The setting sun had spattered its fiery sparks behind the Church of John the Baptist. Dark and shadowy walls and spires loomed ever larger as I approached the church—alone, and on horseback, after an uneasy day’s journey over a remarkably dismal stretch of land. When I drew closer and fell within the monstrous shadow of this ancient and rather Gothic structure, I perceived a peculiar reddish haze surrounding the walls and buttresses and hovering above the towers. It was an eerie nimbus. My former uneasiness intensified at this phenomenon; nevertheless, I dismounted and stood before the glaring gargoyle whose nose-ring served as the knocker in the massive oak door.

It must be understood that my apprehensions at this moment resulted not so much from the appearance of the church, ghastly as that was, but much more from the mysterious circumstances which had compelled me to undertake this extraordinary journey. The evening before, I had just sat down to supper when a cryptic message arrived from this same church, welcoming me to the area and urgently requesting my presence the following evening at a private and personal service in celebration of the church’s patron saint. It was stressed that I was to come alone. At the bottom I read the scrawled signature, Father Blackwood. Now, two things concerning this letter had troubled me at the time and had continued to plague me as I journeyed on my way: the first was the fact that there was no special day set aside in the Church calendar for the commemoration of John the Baptist, and the second was the fact that Father Blackwood was a known eccentric who often invested his own strange dramatic rituals. This last I had ascertained with great difficulty from my cook, who crossed herself three times as she spoke, pleaded with me to remain, and then refused to speak another word. But a fascinated curiosity mingled with a vague dread had spurred me on, till now, attempting to suppress the fearsome premonitions and intense curiosity welling up inside me, I found myself before the solid oak door of the Church of John the Baptist.

I lifted and dropped the ring. It fell with a ponderous thud. Silence. At length I heard a muffled step-step, step-step, step-step—
the tread of a lame man. Suddenly the door creaked open and I stood face-to-face with the notorious Father Blackwood!

How could I possibly convey the panic, the utter horror, that tore through me at the moment—a horror created not so much by the terrible infirmity and deformity of his body, by the crimson splotchiness of his face, nor even by the grisly grotesqueness of his features, but more by the scathing intensity of his blood-shot glance. In fact, and I shuddered as I realized it, the irises of the eyes were themselves red, a brilliant, burning, bloody red which alternately smoked and seared according, as I supposed, to his fluctuating temper. His long black vestments seemed violently in contrast, although in truth I could not imagine such a grotesque figure in any other dress.

I cringed perceptibly as he drew me in with his bony fingers and latched the door behind me, keeping his other hand hidden beneath his robe. But my fears were allayed somewhat as he smiled in greeting.

"Ah, Father M—- I was so afraid you wouldn’t come. Welcome, sir, to the district—and to my private celebration of the life and death of John the Baptist. Yes, yes, you’ll do nicely." His eyes were flickering frantically, and his smile grew sinister. "I daresay you’ve never heard of such a celebration before. It’s one of the oversights I’ve discovered in the church. For instance, I’ve always questioned why the church does not advocate the washing of feet, since this sacrament was plainly instituted at the Last Supper. I practice it myself with my congregation four times a year. Enough said—you’ll soon learn my methods. Follow me."

Mystified, I followed his painfully slow step-step down a long, dark, and gusty passageway whose sole illumination seemed to be the same glow which had suffused the atmosphere outside. As we reached the end, he turned and motioned me to the left. Fearfully, I entered the nave; and suddenly at the far opposite end I could see the source of the light which had mystically pervaded the air. It was—I hesitate to describe it, so ethereal and yet chilling was the sight—it was the Perpetual Flame, licking its tongue around the inside of its ruby glass prison and seemingly up the almost invisible, frayed rope which suspended the flame from the shadowy upper reaches of the ceiling. The light swayed hypnotically in the gusts and drafts. Staring at its bloody corona, I was transfixed, horrified—no, enraptured.

An impatient tap from Father Blackwood broke the spell, and
we proceeded slowly down the center aisle, my regular foot-steps and
his irregular ones beating out an almost pagan rhythm in the echoey
expanses, a rhythm which my pounding heart outspeed. We cut our way
through the dense blue of twilight which filtered through the tall
stained glass windows and diffused itself foggily with the flame’s red
into a murky purple as it approached the obscure vaults of the tower-
ing ceiling. Suddenly I heard an unearthly shriek which bounded and
rebounded from the walls until it faded into silence. I was frozen.

"Why do you stop only half-way to the chancel, my dear sir?
You heard only a bird, one of the many that fly and nest among the
rafters. Come, let us continue. I am most impatient to begin the cere-
mony.” His hidden hand was twiching spasmodically beneath his robe.

His words failed to reassure me, but I trudged on stiffly, my
eyes fixated by the flame. At last we climbed the stairs to the chancel.
With each step the flame flared more and more painfully intense
until I was forced to tear away my eyes and gaze distractedly at the
scarlet paraments and the intricately carved altar.

“We are ready to begin. Yes, yes, you’ll do very nicely. Stand
right where you are.”

He himself was standing directly under the flame, which, I
noticed in wild desperation, had transfigured him into—it couldn’t be,
but it was—into the very image of the Adversary himself! I wanted
to cry out, to run, but his blistering eyes held me with some sinister,
supernatural power as he slowly and stealthily slid something out
of the folds of his robe and brandished it aloft. It gleamed red in the
light of the flame. With sudden horror I perceived it was—a sword.

“Yes, yes, you’ll do very nicely for the celebration of the Be-
heading of John the Baptist!”

At that precise moment—in my confused terror, I couldn’t tell
how or by what means, whether from the singularly strong draft of
air and the sudden stirring of the birds, or from a Mightier Power—
at that precise moment the Perpetual Flame came crashing down on
the head of Father Blackwood, blazing with a vengeful voraciousness.

I bolted and fled for my life. The next thing I remember is look-
ing back over my shoulder as I rode off into the darkness, and seeing,
against the black of the sky—the blaze of the Church of John the
Baptist.