

Are you inquisitive? Do you want to know things? Too many things?

Out of the Jar

By Charles R. Tanner

I am presenting here, at the insistence of my friend, James Francis Denning, an account of an event or series of events which, he says, occurred to him during the late summer and early fall of 1940. I do so, not because I concur in the hope which Denning has that it may arouse serious investigation of the phenomena he claims took place, but merely that a state-ment of those phenomena may be placed on record, as a case history for future students of occult phenomena or — psychology. Personally, I am still unpersuaded under which head this narration should be placed.

Were my mind one of those which accepts witches, vampires and were-wolves in the general scheme of things, I would not doubt for a mo-moment the truth of Denning's tale, for certainly the man believe it him-self; and his lack of imagination and matter-of-fact mode of living up until the time of the occurrence speak strongly in his favor. And then too, there is the mental break-down of the brilliant young Edward Barnes Halpin, as added evidence. This young student of occult history and the vague lesser known cults and religions was a fairly close acquaintance of Denning's for years, and it was at Denning's home that he suffered the stroke which made him the listless, stricken thing that he is today.

That much is fact and can be attested to by any number of people. As to Denning's explanation, I can only say that it deserves a thorough investigation. If there is any truth in it at all, the truth should certainly be verified and recorded. And so, to the story.

It began, Denning says, in the summer of last year, when he attended a sale disposing of the stock of one of those little secondhand stores that call themselves antique shops and are known to most people as junk shops. There was the usual hodge-podge of Indian curios, glassware, Victorian furniture and old books; and Denning attended it as he did every event of this kind, allowing himself to indulge in the sin-gle vice which he had — that of filling his home with a stock of cheap and useless curios from all parts of the world.

At this particular sale he emerged triumphantly with a carved elephant tusk, an Alaskan medicine man's mask and — an earthenware jar. This jar was a rather ordinary thing, round-bodied, with a very short cylindrical neck and with a glazed band around its center, blue glaze, with curious angular characters in yellow that even the rather illiterate Denning could see bore a certain relation to Greek characters. The auctioneer called it very old, said it was Syraic or Samaritan and called attention to the seal which was affixed to the lid. This lid was of earthenware similar to the jar and was set in the mouth after the manner of a cork and a filling of what seemed to be hard-baked clay sealed it in. And on this baked clay, or whatever it was, had been stamped a peculiar design — two triangles in-terwoven to form a six-pointed star, with three unknown characters in the center. Although the auctioneer was as ignorant as Denning as to the real significance of this seal, he made a mystery of it and Denning was hooked. He bought the thing and brought it home, where it found a place, in spite of his wife's objections, on the mantle in the living room.

And here it rested, in a questionable obscurity, for a matter of four or five months. I say questionable obscurity, for as near as I can gather it was the bone of contention, during most of that time, between Den-ning and his wife. It was but natural, I think, that this estimable lady should object to having the best room in their little home filled with what were to her a mass of useless objects. Yet nothing was done about it. In the light of Denning's story of subsequent events, it seems al-most incredible that that frightful thing could sit there, day after day, in that commonplace living room, being taken down and dusted now and then and carelessly placed back.

Yet such was the case, and such remained the case until the first visit of young Halpin. This young man was an acquaintance of Denning's of long standing, and their friendship had been slowly ripening during the last year, owing to the fact that Halpin was able to add much to Denning's knowledge of the curios which he accumulated. Both of them worked for the same company and, seeing each other every day, it was not unusual that they had become quite friendly in spite of the fact that neither had ever visited the other's home. But Denning's description of certain carvings on the elephant's tusk which he had bought interested young Halpin sufficiently to cause him to pay a visit to Denning's home to make a personal examination of the tusk.

Halpin, at this time, was still under thirty, yet he had become already a recognized authority in this country of that queer borderland of mystic occult study that Church ward, Fort, Lovecraft and the Miskatonic

school represent. His articles on some of the obscure chapters of d'Erlette's "Cultes des Goules" has been accepted favorably by American occult students, as well as his translation of the hitherto expurgated sections of the Gaelic "Leabhar Mor Dubh." In all, he was a most promising student and one in whom the traits of what now seem to have been incipient dementia praecox were conspicuous by their absence. Indeed, one of his strongest characteristics, Denning tells me, was a pronounced interest in almost everything about

"He was like that, the night that he first visited me," says Denning. "He looked over the tusk, explained all the curious carvings that he could and made little sketches of the remaining figures, to take away and study. Then his eyes began roving about the room and pretty soon they noticed some other little thing, I don't remember just what, and he began talking about that. I had a couple of Folsom points — those curious flints that are supposed to be much older than any other American artifacts — and he spoke about them for nearly twenty minutes.

"Then he laid them down and was up and around the room again; and presently he picked up something else and was talking about that. I used to learn an awful lot from Ed Halpin, but I think I learned more that tight than I ever did at any other one time. And at last his eyes lit on that jar."

Yes, his eyes lit on the jar, and started the series of happenings that at last made this story necessary. For Halpin was stricken with a sudden curiosity, picked up the jar and glanced over it, and then suddenly became wildly excited. "Why, it's old!" he ejaculated. "It's ancient Hebrew, Jim. Where in the world did you get it?"

Denning told him, but his curiosity was unappeased. He spent several minutes trying to extract from Denning a knowledge which it became obvious that the latter did not possess. It was easy to see that Halpin already knew more concerning the jar than did Denning, and so his questions ceased.

"But surely you know what it is supposed to be, don't you?" quizzed Halpin. "Didn't the auctioneer tell you anything about it? Didn't you see the previous owner? Lord, Denning! How can you find interest in these things, if you don't learn all you can of them?"

Denning was rendered apologetic by his evident exasperation, and Halpin suddenly relented, laughed and started to explain.

"That six-pointed star, Jim, is known as Solomon's seal. It has been a potent sign used in Hebraic cabala for thousands of years. What has me interested is its use in connection with Phoenician characters around the body of the vase. That seems to indicate a real antiquity. It might just be possible that this is actually the seal of Solomon himself! Jim," his attitude suddenly changed. "Jim, sell me this thing, will you?"

Now, it seems incredible that Denning saw no slightest gleam of light in this guarded explanation of Halpin's. The young student certainly was aware of much of the importance of the jar, but Denning insists that the explanation meant nothing whatever to him. To be sure, Denning was no student, he had probably never heard of the Cabala, nor of Abdul Alhazred or Joachim of Cordoba, but surely, in his youth he had read the "Arabian Nights". Even that should have given him a clue. Apparently not — he tells me that he refused Halpin's offer to buy the vase, simply because of a collector's vagary. He felt that; well, to use his own words: "If it was worth ten dollars to him, it was worth ten dollars to me."

And so, though Halpin increased the offer which he first made, Denning was obdurate. Halpin left with merely an invitation to come back at any time and examine the vase to his heart's content.

During the next three weeks, Halpin did return, several times. He copied down the inscription on the blue band, made a wax impression of the seal, photographed the vase and even went so far as to measure it and weigh it. And all the time his interest increased and his bids for the thing rose higher. At last, unable to raise his offer further, he was reduced to pleading with Denning that he sell it, and at this, Denning grew angry.

"I told him," says Denning, "I told him that I was getting sick and tired of his begging. I said I wasn't going to sell it to him and that, even if it cost me our friendship, that vase was going to stay mine. Then he started on another line. He wanted to open it and see what was inside.

"But I had a good excuse for not complying with that plea. He himself had told me of the interest that attached to the seal on the clay and I wasn't going to have that broken if I knew myself. I was so positive on this score that he gave in and apologized again. At least, I thought he gave in. I know different now, of

course.”

