

... A time-sled . . . a ring with the Seal of Solomon ... a broken coaxial cable ... a beautiful girl and a simple VIPPnaper—author Young wraps them up together in a confection of fantasy-cum-science-fiction. Let us all fly away together to

The City of Brass

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

Illustrated by MORROW

TO see her reclining there on the Sultan's couch, her left arm resting on the cushioned back, her bloomed legs drawn up beneath her, you'd never dream she was an animannikin. To Billings, Marcus N., who had come to the animuseum expressly to view the *The Thousand and One Nights* exhibit, she was Shahrazad herself, and he couldn't take his eyes away from her lovely heart-shaped face. Nor could he still the stepped-up cadence of his heart.

The Sultan's quarters were authentic down to the last detail. In the background, slender columns supported graceful round-arches; a period-piece oil-lump hung from the ceiling on burnished brass chains; and the rich and colorful tapestries that flanked the couch were drawn back by special-made draw-cords appended with large golden tassels.

The Sultan "himself" was authentic also. His black beard had a bluish cast, and the overflow from the blood-red silk sash wrapped around his waist trailed vividly across his lap. The crown encircling his head, down almost to his ears, was genuine silver. But then, there was no excuse for an animannikin not to be authentic. Big Pygmalion—the electronic device that copied famous figures out of the past—duplicated everything except living tissue, and in the case of living tissue the substitute Big Pygmalion employed was indistinguishable from the real thing.

As hidden speakers dispensed subdued strains from Rimski-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, Shahrazad began the recitation of "The Story of the Porter and The Ladies of Baghdad, and of The Three Royal Mendicants." Billings listened raptly to her words, and the golden petals of her voice fell all around him. Behind and on either side of him, other people who had come that afternoon to view the *The Thousand and One Nights* exhibit pressed against him, imprisoning him between them and the velvet cord that separated the exhibit from the animuseum floor. He was unaware of their existence.

"There was a man from the city of Baghdad, who was unmarried, and he was a porter; and one day, as he sat in the market, reclining against his crate, there accosted him a female wrapped in an izar of the manufacture of El Mosil. . ."

Yes, yes, Shahrazad, Billings "said," I remember that "night" well. You started to tell it to me once before—remember? And I'll never forget the lady with the striking eyes, "with lids bordered by long lashes, exhibiting a tender expression, and features of perfect beauty"—the lady whiz was lovely enough, almost, to have been yourself.

Your *real* self, Shahrazad. Not your animannikin self. Although you were like a doll even to begin with. A living, breathing doll. A doll that could have been mine—that *would* be mine—if it hadn't been for the immutable laws of time. If it hadn't been for the bluebeard Sultan of WayBackWhen. Show me your ring, Shahrazad—I note that you have it on. That wonderful ring of yours with its Suleyman's seal that the Jinn so much abhor. And show me your lovely smile. Raise those lovely lashes of yours that I may witness once again the violet miracle of your eyes. Breathe upon me, and give me life—the life you knew in those fantastic days of memluks and sheykha and wezirs; of Jinn and Jinniyehs and 'Efrits. Give me life, Shahrazad, so that once again I will want to go on living.

Officially it is believed that you have only a thousand and one nights in your repertoire. But I know better, Shahrazad. Actually, you have a thousand and two. And the thousandth and second is my favorite one of all—

There was once a man named Billings, who was unmarried, and he was a time traveler who worked for Animannikins, Inc., and who returned regularly to the lands of WayBackWhen and abducted Very Important Past Persons and brought them back to the future so that Big Pygmalion, the Electronic Sorcerer, could make facsimiles that walked and talked and laughed and cried just like the real thing; and then, one day, this VIPPnaper returned to the days of musk and aloes-wood and willow-flower water, of 'Efrits and Jinniyehs and Jinn, of sultans and seraglios and wezirs' daughters . . . and fell in love. . . .

1.

THE seraglio had two guards—big black eunuchs clad in diaper-like loincloths and armed with yard-long scimitars. One was posted some distance down the corridor from the curtained doorway through which the girl had passed a little while ago, the other was stationed by the doorway itself. Billings, Marcus N., wearing a synthi-fiber melwatah that came all the way to the floor and a synthi-fiber turban that kept coming unwound, peered round the column behind which he had been biding his time till the girl had a chance to fall asleep. Satisfied that the time was ripe, he leveled the icer sewn into the lining of his right sleeve, flicked his wrist against the sensitive activator, and turned the first guard into a human icicle. Then; synthi-fiber slippers soundless on the carpeted floor, he advanced down the corridor toward guard no. 2.

Thus far, he hadn't found it necessary to show his hand, but now he had no choice. Icers—the only modern weapon VIPPnapers were permitted to take with them--were accurate only at short ranges, and beyond a distance of ten or twelve feet it was virtually impossible to hit anything smaller than a barn door with them. Even as it was, Billings covered half the yardage to the doorway before the eunuch noticed him. Promptly, the man drew his scimitar and made several blood-curdling passes with it; but Billings, knowing that it would be useless to try to fake a reason for being in a place that was off-limits to all bona fide males except the Sultan himself, kept right on advancing, the muzzle of the icer directed at the eunuch's chest.

"Know, whoever thou may be and whencesoever thou comest," the eunuch called out, "that I am going to disembowel thee if thou come one step closer, and throw thy entrails to the dogs!"

BILLINGS increased his pace, prayerful of getting within range before the man sounded an alarm. His luck held, and the eunuch, apparently believing himself capable of handling the intruder alone, stepped grimly in front of the doorway and drew back his scimitar in the first phase of a swing that, had it been completed, would have sliced Billings in two. But before such a dire event could come to pass, Billings cut loose with the icer at a distance of three paces, and the eunuch turned into a quick-frozen statue, dropped his scimitar, and toppled to the carpeted floor.

Stepping over him, Billings parted the curtains and entered the seraglio proper. He felt sorry for the two guards, not so much because of the agony they would undergo while they were thawing out but because of the third degree to which the Sultan (who had been VIPPnaper a week ago by another Animannikins, Inc., VIPPnaper) would subject them when Shahrazad turned up missing in the morning; but a job was a job, and it was Billings' job to abduct the once-legendary raconteur of *The Thousand and One Nights*, and he intended to go through with it regardless of how many human icicles he had to leave behind him.

He wasn't *really* going to abduct her, of course—he was just going to borrow her for the eight or nine hours that it would take to duplicate her. And thanks to Big Pygmalion's proficiency in the art of memory-eradication, she wouldn't even have any recollection of the experience. Once duplicated, she would be handed over to Animannikins, "Lost and Found Department" and returned to the seraglio, and

no harm would have been done, either to her, or to the existent scheme of things, which, while it was indifferent to the permanent disappearance of an Unimportant Past Person, could be depended upon to create a cosmic upheaval over the permanent disappearance of a Very Important Past Person. Since the birth of Big Pygmalion ten years ago, VIPPnapping had been perfected to the nth degree; and if it hadn't been for the fact that the time a person spent in the past or in the present was automatically added on to the opposite end of the line, even the minor disruptions sometimes occasioned by the temporary disappearances of VIPPs would no longer have been a factor.

Just within the seraglio doorway there was a luxurious couch, and on it, indistinctly illuminated by the gray dawnlight that was coming through a nearby window, lay the figure of a girl. Apparently the recitation of the most recent night—the thirty-second, according to Animannikins, Inc.'s Research Department—had exhausted her, for she had gone to bed with her clothes on; or perhaps it was customary for a ninth-century Arabian damsel to sleep in a turban, a jubbeh, and a pair of ankle-length bloomers. In any case, their presence on the damsel in question obviated any need for him to enter either of the two rooms that flanked the present one, for the girl he had followed at a distance from the Sultan's quarters had been wearing identical apparel. There wasn't any need for him to explore further anyway, as the Sultan—at least in this phase of his marital career—was a monogamist. Hence, without further delay Billings pulled a somnosponge from the folds of his melwatah, clamped it over the girl's nose and mouth, and, when she awoke and began to struggle, held her firmly in place till the somno took hold. Then he removed the sponge, felt under the couch for her slippers, and, when he found them, slipped them on her feet. Finally, he slung her over his right shoulder and left the room by the same door through which he had entered.

AND right then and there, his luck gave out; for just as he stepped into the corridor, he saw the Sultan step into it at the farther end.

Simultaneously, the Sultan saw him.

Billings, who despised Bluebeards of all eras and all nationalities, would have liked nothing better than to have turned this particular one into an icicle. But the distance was much too great; and even as the temptation touched him, the Sultan started shouting at the top of his voice—to his guards, to his memluks, to his black slaves, to his wezir, to the nearest wali, and to the world at large. So Billings, having previously ascertained that the corridor was a dead end, took the only course left to him: he re-entered the room he had just left, made a beeline for the window, climbed up on the sill, and jumped into the dawnlit courtyard below—a drop of about twelve feet.

It was a calculated risk at best, but even so he would have come through unhurt if he hadn't underestimated the girl's weight. Landing considerably harder than he'd expected to, he sprained his right ankle—not severely enough to put him out of action, but severely enough to make walking an ordeal and running an impossibility. However, with a little luck he could still cover the two hundred yards that separated him from the little grove of date palms where his time-sled was hidden, and he set out grimly, grimacing at every other step and tripping over the hem of his melwatah at every other one. The whole palace was awake by this time, and memluks brandishing scimitars and black slaves carrying daggers were running this way and that. In addition, about ten thousand dogs had appeared out of nowhere and were yapping around his ankles. To make matters worse, the somno dose he had administered to his captive wore off, and she began to kick and squirm and scream. Some of the things she said made his ears burn, and he almost wished he hadn't gone to the trouble of sleep-teaching himself ninth-century Arabic.

THE memluks and the black slaves began charging him in twos and threes and fours. He iced them down indiscriminately, and the courtyard gradually took on the aspect of a statuary shop that a strong wind had just blown through. No question about it, when the Hunter of the East caught the Sultan's

Turret in a Noose of Light, he was going to have a king-size defrosting job on his hands. But that was all right: by then, Billings and his captive would be long gone, and no permanent damage would have been done.

Reaching the grove, he stepped among the trees and peered into the shadows in search of his time-sled. Presently, he saw it. It looked more like a toboggan than it did a sled—a toboggan featuring a chrome-filigreed control panel just behind its turned-up nose, and a foam-rubber padded pilot's seat that in addition to its regular duties functioned as a combination tool chest and supply locker. But Billings didn't care what it looked like. All he cared about was that it was still there. Climbing aboard, he plumped his captive on the seat and sat down beside her; then, holding her in a one-arm bear hug, he shooed away the dogs, and leaned forward and punched H-O-V-E-R 8-5 on the Intra-Era A.P.

Promptly, the little craft lifted aloft, automatically avoiding the fronds of the date palms, and came to a smooth stop eighty-five feet above the Sultan's courtyard.

JUST as promptly, the girl ceased kicking and squirming and screaming, and, turning toward him, fixed him with a pair of the most remarkable eyes he had ever seen. "Why did you not impart to me that you had come to bear me away from this wicked place on your magic carpet, master?" she cried, in a voice that made him think of liquid gold. "Why did you not say that you were the deliverer for whom I have prayed, lo, these many months? I would have come with thee willingly—nay, gladly."

Billings hadn't the slightest idea what she was talking about, but he saw no point in arguing with providence. One of her slippers had come off and was caught in the folds of his melwatah. He disengaged it, and handed it to her. Surrounding her was an aura compounded of ambergris, musk, and aloes-wood, which he identified presently as *nedd*, a perfume that was as popular in her day and age as *Jeu de Printemps, numero cinq*, was in his. Ignoring the shouts and the imprecations arising from the courtyard below, he watched her put the slipper on. The Hunter of the East hadn't thrown his Noose yet, but the dawnlight had brightened to a considerable degree, and he could see her quite clearly. By twenty-second century standards, she was on the plump side, and her loose-fitting jubbeh and her baggy bloomers made her seem more so. But she was built for all that, and could have more than held her own in the best garden of girls the twenty-second century could put together, or the twenty-first century, for that matter; or, for that matter, any other century. Her night-black hair fell slightly below her shoulders, and her turban, although no doubt carefully wound, had an impromptu air about it, possibly because the final several feet of the material had been allowed to escape from the turban proper and trail down to her right shoulder and thence down her back. Her feet were small, and so were her hands, and on the forefinger of the right one there was an enormous seal ring.

Presently, she turned and faced him again, and he replenished his first good glimpse of her with a long look. Her heart-shaped face was full, and her eyes, in defiance of the laws of genetics, were pure violet in hue. They were also large, and wide apart, and, in conjunction with her delicate nose and rather small mouth, enhanced the fullness of her face. Tiny pendants hung from golden circlets in her earlobes, which—so help him God!—were a rose-petal pink, and the lapels of her jubbeh were joined together by two sequined flaps in such a way as to leave her chest exposed all the way down to the tops of her bloomers, which, while they exceeded the function of ordinary bloomers and covered her breasts, did so with but little room to spare.

Billings had never seen anyone quite like her in all his life. Talk about living dolls! It was difficult—no, impossible—to believe that the only reason her master didn't behead her was because of the Arabian cliff-hangers she recounted to him each night; yet, according to legend—or rather, according to history, the legend in question having been substantiated as fact some time ago—the only reason the Sultan allowed her to go on living was that he himself couldn't bear to go on living without learning how the tales she left unfinished each night came out.

"You are Shahrazad, aren't you?" Billings asked. "You must be."

SHE blinked once, as though the question had affronted her, and before she answered she looked

straight into his eyes for several moments. "Yes, master—I am Shahrazad," she said. She hesitated, then, "And thou—art thou not the deliverer for whom I have prayed—a prince from a far land who has come to free me forever from my bondage and to bear me away to his palace on his magic carpet?"

Billings got the picture then. To her, he was an *Arabian Nights* version of a knight in shining armor—a young Lochinvar who had come out of the west, and through all the wide Border his magic carpet was the best. He didn't blame the poor kid for wanting to get away from old Bluebeard, and he wished he could free her from the man permanently. He couldn't, of course, but that didn't mean he couldn't take advantage of her schoolgirl romanticism. "I have indeed come to bear you away, Shahrazad," he said, and leaned forward and began to punch P-R-E-S-E-N-T on the Trans-Era A.P.

He got as far as R. Then his right ankle, which he had momentarily forgotten, informed him that in leaning forward he had further outraged its already outraged cartilage. His reaction was as disastrous as it was instinctive: in straightening his leg to relieve the pain, he kicked the coaxial cable that led from the Trans-Era A.R. to the power-Paz just below the foredeck, aggravating the ankle further and tearing the cable part away from its moorings. There was a jar, a lurch, and a brief period of darkness; then dawn again, and a strange new landscape.

Looking at the landscape through his pain, Billings knew that it didn't belong in the ninth century. It didn't belong in the twenty-second century either.

He wasn't even certain that it belonged on Earth.

2. The 'Efrit

DIRECTLY below the sled, where a moment before the Sultan's courtyard had been, was an oasis. But it was like no oasis Billings had ever seen. It had been laid out in the form of a perfect circle. The palm trees that constituted ninety percent of its verdure also grew in perfect circles, and the circles became progressively smaller, the innermost one ringing a palm tree much larger than the others that stood in the exact center of the oasis something in the manner of a Maypole.

Surrounding the oasis was a vast desert, and dotting the desert as far as he could see were other, identical oases. In the foreground was a small sapphire lake, and beyond the lake stood a walled city. Despite the imminence of sunrise, the city, with the exception of a lofty tower that rose above the eastern edge, appeared to be shrouded in darkness. Not utter darkness, but a fuliginous variety through which block-like multi-windowed buildings could be glimpsed. The wall itself was uncompromisingly black, and the tower and the buildings were constructed of a substance that strongly resembled brass, and could very well be just that.

Beyond the city sat a huge sphere apparently made of a similar, if not identical substance, its surface unbroken save for a round aperture in its "equatorial" region, from which a long ramp extended to the ground.

Not a single human being—or any other kind of being—was in evidence anywhere.

Billings glanced at Shahrazad to see how the abrupt change of scene had affected her. She was staring at the city, violet eyes sparkling with excitement. He had expected her to be upset, but she looked for all the world like a little girl who had suddenly been transported to an *Arabian Nights* version of the Land of Oz.

Next, he looked at the Trans-Era A.P. cable to see how much damage had been done. Two strands still connected it to the power-pac, but all the others had pulled completely free. Such a complex reconnecting job would have taxed the ability of a very good time-sled repairman, and Billings wasn't even a good one. Insofar as the sled was concerned, he could kiss the twenty-second century good by.

The sun was beginning to rise, and he was relieved to see that it was rising in about the right place. But its light didn't seem quite right. There was a reddish cast to it, and it wasn't quite as bright as it should have been. Stealing a swift glance at the sun itself, he saw that it, too, had a reddish cast.

He swallowed. Was he still in the same solar system? The only alternative to such a conclusion was

to conclude that the sled had somehow leaped into the remote future and emerged in an era when the sun was beginning to show the first symptoms of incipient old age. But since time-sleds couldn't travel into the future except with respect to past eras, such a conclusion was preposterous.

At first thought, it seemed equally as preposterous to conclude that the sled had somehow traveled through space and emerged in a different system. But not on second thought. Modern theory had it that space-time warped back upon itself in the manner of a Mobius strip. Assuming that the theory was correct—and there was no reason to believe otherwise—a time-sled, when it moved in time, moved in space as well; and as space, in a cosmic sense, certainly wasn't limited to a single solar system, a malfunction—conceivably at least—could shunt the sled into a different system. Or maybe into a different universe.

HE would see when the stars came out that night, And when and if the moon rose.

He became aware that Shahrazad was tugging the sleeve of his melwatah. "Look, master," she said, pointing across the lake,

"A Jinni!"

Billings looked. All he saw was what appeared to be a rotating pillar of dust. He said as much. "But how can dust swirl when there is no wind, master?" Shahrazad asked. "It is a Jinni, and a very powerful one. An 'Efrit—perhaps even a Marid."

Now that he thought of it, there wasn't any wind; there wasn't even a breeze. Moreover, the pillar, after pirouetting down to the water's edge, had begun to move across the lake in the direction of the hovering sled. Concluding that whatever it was, it would be the better part of valor to get out of its path, Billings put the undamaged Intra-Era controls on manual, turned the sled around, and headed for an oasis about a mile distant. Arriving above it, he brought the little craft down on the perimeter of grass bordering the outermost circle of trees; then he turned to Shahrazad, ready with the words of reassurance that he felt were in order after such trans-ninth-century proceedings.

HE did not utter them. She needed to be reassured about as much as her lord and master the Sultan needed to go on relief. Her face was radiant, and her violet eyes were filled with rapture. "Let us fly some more, master!" she cried. "Let us fly all the way to the top of the sky!"

He stared at her. "You can't *possibly* have ridden on one of these things before," he said.

"Oh, but I have dreamed of doing so many times, master, and that is almost the same. And I have read much of others flying, and that, too, is almost the same. Come, let us fly right up to the top of the sky!"

"Later," Billings said.

He continued to stare at her for some time. Then, shaking his head, he stepped gingerly down from the sled, found a spot where the grass was soft, and lowered himself to the ground. Pulling off his right slipper, he saw that his ankle was turning blue. At this point, Shahrazad, clearly unaware till now that he had hurt himself, came flying to his side. "You are injured, master!" she cried, and, before he could stop her, she tore a sizeable length of material from the loose portion of her turban and began bandaging the ankle so gently that he felt hardly anything at all.

She did an excellent job. Afterward, she forced the slipper back onto his foot and made him stand up. Putting his weight on his right foot, he found that the pain was much less acute, and a few tentative steps informed him that he could now walk without limping.

Shahrazad was as pleased as he was. "There is a spring just within the trees," she said. "I can hear it bubbling. Shall we retire to it, O master, and refresh ourselves?"

Before accompanying her, he pulled down several low-hanging palm fronds and covered the time-sled with them, just in case. The spring turned out to be a stone-lined pool filled with the clearest water he had ever seen. He was dubious about drinking any of it, but he knew he was going to have to acclimate himself to this strange land sooner or later, and when Shahrazad cupped her hands and satisfied her thirst, he followed suit. Then they bathed their faces and sat back on an expanse of thick green grass

which grew to a uniform height of approximately two and a half inches. Noticing a low-hanging cluster of fruit just above his head, Billings reached up and broke it free. It consisted of roseate spheres the size of honeydew melons, and to look at one of them was to want to devour it on the spot. Realizing by this time that the oases were orchards of some kind, he decided to take a chance, and he and Shahrazad had breakfast. The "melons" proved to be even more delicious than they looked, and their taste alone precluded the possibility of their being unfit for human consumption. Billings ate three of them, and Shahrazad ate two.

BREAKFAST over, Billings lay back on the sward, wondering how he was going to get back to the twenty-second century and the girls he had left behind (none of whom he missed particularly, but some of whom probably missed him). As he lay there wondering, Shahrazad leaned over him, removed his turban, which had become unwound again, and gave it several deft twists and tucks that transformed it into a headpiece fit for a king. Replacing it on his head, she said. "Shall I relate to thee a tale that will beguile thee, O master?" Without waiting for him to answer, she rushed on, "There was a man of the city of Baghdad, who was unmarried, and he was a porter; and one day, as he sat in the market, reclining against his crate, there accosted him a female wrapped in an izar of the manufacture of El-Mosil, composed of gold-embroidered silk, with a border of gold lace at each end, who raised her face-veil, and displayed beneath it a pair of black eyes, with lids bordered by long lashes, exhibiting a tender expression, and features of perfect beauty ; and she said, with a sweet voice, 'Bring thy crate, and follow me!

"The porter had scarcely heard her words when he—" Abruptly, Shahrazad paused, and raised her head. "Listen—do you hear it, master?"

Billings raised his head also. For a while, he could make out nothing. Then he heard a faint humming sound, and realized that it was growing louder by the second. He laughed, but not nearly as convincingly as he'd intended to. "It's the wind," he said. "What else can it be?"

"No, master—it is not the wind. It is a Jinni. The one we saw before, perhaps—or perhaps a different one."

"But if it's a Jinni, you should be afraid. Why aren't you?"

Her violet eyes went wide with indignation. "I—afraid of a Jinni, master? Indeed! It is the Jinn who are afraid of me!" Proudly, she pointed to the large ring on her right forefinger that he had noticed earlier. "This seal ring," she proclaimed in her rich golden voice, "is made of both brass and iron, and iron, as you yourself must know, master, is excessively dreaded by the Jinn. It is a most marvelous ring which I had wrought by a most excellent craftsman when I came to possess one of the lead stoppers which Suleyman Ibn Da'ud used to imprison the Jinn in brass bottles hundreds of years ago and upon which he imprinted his seal. Upon the brass are engraved Suleyman's commands to the good Jinn, none of which any longer remain; and upon the iron are engraved his commands to the bad Jinn—the Sheytans, the 'Efrits, and the Merida. Also upon the ring is engraved the Most Great Name. With such a ring in my possession, O master, I have no cause to fear the Jinn—but the Jinn have cause to fear me!"

She held the ring under Billings' nose so that he could get a good look at the seal; but he was more interested in her face than he was in the talisman, and glanced at the latter only cursorily. So earnest was her expression and so zealous were her eyes that for a moment he half believed that what she had told him was based on fact instead of on folklore. Then he brought himself to time, and, getting to his feet, said, "I still say it's the wind, but we'll have a look anyway."

SHE accompanied him back the way they had come, and together they looked out over the desert from behind the outermost circle of trees. The humming sound was much louder now, and had taken on an eerie tone. Its source was the same pillar of dust they had seen before, or at least Billings assumed it was the same one. It was less than half a mile away, and he could make it out dearly. In color, it was dark-brown, verging in places on black, and he estimated its height at about twenty feet and its diameter at about three. The course on which it was moving would take it past the oasis at a comfortable distance

of several hundred yards, for which he was duly grateful. Jinni or not, the damned thing had him worried.

It didn't have Shahrazad worried, though. Indeed, from the way she was acting you'd have thought that the circus had just come to town and the elephants were on parade. "It is an 'Efrit, master," she said, "and it perceives that we are here. See—it is changing direction."

Sure enough, the pillar had altered its course. And there wasn't a chance of their reaching the time-sled in time to get away. Horrified, Billings watched the dark-brown swirling mass move right up to within thirty feet of the oasis and come to a stop. The humming sound faded away, and the dust—if dust it was—began to coalesce. Presently he discerned a pair of huge splayed feet and a pair of grapple-like hands. At length he made out the head. It brought to mind a huge brass kettle turned upside down with a face sketched on it. And such a face! The eyes resembled rotating fan-wheels. The nose was broad, and slightly turned up. The Gargantuan mouth was open, revealing two rows of tombstone-like teeth.

As Billings stared, the rows ground against each other, and several sparks shot forth.

HE directed the muzzle of his icer at the kettle-like head and put his free arm around Shahrazad. The fragrance of nedd rose round him, seemed to envelope him, and he found himself wishing he were twenty feet tall so he could do physical battle with the monster that threatened their lives. But he wasn't, of course, and when the 'Efrit came within range he would have to render it *hors de combat* the easy, twenty-second century, way. Apparently, however, coming within range was not on its agenda. After grinding its teeth once more, it backed off and commenced rotating again. The humming sound began anew, and rose on a cacophonous crescendo. The face disappeared; the head, the hands, the feet. At length, the pillar of dust took shape again, and swirled off in the direction from which it had come.

Billings stared after it. After a while he realized that his arm was still around Shahrazad's shoulders. He removed it somewhat reluctantly and sat down on a nearby log. Shahrazad sat down beside him, cheeks flushed with excitement, violet eyes aglow. "I am excessively glad, O master," she said, "that you chose to pass through the Veil on the way to your palace, for I have longed, lo, these many years, for an opportunity to avenge the persecutions which my countrymen have suffered at the vile hands of the Jinn. Let us proceed at once to the City of Brass, that I may begin, as that is where they live."

The day had no end of surprises up its sleeve. "Do you actually know where we are?" he asked incredulously.

"Of course, master. We are in the land beyond the Veil. The land of the Jinn. I have never been here before, as it is beyond the power of ordinary mortals like myself to pass unaided from our land to this one, but when I saw the City of Brass, I suspected the truth, and when the 'Efrit came to spy on us, I knew. They are afraid, master, and we must take advantage of their fear and capture them in bottles of brass and throw them into the sea."

In her voice rang the zeal of a born crusader, and the seal ring on her finger had taken on an added luster. Looking at it, Billings was somehow reminded of Carry Nation's hatchet. He sighed. All he'd needed was to become involved in a one-woman jihad against the Jinn. "Suppose you tell me a little more about the Veil," he said. "Not," he added hastily, "that it is unknown to me. I'd merely like to have my Memory replenished."

She needed no second invitation. "Very well, master, I will comply with thy wish. But I must begin at the beginning."

3. The Veil

TO the dwelling of my father the Wezir there came one day when I was as yet quite young (said Shahrazad) a poor fisherman who, for a mere kataif, offered to my father a brass bottle which he had caught in his net and which was sealed with a lead stopper bearing the seal of our lord Suleyman. My father gave the poor man the pastry, and accepted the bottle in return, and afterwards placed it in a secluded part of the courtyard. Seeing it there the following morning, I approached it closely, and, lifting

it, found it to be excessively heavy. Perceiving the seal, but not understanding its true nature, I obtained a kitchen knife from the cook-maid and picked at the lead until I extracted the stopper. Immediately, smoke came forth and ascended towards the sky, and spread over the face of the earth; at which I wondered excessively. And after a little while, the smoke collected together, and was condensed, and then became agitated and was converted into an 'Efrit, whose head was in the clouds, while its feet rested upon the ground. Its head was like a dome; its hands were like winnowing forks; and its legs, like masts. Its mouth resembled a cavern; its teeth were like stones; its nostrils, like trumpets; and its eyes, like lamps. And it had disheveled and dust-colored hair.

When I beheld this 'Efrit, the muscles of my sides quivered, and I was excessively afraid and knew not what to do. The 'