNOON

That's right. Too much unaccountable. Too much slipped out of memory since the last time.

PHLEGTHA

Why should that be a particular torment?

GNOON

Why, indeed? For up and down the earth we ply, Dinghai to Rodagune,

the great-circle route...

PHLEGTHA

I mean, isn't it a great constriction of life on you, never getting off the ship?

GNOON

Well... nothing really interests me so much as docks, anyway. Docks, now, are just unending in their fascination for me - the way they content a great ship to stay still, which all the sea beside cannot do. And then, my shipmates keep me informed: they'll put down a couple of sides of their impressions, drop me a card... I just sit here and take it all in. At first, when they used to come and try and drag me ashore, I'd make excuses - a ship's-carpenter can always find reasons for staying aboard: some slats to remeasure, a belaying-pin to belay... But by now they're used to just taking off without me, leaving me to my tools; and after they've been gone a few hours, the captain's boy will slip an envelope under my door from some thoughtful shipmate or other - usually from one or the other of my great friends, Tecker and Xoxxin - giving a full account of -

(suddenly remembering)

My god! Tecker and Xoxxin! They'll be coming down here for me! I was to have these barrel-hoops ready for them, that's the only way I got permission to come below at this hour. What'll we do? - I couldn't bear for them to see the mess I've gotten into with you, they give me enough gas about my conjuring. Oh, but I can drop you now, can't I? You've done your errand, with the fish.

(going quickly and carelessly through the motions he went through so carefully at opening:)

"Anacelsus cru!

Back to your choir,

Having exhausted,

The thane of the shire!"

(Pause. Nothing happens.)

PHLEGTHA

As you see, it was in no way a question of having not yet expressed a wish, or of my having not yet been sent on an errand for you.

(violent knocks and cries of "Gnoon!" in two voices: one gruff, the other high, wheedling, crooning)

GNOON

That's them!

(starts to take a step, remembers the circle and stops)

PHLEGTHA

Well! An unforeseen foreshortening! Your apocalyptic moments come on apace.

GNOON

Why do you say that? Now I give it a little thought, I'll be proud for them to see what I've conjured up (they don't have to know about this little snag we're caught on). In fact, the more I think of it, it'd be a poor thing for me not to be sharing my wildest with them. God knows, in those glorious letters they've always shared their wildest with me; I can almost feel I'm reciprocating.

PHLEGTHA

Oh, many fold, many fold. You'll be sharing your removal from the scene by a devil with them.

GNOON

Well know you you may not touch a hair of him who has not called on you!

(more knocks and cries)

Coming, boys! There's a glued joint I must keep my hand to yet.

(to PHLEGTHA)

Go open the door!

PHLEGTHA

Now wait just a minute, before you seat me on that wild horse of a will of yours again!

GNOON

I command you to let them in and then not touch them!

PHLEGTHA

And well you may; they're not for my meddling. I'm warning you for you. The moment anyone but the sage who raised me comes on the scene, I go invisible.

GNOON

Oh. Then it looks like Tecker and Xoxxin miss you in any event - unless for once I were to write them a letter.

PHLEGTHA

You fool, master! Don't you see that if I go invisible, that finishes you?

GNOON

No. But if that is so, then you'll just stay visible - or else I'll drop you, howling.

PHLEGTHA

(impatiently)

There's no point threatening me, I just do fade as the door swings open; it's...

(searching for a word)

ground-rules.

(more knocks and cries)

GNOON

Well, then, fade or stay or do as you like, what difference is it?

(gruff cry of "Come on, Gnoon, haste thee!"; wheedling cry of "Gnoon, Gnoon me boy, daarlin!")

PHLEGTHA

(leaps into the circle and urgently puts his hand on GNOON's arm. GNOON writhes with pain during the following; PHLEGTHA does not seem to notice this.)

Think for a moment! They enter and perceive you - alone, apparently, for I've faded - crouching in your chalk circle.

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF XOXIN

(the deep, gruff voice)

Whot's up, Gnoon?

PHLEGTHA

...cries Xoxin.

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF TECKER

(the high, wheedling voice)

Have ye the hoops for us, lad?

PHLEGTHA

... questions Tecker.

GNOON

(to PHLEGTHA)

Get away, stay off from me!

PHLEGTHA

... you reply; but the urgency in your voice only draws them to you. The questioning begins; and what can you say?

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF TECKER

Why d'ye just bide inside there like a dumb one, lad?

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF XOXKIN

The barrel-hoops, boyo - that's what we've come for.

GNOON

(crying out under the agony of PHLEGTHA's touch)

Oh, God help me!

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF TECKER

D'ye mark that now, Xoxxie - d'ye know what 'tis makes him to cry out so? It's the crashin' o' the hammer and the whine o' the saw a-clampin' and a-clutchin' at his poor, worn brain.

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF XOXKIN

We'd best move him above deck and let the sea air get at him.

PHLEGTHA

(to GNOON)

Then you conceive your danger and cry out wildly for me to manifest myself: if I don't, they'll lift you out of the circle.

And they mustn't do that, you explain; there's this devil waiting to seize on you. But they won't see any devil (I'll have faded); they'll just see you - terrified over nothing.

GNOON

(to PHLEGTHA)

Take your claws out of me! Stand off, devil!

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF TECKER

Ooooo, Xoxxie, he must be took bad if he's startin' in on the devils.

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF XOXKIN

His mind's stifflin'. Best carry him out o' this quick - it'd choke a well man down here.

GNOON

(to PHLEGTHA)

Get off me!

PHLEGTHA

... you plead.

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF TECKER

Now, Gnoon, it's a poor thing to be strugglin' with them's would do ye a good turn, lad.

PHLEGTHA

(to GNOON)

But they, ignoring your plea, reach into the circle to pluck you from your safety. Whereupon I, activated -

(makes a horrible roaring, salivating sound, and rears back as if to pounce on GNOON)

GNOON

(to PHLEGTHA)

Get out of this circle! NOW! I command you!

(PHLEGTHA is flung out of the circle as if hit by a bullet. GNOON rises. Rain of knocks and cries of "Gnoon!" continue under following dialogue. GNOON closes his eyes to get control of himself.)

All right, I see the danger. Spirit them away.

PHLEGTHA

You have other shipmates.

GNOON

Get the whole ship out of here!

PHLEGTHA

Where does that leave us? Amid the crystal waves?

GNOON

(opens his eyes, exasperated)

Get us out of here, then - you, me and the circle; I guess those are the indispensables.

PHLEGTHA

Where to?

GNOON

(with an exasperated shrug)

Wherever one goes from here.

(PHLEGTHA makes a gesture as if to say, "Now you're talking!" and waves his arms.

The stage darkens. The cries of TECKER and XOXIN grow fainter, the knocks fainter and quicker, and finally come in so rapid a succession that they are almost a single tone. This converts into an actual single tone - an electronically produced reedy hum of steady frequency - and the lights come back up.

The conjuror's circle has disappeared. GNOON stands in a circular pool of bluish-white light - the stylized version of the former chalk-drawn circle - cast by a spotlight directly overhead.

The flat with the porthole painted on it has been hauled up. In its place hangs, as if suspended in air, an irregularly shaped and textured brownish "blob shape" flat, onto which is projected a sharply focussed white-light slide of the conjuror's circle corresponding in every detail of symbolic figuration, scattered herbs, etc. to the actual circle in which GNOON had been standing before the scene change.

The electronic hum continues for a slow count of 5, shuts off suddenly. You can hear the silence.)

GNOON

So. This is... where one comes.

PHLEGTHA

And what one comes to.

GNOON

(mocking him with being impressed)

Enlarging, Phlegtha; very enlarging remark. Not that the overall effect of your acquaintance could exactly be described as enlarging; no, I really don't think that would be the word for it.

PHLEGTHA

(to himself, with great concealed excitement)

This is it. It begins here.

GNOON

What? What does?

PHLEGTHA

(obviously fumbling for an answer)

The... uh... process of gratifying your every wish, the plastering over all chinks.

GNOON

(stepping out of his attitude for a moment to ask a procedural question)

Same ground-rules?

(raises one foot up over the edge of the pool of light)

PHLEGTHA

Same ground-rules.

GNOON

(gesturing around him)

Though it's a spiritual circle, though it's all been shifted up one into a symbol?

PHLEGTHA

Same ground-rules.

GNOON

The real toe must shut its eyes to the immateriality of the chalk-line?

(draws back his foot)

How very unimaginative of Hell!

PHLEGTHA

(dumbfounded)

How very unimaginative of Hell?

GNOON

(rubbing his hands)

So: wishes. That's to be the character of the life from this outwards, correct?

PHLEGTHA

(conciliatingly)

Any - absolutely any. Food, entertainment, girls -

GNOON

(holding up a hand in protest)

Please, Phlegtha; you will at least leave to me the naming of the poison. Have we been over the possibility of my wishing you away as one of my wishes?

(PHLEGTHA makes a gesture of appeal, as if this remark were in rather poor taste)

Well, I thought of course we must have. But now that I'm really settled into the wishing as being all I do, it seemed worth re-checking.

PHLEGTHA

Mr. Gnoon, I would feel a great deal more comfortable if -

GNOON

(sarcastically attentive)

What? Do but name it, devil, and I fly, I fly to do everything within my...

(gestures at pool of light)

range to make your stay with us more pleasant. My wish -

(he executes a jerky, florid bow)

is your command.

PHLEGTHA

All right, I'm sorry for intruding myself; it won't happen often. I'm generally, you'll do me the justice to admit, overwhelmingly careful. I just feel that this whole experience could be a good deal less tense for the both of us if -

GNOON

Phlegtha, I begin to sense the limitations of the demonic mentality.

PHLEGTHA

Our limitations? It's just incredible you should say that - you, who haven't the imagination to leave your ship (but who are nevertheless out of that impoverished imagination now going to have to fashion a life for yourself) - you can stand there and go on at me about our limitations! All right, then; down goes the mask of sweet reasonableness. I'm just saying to you, it'll be a great deal easier living with me if you give me some of my proper work to do. It won't lay me, but it will keep me decent to be around.

(his hands working up and down his thighs with impatience)

Just wish! Do something with me! Make a use!

GNOON

(shaking his head)

I'm sorry, devil, I can't be precipitate here just because you happen to be prey to professional scruples. His first wish -- that's a big step in the life of a misfired conjuror.

PHLEGTHA

Mr. Gnoon, this isn't in any sense your first wish. There was that business with the dead fish...

GNOON

(brushing it off)

That was before it all went emblematic.

PHLEGTHA

(ready with a reply)

And more recently, it was your wish that zoomed us out of that situation with your shipmates.

GNOON

Tecker and Xoxxin! How must they be taking it...?

PHLEGTHA

Could that conceivably be construed by a restive devil into a request for information?

GNOON

(at first annoyed)

No... !

(then intrigued by the idea)

Yes, get me Tecker and Xoxxin, it'd be intriguing...

PHLEGTHA

Actually "get" them? Here? Have you already forgotten the dangers --

GNOON

Aie, I see what you mean; there is something about the suggestion that brings the stink of dead fish back into my nostrils. All right, let's have the whole transaction in letters, then; it'll save on explanations, but what's more important, it'd be so much more characteristic - in fact, quite the usual channels as between Tecker and Xoxxin and myself...

PHLEGTHA

(whips out of his costume a pale blue envelope with a bright red stamp on it and hands it to GNOON.
NOTE: All letters, parcels, etc. referred to from here on should be about $1\frac{1}{2}$ times larger than life.)

Here.

GNOON

(eagerly tearing open the envelope:)

Thank God for the mails - sailor's standby...

(He flings the envelope outside the circle, unfolds the letter, and begins to read:)

"Dear Shipmate Gnoon,

How surprising were the events that lately transpired in the work-room of our ship! We cannot imagine what has become of you, since -

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF TECKER

(interrupting GNOON's reading and picking it up)

" - since, although you clearly stated you were going below to complete some barrel-hoops, the work-room, when forced open at Xoxxin's insistence - "

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF XOXXIN

'E must be in there somewhere!

(GNOON starts, as if the "in there" XOXXIN is referring to was the symbolic circle in which GNOON now finds himself.)

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF TECKER

" - proved to be empty and the door locked from within. This is very hard for the understanding of a sailor."

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF XOXXIN

Poor lobs.

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF TECKER

"Subsequent inquiries have failed to turn up any fresh light. All we have been able to conjecture is that you may have been washed overboard, and the door have slammed shut, in one of the recent lurchings. For, as Xoxxin so rightly points out: "

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF XOXXIN

We've been over every stick o' the ship for 'im. Boy, 'e's really gonna catch it from me when we meet up.

OFFSTAGE VOICE OF TECKER

"The which notwithstanding, I continue to hope that a better fate awaits, or has befallen, my valued shipmate and correspondent. Hoping this finds you as it leaves me, I am

Your affectionate shipmate,
Maurice Tecker"

(GNOON, who during the preceding has seemed to hear the two voices only with difficulty, and with uncertainty as to which direction they have been coming from, shudders and lets the hand with the letter in it fall. He notices the envelope lying just outside the pool of light.)

GNOON

(to PHLEGTHA, indicating the envelope)

Bring me that.

(PHLEGTHA hands GNOON the envelope; GNOON reads the address on it aloud:)

"Mr: Alphaeus Gnoon, Ship's-Carpenter
Lost in the Night
10437"

(Pause. He crumples the letter and envelope and flings them into the "outer darkness" beyond the pool of light.)

I wonder how they are. In contrast to their usual productions, this leaves one with very little sense.

PHLEGTHA

A man engaged in such extensive correspondence as yourself can't expect every memo to be a billet doux.

GNOON

Where's my "extensive correspondence" supposed to be coming from?

(PHLEGTHA makes a "Just one minute!" gesture, disappears into the darkness, reappears almost at once pushing on one of those two-level metal wheeled tables used in hospitals. On the upper table-level is a round golden tray with fretted rim, and resting on it, a letter opener. On the lower table-level is a burlap mail sack.)

What delicate little ministrations does this represent?

PHLEGTHA

(presenting the table, rather excited and pleased with himself)

Herein we have a bag full of letters: a

(which he pronounces long, like the "a" in stay) letter per wish, and there's one answering to everything you'll ever wish for.

GNOON

You think I'm going to wish myself letters?

PHLEGTHA

They're on subjects.

GNOON

You think I'm going to content myself with accounts?

(PHLEGTHA makes as if to speak, but GNOON anticipates him.)

Of course, I always have.

PHLEGTHA

(with a little gesture of dissociation)

Thou sayest.

GNOON

Somehow accounts are all I've ever really felt ...

(at a loss for a word)

PHLEGTHA

(with a clean movement emptying some letters out of the sack onto the upper level of the table)

"... up to"?

(GNOON stares at the letters)

GNOON

Phlegtha, you are witnessing the birth of a small, dark fear.

PHLEGTHA

It's the whole recompense of the work.

GNOON

There are in that sack - what? - a hundred, a million letters; whatever. Some number. Which means that now, however remotely, glimpsed however from afar, the end is in sight.

PHLEGTHA

Ah.

GNOON

What happens when I've digested the last of these love-notes?
What's all that can happen to desire?

PHLEGTHA

Let me ask you a question. Twice - once when you would have stepped out of the circle, once when you would have admitted Tecker and Xoxxin - I saved you from my claws. Make no mistake about it: I saved you. I could have had you without lifting a finger either time; but I saved you. Which means - what, do you think, - if it means anything beyond the well-known demonic weakness for God-playing?

GNOON

(indicating the letters on the table)

I think I'd better plunge into that correspondence.

PHLEGTHA

I think maybe you better had.

GNOON

(takes one of several letters which PHLEGTHA holds out to him on the tray, stares at it for a moment without really seeing it, lets it fall back onto the tray.)

It's so unfair - it's stupid - to have it this mechanical.

PHLEGTHA

(makes a gesture of impatience)

GNOON

(miming being thrown off balance and nearly falling out of the circle)

I can roll out of the circle in a lurch and start getting it.

PHLEGTHA

You could roll over in your sleep.

GNOON

(exasperated)

Well, then... !

PHLEGTHA

But who drew that circle? - and I can just imagine you light-heartedly doing it, with the manual in your other hand. You set up this situation, this little cosmos. You turned down the lights and started the hum going, you called in the pink cloud. I'm sorry: you threw up the gallows and it's Execution Square!

GNOON

(with hatred)

You stand there delivering yourself... ! It just lights your insides to be able to pile everything on me and then watch me stagger under the weight of it - emphasizing your own unburdened quality the meanwhile by the little dance-turns you perform to one side.

PHLEGTHA

Who summoned who?

GNOON

Who is whose tormentor?

PHLEGTHA

You find that so irrefragably clear?

GNOON

When I have but this little disc to cavort in and you have all the world beside?

PHLEGTHA

Where am I going? You see me projecting world-tours?

GNOON

Oh, but you've struck Shangri-la. Where could you be having your little ecstasy of anticipation better than you're having it right here? It can hardly have involved a very agonizing choice on your part, to throw in your lot with mine, even if it does entail having to tap that cloven foot for a little.

PHLEGTHA

Choice!

(very earnestly)

Mr. Gnoon, we could be lying here asleep, the both of us, and if you rolled out of your circle I would awake to find my talons in your throat. What am I, or any devil: a pile of leaves behind which an impulsion gathers. And you talk about prisoners - every prison has two sets; but the warden-set is the ghost-set, the inmates' shadows. "Prisoner of a prisoner" describes me, Mr. Gnoon, - and just incidentally describes you.

GNOON

Prisoner, is it? Produce your rage! For one may be barred and bound, and if it doesn't tear at you -

PHLEGTHA

Does the man not hear me raving?

GNOON

Ah, but there's a twitch of expectation in those talons that gives the lie to your raving. Warble on about degradation, it's no degradation for you being here - it's what you want.

PHLEGTHA

What is it else to be damned but to assent in my degradation - to drink joy and revulsion from the one cup?

GNOON

(struck)

How seldom that syllable "damned" forms itself on your lips, whereas one might expect it to be the devil's every third word. And especially not in reference to yourself. You talk of that whole side of it very little.

PHLEGTHA

It would frighten you; and I'd win you.

GNOON

You don't have to "win" me, as I understand it.

PHLEGTHA

Oh, yes, I have to win you.

GNOON

But I've conjured myself into a corner where I've no outs - or at least, it'll seem that way till I can work it with the spell.

PHLEGTHA

Ah! You see? That reservation...

GNOON

You mean I'm all right so long as I have a reservation?

PHLEGTHA

Well, no one is damned till he feels he is; there is but that one avenue.

GNOON

Then you can buzz off; I'll never be ready.

PHLEGTHA

I wouldn't do any premature rejoicing. Hell is full of souls on whom it gradually dawned - but with utter certainty - that they were never, in fact, going to work it with their particular spell.

GNOON

(closing his eyes to shut it out)

Wasn't I just about to dip into that correspondence?

PHLEGTHA

You were that.

GNOON

All right, get me something'll interest me.

PHLEGTHA

You have to image it a little clearer than that. All I need is a bright sensory detail, or the general area of experience, or something.

GNOON

Oh, it's so boring an occasion to have to show oneself equal to! My wishes are what anybody's would be under the circumstances; I'm not an exceptional man. If you've got me pegged for some sort of visionary, if this is where I'm supposed to start opening up new areas in the human consciousness, we'd better just drop it; there aren't any such. There are no wishes that haven't been wished; there's only so much.

PHLEGTHA

You do certainly take the top off it.

GNOON

(pressing the advantage; wheedling)

Look, Phlegtha, couldn't we just omit the actual doing of this whole phase? I'm perfectly willing to pick it up from wherever we'd come out after the wishes.

PHLEGTHA

(almost plaintively)

This is the only part that gives me any enjoyment!

GNOON

Losing our sense of the situation, are we, a little, in that last remark?

PHLEGTHA

(embarrassed)

I don't know what came over me. But you do have to, with the wishes; it can't but be different, experienced.

GNOON

It'll be the same usual pageant.

PHLEGTHA

(flaring up)

Then it'll be the same usual pageant! Are we supposed to reroute the whole damnation of mankind so that you'll feel distinctive? Want things; suffer with your fellows, if you're so unexceptional.

(GNOON makes a gesture: "All right; enough!" He tries impatiently to think of something, gestures as if he would snatch something out of thin air - and then gets it:)

GNOON

MONEY!

(GONG sounds, as it does after all of GNOON's subsequent wishes.)

PHLEGTHA

You said... ?

GNOON

That was my first wish: Money.

PHLEGTHA

(genuinely puzzled)

What do you want money for? Where do you think you're going you'll need money?

GNOON

Oh, my god, I'm beginning to see it: every whim is going to provoke a round-table discussion.

PHLEGTHA

Well, I'm honestly curious.

GNOON

So fucking what?

PHLEGTHA

Well, under the circumstances, I just can't believe that money can be a very sincere wish, that's all.

GNOON

(with a sad little laugh)

Oh, Phlegtha, how can you be so interested in the fate of creatures you know so little?

PHLEGTHA

If I had understood better generally, Mr. Gnoon, I wouldn't now be where I now am.

GNOON

I'm sorry, I'm afraid I've just forgotten about feeling sorry for you, and nothing's going to put it back in my mind again, no matter how telling you get.

PHLEGTHA

(embarrassed, recovering himself with a business-like question)

Would you want this money held in a Swiss bank for you against the possibility of your release?

GNOON

Phlegtha, I want it purely and solely to impress you with the banality of human wishes. I want it to arouse your disgust with the whole process (and so maybe abridge it a little); because, Phlegtha, money is the invariable first thing that any man, put in a wishing way, is always going to wish for.

PHLEGTHA

(with a rueful smile)

There spoke my dauntless master.

(PHLEGTHA reaches in the mail sack, immediately brings out a green envelope with gold stamps, puts it on the tray with the letter-opener, and with a flourish presents it to GNOON. GNOON takes the letter with fascination, absently waves away PHLEGTHA, who retires back to the wheeled table. GNOON tears open the envelope, casts it out of the circle, and examines the contents: a strip of light-blue paper - a cheque. GNOON stares at it, turns it over, looks inquiringly up at PHLEGTHA.)

GNOON

A blank cheque?

PHLEGTHA

Drawn on an account representing unbounded wealth.

GNOON

Did you hear me wish for unbounded wealth?

PHLEGTHA

I hardly heard a wish at all - just the grudging and minimal disturbance of a wail of self-pity.

GNOON

(handling the cheque)

It's not terribly tangible...

PHLEGTHA

Nothing prevented your wishing for a sheep-ranch, or a pearl brooch.

GNOON

I mean, even as currency, it's not...

(He can't find the word, ends in a shrug.)

PHLEGTHA

Well, you didn't exactly specify pesetas or Swiss francs, did you?
What is it with you?

GNOON

I just don't feel my wish has been in any important sense...
gratified.

PHLEGTHA

Ah, expecting the gratification to come through any more specific
than the longing it answers to - isn't that just your old mistake
when you supposed the spell might work better than you could work
it? Everybody and everything's to blame because you're a little
short in the imagination department. Take my acknowledgment,
though: you've certainly shown me what you wanted to show about
the banality of the human heart to frame wishes.

GNOON

Then, Phlegtha, despite my dissatisfaction with the

(glancing at the cheque)

funding arrangements, it's been a very profitable afternoon.

(glances at cheque again, then pockets it)

Well, it's a pleasant sensation to feel "competent" for a change, if you see the pun.

(out of the blue)

As long as I'm on to money, I'll do women.

PHLEGTHA

Was that another wish just went ^{whizzing} by me there, before I could even take it in hand long enough to let it slip through my fingers?

GNOON

Poor Phlegtha, am I stinting on the punctillios again?

PHLEGTHA

Forget about me, I would think you, as a conjuror, would care more about smartening up your manner a bit: not, "How's about a woman," but, "Fetch me an jet-haired Queen of the East to be my paramour!" That, now, redounds to your dignity.

GNOON

The dignity of a conjuror fuddled in his own conjuring? I can think of nothing more ludicrous - except maybe the dignity of a devil pleading under his fiery breath for the preservation of certain decencies.

PHLEGTHA

I fly to fetch thee an jet-haired Queen of the East!

GNOON

Ah. I see there are certain areas there are not going to be any concessions to informality.

PHLEGTHA

Jet-haired Queen of the East!

GNOON

(waving a disclaimer)

Right, Phlegtha; you dramatize it any way you want. Whatever you... wish.

(GONG, signifying a wish on GNOON's part.)

PHLEGTHA takes from the table a mailing-tube wrapped in plain brown paper - stamped, but with no address - and carries it on the tray over to GNOON. He presents it to GNOON with an insinuating flourish, like a pimp presenting his girl to a customer.

GNOON looks blankly at the mailing-tube, then questioningly at PHLEGTHA. GNOON gestures for him to rip it open.

GNOON takes the tube, tries - gently, at first - to find a seam to start tearing the paper off; not finding one, he becomes irritated, begins to run his nails like claws along the tube. Then he catches sight of the letter-opener, snatches it off the tray and punctures the end of the tube. He rips the brown paper off the tube and throws it violently from him.

He now holds in his hands a six-foot roll of paper rolled up on the mailing tube. This length of paper has on it a spectrum going from purple-black gradually up through yellow-white as it's unrolled, the purple-black section coming off first. GNOON, holding the roll at both ends, begins slowly to unwind it.

He unrolls it faster and faster, moving sexually, breathing hard, as the color of the paper gets lighter and lighter. As he is just about to reach the end of the roll (pure white) - and sexual climax - he flings the whole roll from him and cries out:)

POWER!

(GONG sounds.)

PHLEGTHA takes the tray back to the table, draws another envelope from the sack - a long thin one, apparently of parchment - sticks it on the tray and presents it to GNOON.

GNOON, still aroused all through the following, breaks the red wax seal and unfolds the parchment: the envelope is the letter. It is a decree written in elongated, ominous looking Gothic script. At the bottom of the page is a black, ribooned seal.)

What's this you've given me? - an unfilled-out death warrant?

PHLEGTHA

The request was for power.

GNOON

(holding out the warrant to him)

This is just power for death!

PHLEGTHA

The only power that signifies, surely.

GNOON

The only place death is the only power that signifies is the Hell that spawned you. Hell peers out of you like a snake in the pocket.

PHLEGTHA

But surely, in the decision to spare, to slay, we see all that power can ever be said to -

GNOON

Hell-hound, you're barking up the wrong tree, and like to go wronger. Oh, these pronouncements you favor me with! - I'm weary of them - there's a weariness in this hell-wisdom -

(flings away his conjuring book out of the circle)

and weary of remarks that shape the conversation and shove it forward. And when I'm weary, I don't just plunk down and have a nap in my circle - no; I repeat those ever-new, ever-scintillating words:

"Anacelsus cru!

Back to your choir,

Having exhausted

The strain of the wire!"

(PHLEGTHA gives a yell and begins to leap acrobatically around the stage, as if jabbed and prodded from behind. GNOON laughs exultantly; there is a strange quality of sexual climax in his laughter.

Suddenly PHLEGTHA collapses in a heap; at the same

moment GNOON sinks to the ground.
Long pause.)

PHLEGTHA

(still panting with exhaustion)

"Strain of the wire," you gave it; that must be pretty close to the right wording, to have affected me like that. I thought I was on my way back to hell for a minute...

(a sudden access of blind anger coming over him)

You damned bungler!

GNOON

(in a repressed, exultant voice, looking wonderingly at the hand with which he cursed PHLEGTHA)

And was I nearly free, then?

PHLEGTHA

(scornfully)

"Nearly" is your middle name.

(GNOON's conjuring book, lying outside the circle, catches PHLEGTHA's eye.)

Oh, and let's not omit your latest contribution: brilliant of you to have flung your book out to where you can't get at it and keep trying.

GNOON

(still studying his hand, fascinated, as if trying to see in it the power that just went out of it to PHLEGTHA)

None of my attainments from here on are going to require the book.

PHLEGTHA

Listen to the pride of the little fuddler; oh, nobly squeaked!
He'll fall back upon resources as yet unguessed-at... I tell you,

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it shouldn't be permitted to these bunglers, these people... !
I am Adonoi's plaything, but I am not some ship's--carpenter's
plaything!

GNOON

(giving him an ironic sidewise look and smile)

Nobly squeaked, yourself.

PHLEGTHA

To dare to conjure up what you haven't the imaginative gift to
see through to anything!

GNOON

Now, Phlegtha, really - how could I be expected to know in advance
I was going to hit that problem?

PHLEGTHA

The good ones know. But then, with a good one, with a half-way
competent conjuror, there wouldn't ever have arisen any problem,
would there? But you bunglers... ! I don't know what ever made
you dream you could enter the circle of the magi. What are
you doing as a conjuror, anyway?

GNOON

That's the idea, Phlegtha; by all means let's keep on probing each
other's conversational resources.

(PHLEGTHA makes a gesture of disgust.)

Well! Assuming that to be a serious question: I got on to con-
juring because I was looking for a way to pay my mates back for
all the good times they'd given me with their letters. You
understand, when I say "conjuring," I don't mean this big stuff
I'm doing now with you. I mean parlor tricks, to keep the lads
amused times they didn't get ashore.

PHLEGTHA

What peculiar ill fate, I wonder, ever led you to magic, when there was juggling, the banjo, shadow-pictures...

GNOON

Tricks always held a certain fascination for me.

PHLEGTHA

(almost sympathetically)

Ah, yes, that lust for power, for mastery... !

GNOON

Phlegtha, the only power I lust for is power to dazzle you with my conventionality. "Lust for power" seems exactly the wrong way to describe what I sought from magic. I wanted to learn tricks because when I'd learned one, I could feel I'd analyzed that one, at least, out of existence - broken down the extraordinary feat of plucking a kerchief from the air into a series of difficult but very compassable, very learnable hand-motions. That was what I like - you talk about gratification; that gratified me: to be steadily closing the gap between a feat that boggled the imagination and my ability mechanically to reproduce it. That, now, was a thing that... rejoiced me.

PHLEGTHA

To take something and take the magic out of it?

GNOON

I'm struck by that...

PHLEGTHA

There's no connection between a hatful of rabbits and a circle full of necromancy. The dazzlingest sleight-of-hand could never have landed here.

GNOON

Yet in my case there seems to have been a continuity, if only because I felt it.

PHLEGTHA

One's a deception; one's reality!

GNOON

Yes, but I entered the field under a cloud: I didn't have that distinction clear in my mind, incredible as that must seem to you. For you, the real magic is your element; and seeing the terrible live reality of it as you do, it must seem just incredible to you that anyone should ever for a moment confuse it with nimble fingers. And yet, when I, that morning in the trick-store in Lallah-pei, picked up a pamphlet on "ceremonial magic", I never supposed that anything more was meant than - magic for ceremonies; you know: dinners, gatherings, ... functions. It was only after several hours of study that I realized I was in another realm of experience altogether...

PHLEGTHA

I should be fascinated to hear you describe that moment.

GNOON

"I should be fascinated to hear" - you know, you change your attitude every two seconds. A minute ago you were fulminating down at me from off your bad eminence, and now one's confronted with the sympathetic listener.

PHLEGTHA

Well, I'm not exactly the Unmoved Mover, am I? It just never occurs to you to remember that being damned gets into anything. Let's hear about your vasty moment.

GNOON

I don't remember it as being in any way marked.

PHLEGTHA

That's past belief.

GNOON

I tell you I have no recollection of there being a first time the nickel appeared out of the rose not because I triggered the secret compartment, but because I'd triggered some secret spring in the spiritual balance of the universe.

(PHLEGTHA shakes his head in sad wonderment.)

That just completely disqualifies me in your eyes, doesn't it? You don't see how I could ever, ever have become a conjuror.

PHLEGTHA

I don't see how you could ever have become anything so romantic as as a ship's-carpenter.

GNOON

Oh, I never looked upon the sea as being particularly romantic.

PHLEGTHA

(sincerely puzzled)

What else would ever lure a carpenter out from under his spreading chestnut tree?

GNOON

The metality of the ship.

PHLEGTHA

I beg pardon?

GNOON

I mean, that since today's ships are - or so I thought - predominantly metal, I supposed it would be quite an easy type job. This turns out to be not quite accurate, as it happens.

PHLEGTHA

Does the last vestige of your glamour issue in shiftlessness?

GNOON

Ah, but I'm not lazy! I only like - or rather, I'm terribly anxious to feel... relieved. You know? - to know for sure.

PHLEGTHA

To know what?

GNOON

(shrugs)

The dimensions of a thing. The limits of a situation.

PHLEGTHA

(getting excited)

That could be worked up to the level of a wish. Has the potential.

GNOON

What? - wanting to know the limits of a situation?

PHLEGTHA

(shaking his head impatiently)

KNOWLEDGE!

(PHLEGTHA starts to hasten toward the sack, as if it was GNOON who had expressed the wish; then remembering it does have to come from GNOON:)

Right?

GNOON

Oh, I've surrendered myself to your interpretations. On with the wishes!

(GONG.

To himself, as PHLEGTHA is taking a small, bulky package out of the sack and setting it on the tray:)

A surrender which says what about me - that I'm feeling more damned? More ready? More nothing?

(shrugs. Calling out to PHLEGTHA:)

Come on, Phlegtha. I burn with impatience to see what gismo is going to have the privilege of assisting you in your next evasion.

(PHLEGTHA brings the bulky package on the tray over to GNOON, who grabs it and rips it open. It is a chunky book.)

This

(holding up the book)

is in gratification of my wish for knowledge?

(PHLEGTHA nods; GNOON gives him an amused look.)

PHLEGTHA

(embarrassed under GNOON's look, indicating the book)

You'll find it all in there.

GNOON

What will I find all in there?

PHLEGTHA

Whatever you meant by knowledge.

GNOON

What did I mean by knowledge?

PHLEGTHA

How should I know?

GNOON

How should I know? You think I'd ask for knowledge already knowing what it was I wanted to know? That's the knowledge I meant in the wish.

PHLEGTHA

Well, consult your volume. Maybe you'll find what you're after.

GNOON

But it'll be in the book, not in me. That's not knowledge.

PHLEGTHA

Well, for goodness sakes, there has to be some way of imparting things to you - we can't just "ping" the data in.

GNOON

You know, for people who are supposed to have the whole spiritual circuitry of the universe under their fingers, you certainly don't employ very spectacular means. Here, for example,

(holding up the book)

you show all the flair of a branch librarian.

PHLEGTHA

Einstein once said, why carry around in your head anything you can always find in a book?

GNOON

With that philosophy, I hope he stayed out of magic circles - or took the precaution of bringing his library in with him. Not that even that - judging from my own experience -

(indicates the conjuror's book lying outside the circle)

seems to guarantee anything. How about that now, Phlegtha: would you describe me as being in possession of the knowledge it takes to dismiss you? It's is a book I have - or had till a minute ago.

PHLEGTHA

That's really quite a telling application.

GNOON

Devilish white of you to say so, old man, old Phlegtha, old son.

I think I'll celebrate my first and only triumph with a pipe.

(PHLEGTHA starts to head toward the sack.)

Stay your appointed rounds, lovey; I think I'm up to a real pipe.

(PHLEGTHA produces a lighted pipe from the folds of his sleeve. GNOON takes one drag, makes a face, and hurls the pipe away in disgust.)

Uch! Kindled at the burning lake, I suppose? Pew, that smells!

PHLEGTHA

Real things seem to be pretty generally in bad odor with you.

GNOON

Hm?

PHLEGTHA

I was thinking back to the dead fish.

GNOON

Oh, right.

(does a take and looks narrowly at PHLEGTHA)

Well! You're becoming my chronicler.

PHLEGTHA

Doesn't that suggest the next wish to you?

GNOON

You bet it does, Phlegtha; I'm right in tune. FAME!

(GONG.

PHLEGTHA crosses to the sack, returns with a newspaper rolled up for mailing in a brief cylinder of brown paper. GNOON tears off the wrapper, unrolls and unfolds the newspaper; looks at it, puzzled; then holds it out to PHLEGTHA. It is all fake writing - squiggles - except for an enormous tabloid headline at the top which reads: "GNOON DOES!")

Does what?

(PHLEGTHA shrugs, then gestures as if to say, "that's up to you." GNOON nods his head, comprehending.)

I see; the usual empty cheat. You find a way to make every occasion be it.

(looks down at the newspaper again; half to himself)

Does what?

PHLEGTHA

Well, there's not exactly a paucity of incident. You're rapidly acquiring quite a past.

GNOON

It can't come too soon for me. I wish it was here already.

PHLEGTHA

(starting toward the sack)

I'm not going to give you time to reflect whether you really meant that as a wish or not.

GNOON

I mean everything as a wish by this time. RESTORE ME MY PAST!

(GONG.)

PHLEGTHA hands him from the sack a packet of yellowed old envelopes, tied daintily with a pale blue ribbon.)

When do these posies date from?

PHLEGTHA

How would you react to the suggestion that you open them and find out?

GNOON

Aren't you forgetting that they've all been opened, years ago?

PHLEGTHA

Ah, but the thrill of those faraway moments when you first slit

the envelopes - that's what we're undertaking to restore to you.

GNOON

Because it makes for my damnation, you restore it -- for nothing does so mark us for damned as a dreaming absorption in our past. Usual empty cheat.

PHLEGTHA

Now come on! This is a genuine restoration, you take a look.

GNOON

I say, your barefacedest cheat! -- this proud undertaking to restore what was never for a moment from us: our past.

(looks at the packet for a moment, then averts his eyes from it and holds it out to PHLEGTHA:)

Oh, take it! It's all port-towns at sunset and cousins and afternoons, I can't handle it. It gets to me here in my circle where realler things don't get to me. Which makes a certain question of its reality, I suppose. Anyhow, its poignance is real, and on that basis alone I'd be glad to exchange it for a good grey future.

(holds out the packet to PHLEGTHA, who doubtfully makes a gesture that seems to ask, "You mean I should...?" and PHLEGTHA points to the sack)

That's right; you sniff correctly: a wish is being expressed.

(holds out the letters to PHLEGTHA)

Here: clap the pig back in the poke; and instead, show me something with a little promise: THE FUTURE!

(GONG.)

PHLEGTHA takes the packet from GNOON, makes as if to drop it back in, but suddenly stops, looks furtively back at GNOON, who is lost in his own thoughts.)

PHLEGTHA

(in a very fast whisper, as if anxious not to be heard, or, failing that, to get it out before GNOON can stop him)

I possess myself of this man's past.

(Quick as lightning he drops the packet into his garment, looks guiltily around again, but GNOON has not noticed. PHLEGTHA takes up the sack again, turns it upside down, and begins to shake it out.)

GNOON

Phlegtha. Wait.

(PHLEGTHA turns to him quickly, guiltily.)

Level with me. It's going to be a blank page, my future, isn't it - in the tradition of the blank cheque and the blank death-warrant? Forgive me for stealing your thunder, but one would have to be a moron not to see the trend. It's going to be a single blank sheet of paper - right?

(PHLEGTHA, a little relieved, shakes out the sack. A single sheet of jet black paper floats out. PHLEGTHA picks it up and holds it out for GNOON to see.)

PHLEGTHA

You understand.

GNOON

Oh, I've been in this long enough and to spare, to understand anything you might send my way. But you, hellion - you have misunderstood first to last. What are you trying to tell me with this tabula rasa? it's, "write my own ticket," isn't that the idea?

PHLEGTHA

You can easily see how in the eyes of those for whom an eternity of torture has been decreed there'd be a great deal of appeal in an offer to "write their own ticket."

GNOON

Oh, I can see the hell-appeal. But for the rest of us, it's something less than a windfall - in fact, it doesn't even change anything. The future is a blank, with no help from you.

PHLEGTHA

Not everybody's. Not ours.

GNOON

But now, if you had it in your power to stamp the^t future with the character of assurance - to guarantee that all our achievements are not merely waiting their moment to rise up in mockery against us... Could you offer such assurance - !

PHLEGTHA

In hell, assurance is nobody's idea of a nice future. We're assured enough already.

GNOON

The hell-idea is in all areas one large round naught! Unfilled-out warrants, blank cheques, almanacs...you don't follow through on a single engagement. I never understood before how evil was a privation.

PHLEGTHA

What has heaven or hell for a man incapable of a daydream?

GNOON

Yes, put it all back on the old imaginative cripple: "Gnoon does, Gnoon does, Gnoon does!" as that idiot of a newspaper has it. But heaven and earth, Christ Jesus, what does Gnoon do?

PHLEGTHA

(with an enormous ironic smile that is meant to finish it)

Whatever he wishes.

GNOON

Well, in that case, Phlegtha, compose your spirit for a nice, quiet future, because I am out of wishes.

"Anacelsus cru!

Back to your choir,

Having exhausted

The vein of desire."

(An electric pause. PHLEGTHA begins to twitch violently; he moves as if some one were shoving him insistently from behind, and he doing his best to hold his ground.)

PHLEGTHA

Gnoon! That was the wording! You've done it!

GNOON

The wording... ?

PHLEGTHA

That lays me, that bears me back. I'm free of you - and you're free of me. We're free! We're out! You're safe!

GNOON

Safe... ?

PHLEGTHA

(growing ecstatic)

All hell gathers behind my heels.

GNOON

Wait...

PHLEGTHA

It is as if a great fist were being shaken behind me in hate, and I being borne off on the waves of that hate.

GNOON

Wait! What are you leaving me to?

PHLEGTHA

Tecker and Xoxxin, come lads, our work is done ^{here} and they lay the
^

banquet for us in hell tonight. Come, Tecker and Koxxin, come boys, come.

(Two twanging noises. At each, GNOON jerks his head to the left, as if following something whizzing past him at great speed.)

GNOON

Wait! Just don't go off like that: where should be my next step?

Phlegtha! What happens now?

(The force behind PHLEGTHA at last sweeps him off. The projection of the circle on the "blob" flat is audibly switched off. Hearing the switch, GNOON whirls and faces the flat, sees that the projected circle is gone.

He looks down, notices the circle of light in which he has been standing. He turns back toward audience, cautiously puts one foot a few inches beyond the circle. The circle instantly expands to just beyond where he has set his foot.

Another step. Again the circle expands to just beyond his foot.

In panic, he runs downstage. The whole stage lights up.

He runs down to the very rim of the apron. The "blob" flat begins to be audibly hauled up. Hearing it, he turns and runs up to center, facing upstage.)

Wait! Phlegtha! Take my address, at least.

(The curtain begins very slowly to fall, the house-lights to come up. Startled, GNOON whirls until he is facing out.)

Wait! Wait!

(It is not clear whether he is addressing the curtain and lights, or the audience, or PHLEGTHA. The curtain comes down; the houselights are on. As the audience leave the theatre they are pursued by GNOON's increasingly shrill, hoarse and crazy cries of "Wait!", until the syllable has lost all meaning for them.)

The End