We all know different now. Halpin had decided to open the vase at any cost, and so had merely given up the idea of trying to buy it. We must not think, however, that he had been reduced to the status of a common thief in spite of his later actions. The young man's attitude was explainable to any one who can understand the viewpoint of a student of science. Here was an opportunity to study one of the most perplexing problems of occult art, and obstinacy, combined with ignorance, was trying to prevent it. He determined to circumvent Denning, no matter to what depths he had to stoop.

Thus it was that several nights later Jim Penning was awakened, sometime during the early morning hours, by a slight, unusual noise on the lower floor of his home. At first but half awake, he lay and listlessly pondered the situation. Had his wife awakened and gone downstairs for a midnight snack? Or had he heard, perhaps, a mouse in the kitchen? Could it be — a sleeping sigh from his wife's bed made him realize that it wasn't she and at the same moment came a repetition of the sound — a dull “clunk” as of metal -striking muffled metal. Instantly alert, he rose from his pillow, stepped out of bed, fumbled for robe and slippers and was tiptoeing down the steps, stopping only long enough to get his revolver from the drawer in which he kept it.

From the landing he could see a dim light in the living room, and again he heard the “clunk” that he had heard before. By leaning far over the banister, he was able to look into the living room, where he could see, by the light of a flashlight lying on the floor, the dark form of a man; his long overcoat and hat effectively concealing all his features. He was stooping over a round object, and as Denning looked, he raised a hammer and brought it down sharply but carefully on a chisel which he held in his hand. The hammer's head was wrapped in rags and again Denning heard the dull noise which had awakened him.

Of course, Denning knew at once who ‘the dark form was. He knew that the round object was his vase. But he hesitated to make an outcry or even to interrupt the other for several seconds. He seemed a little uncertain as to the reason for this, but I am convinced, from what I know of Denning's character, that curiosity had gotten the better of him. Half consciously, he was determined to find out just why Halpin was so interested in the vase. So he remained silent, and it was only after several seconds that some slight noise he made caused Halpin to turn in a panic.

As he did so, the last bit of seal crumbled from the jar, and rising, he still clung unconsciously to the lid. The jar turned over on its side and lay there for a moment unnoticed. Halpin was almost horror-stricken at the realization that he had been caught, as the lawyers say, in flagrante delicto. He burst into chattering, pleading speech.

“Don't call the police, Jim! Listen to me. I wasn't going to steal it, Jim. I'd have been gone with it long ago if I had intended to steal it. Honest Let me tell you, Jim. It's one of Solomon's jars; all right I was only going to open it. Good Lord, man, haven't you ever read about them? Listen, Jim, haven't you ever heard those old Arabian legends? Let-me tell you about them, Jim—”

As he spoke, Denning had descended the stairs. He stepped into the room and seized Halpin by the shoulders and angrily shook him.

“Quit babbling, Halpin. Don't act like a damned fool. I guess the jar and its contents are still mine. Come on, snap out of it and tell me what this is all about.”

Halpin swallowed his panic and sighed.

“There are old Arabian and Hebrew legends, Jim, that speak of a group or class of beings called Jinn. A lot of the stuff about them is clap-trap, of course, but as near as we can make out, they were a kind of super-being from some other plane of existence. Probably they were the same things that other legends have called the Elder Ones, or the Pre-Adamites. Perhaps there are a dozen names for them if they are the same beings that appear in myths of other countries. Before the time of man, they ruled the world; but fighting among themselves and certain con-ditions during the Glacial Period caused them to become almost extinct, here on this earth. But the few that were left caused damage enough among men until the time of King Solomon.

Arabian legend says that Solomon was the greatest of all kings, and from an occult standing I guess he was, in spite of the fact that the kingdom he ruled over was little more than a jerk-water principality, even in

that age. But Solomon's occult knowledge was great enough to enable him to war on the Jinn and to conquer them. And then, because it was impossible to kill them (their metabolism is entirely different from ours), he sealed them up into jars and cast the jars into the depths of the sea!"

Denning was still dense.

"Halpin, you're not trying to tell me that you expect to find a Jinn in that jar, are you? You're not such a superstitious fool as to believe—"

"Jim, I don't know what I believe. There's no record of such a jar as this having ever been found before. But I know that the Elder Ones once existed, and from an examination of that jar an occult might learn much concerning—"

While Halpin had been speaking, Denning's eye had fallen on the jar, lying where it had tumbled at Halpin's sudden rising. And the hair on Denning's neck quivered with a wave of horripilation, as he stammered suddenly: "For the love of God, Halpin, look at that jar!"

Halpin's eyes turned at Denning's first words and he, too, stared, un-able to take his eyes off the thing that was taking place. From the mouth of the jar was flowing, slowly, sluggishly, a thick, viscous mass of bluish, faintly luminous stuff. The mass was spreading, oozing across the floor, reaching curious curdly pseudo-pods out in all directions, acting, not like an inert viscous body should, but like — like an amoeba un-der a microscope. And from it, as though it were highly volatile, curled little streamers of heavy smoke or vapor. To their ears came, almost inaudibly at first, and then more and more loudly, a slow deliberate "cluck - cluck - c-lu-uck" from the mass, as it spread.

The two had forgotten their differences. Denning stepped toward Halpin and clasped his shoulder fearfully. Halpin stood like a stone statue but his breath was like that of a winded runner. And they stood there and looked and looked as that incredible jelly spread and steamed across the floor.

I think it was the luminous quality of the mass that horrified the men the most. It had a dull bluish glow; a light of a shade that made it absolutely certain that it was not merely a reflection from the light of the flashlight which still threw its beam in a comet's tail across the floor. And too, it was certain properties, in the mist, for that behaved not like a normal mist, but with a sentience of its own. It floated about the room, seeking, seeking, and yet it avoided the presence of the two men as though it feared their touch. And it was increasing. It was quite appar-ent that the mass on the floor was evaporating, passing into the mist, and it was evident that it would soon be gone.

"Is it — is it one of those things, Halpin?" whispered Denning, hoarsely; but Halpin answered him not at all, but only gripped his hand, tighter and tighter and tighter. Then the mist began a slow twirling motion and a deep sigh came from Halpin. It seemed that he was assured of something by this, for he leaned over and whispered to Denning with what seemed a certain amount of confidence: "It's one of them, all right. Stand back by the door and let me handle it. I know a little something from the books I've read."

Denning backed away, more than a little fearful of Halpin now, seeing that the young man seemed to know something of this terrible thing, but nevertheless grateful for the suggestion. Standing there by the doorway, hoping vaguely that his traitorous legs would obey him if it became necessary to flee, he watched the dread process of materialization take place. And I think he has never quite recovered from the effects of it; for surely, at that moment, the entire philosophy of his life was changed. Denning, I have noticed, goes to church quite regularly now.

However, as I say, he stood there and watched. Watched the smoke, or vapor, or whatever it was, whirl and whirl, faster and faster, snatching up the vagrant wisps and streamers that had strayed to the far corners of the room, sucking them in, incorporating them into the central column, until at last that column, swirling there, seemed almost solid.

It was solid. It had ceased its whirling and stood there quivering, jelly-like, plastic, but nevertheless, solid. And, as though molded in the hands of an invisible sculptor, that column was changing. Indentations appeared here, protuberances there. The character of the surface altered subtly; presently it was no longer smooth and lustrous, but rough and scaly. It lost most of its luminosity and became an uncertain, lichenous green. Until at last it was a — thing.

That moment, Denning thinks, was the most horrible in all the adventure. Not because of the horror of the thing that stood before him, but because at that very moment an automobile, driven by some belated citizen passed by outside, the light from its headlights casting eerie gleams across the walls and the ceiling; and the thought of the difference between the commonplace world in which that citizen was living, and the frightful things taking place in this room almost overcame the cowering man by the doorway. And, too, the light made just that much plainer the disgusting details of the creature that towered above them.

For tower it did. It was, apparently about nine feet tall, for its head quite reached the ceiling of Denning's little room. It was roughly man-like, for it had an erect body and four limbs, two upper and two lower. It had a head and a sort of a face on it. But there its similarity to man ceased. Its head had a high ridge running from the forehead to the nape of the neck — and it had no eyes and no nose. In the place of these organs was a curious thing that looked not unlike the blossom of a seashell, and beneath that was a mouth with an upper lip that was like a protruding fleshy beak, making the whole mouth take on the semblance of a sardonic letter V.

The front of its body had the flat, un-detailed plainness of a lizard's belly, and the legs were long, scaly and terribly scrawny. The same might be said of the arms, which terminated in surprisingly delicate, surprisingly human hands.

Halpin had been watching the materialization with the eagerness of a hawk, and no sooner was it complete, no sooner did he notice that tautening of the creature's muscles that indicated conscious control, then he burst out with a jumble of strange words. Now, it happens that Denning was so keyed up that his mind was tense and observant of every detail, and he clearly remembers the exact words that Halpin uttered. They are in some little-known tongue and I have failed to find a translation, so I repeat them here for any student who may care to look them up:

"La, Psuchawrl!" he cried. "Ng topuothiki Shelemoh, ma'kthoqui h'thrl!"

At the cry, the horror moved. It stooped and took a short step toward the uncowering Halpin, its facial rosette rose just as a man lifts his eyebrows in surprise, and then — speech came from its lips. Halpin, strangely, answered it in English.

"I claim the forfeit," he cried boldly. "Never has one of your kind been released that it did not grant to who-ever released it one wish, were it in its power to grant it."

The thing bowed, actually bowed. In deep — inhumanly deep — tones it gave what was manifestly an assent. It clasped its hands over what should have been its breast and bowed, in what even the paralyzed Denning could tell was certainly mock humility.

"Very well, then!" the heedless Halpin went on. "I want to know! That is my wish — to know. All my life I have been a student, seeking, seeking — and learning nothing. And now — I want to know the why of things, the cause, the reason, and the end to which we travel. Tell me the place of man in this universe, and the place of this universe in the cosmos!"

The thing, the Jinni, or whatever it was, bowed again. Why was it that Halpin could not see its mockery! It clasped those amazingly human hands together, it drew them apart, and from fingertips to fingertips leaped a maze of sparks. In that maze of brilliant filaments a form began to take shape, became rectangular, took on solidity and became a little window. A silvery, latticed window whose panes were seemingly transparent, but which looked out upon — from where Denning stood, it seemed nothing but blackness. The creature's head made a gesture and it spoke a single word — the only word which it spoke that Denning recognized.

"Look!" it said, and obeying, Halpin stepped forward and looked through that window.

Denning says that Halpin stared 'while you might have counted ten, Then he drew back a step or two, stumbled against the couch and sat down. "Oh!" he said softly — very softly, and then: "Oh, I see!" Denning says he said it like a little child that had just had some problem explained by a doting parent. And he made no attempt to rise, no comment, nor any further word of any kind.

And the Jinni, the Elder One, demon or angel or whatever it was, bowed again and turned around — and was gone! Then, suddenly, somehow or other, Denning's trance of fright was over, and he rushed to the light switch and flooded the room with light. An empty jar lay upon the floor, and upon the couch sat one who

stared and stared into vacancy with a look of unutterable despair on his face.

Little more need be said. Denning called his wife, gave her a brief and distorted tale which he later amplified for the police, and spent the rest of the night trying to rouse Halpin. When morning came, he sent for a doctor and had Halpin removed to his own home. From there Halpin was taken to the state asylum for the insane where he still is. He sits constantly in meditation, unless one tries to arouse him, and then he turns on them a sad, pitying smile and returns to his musings.

And except for that sad, pitying smile, his only look is one of unutterable despair.

The End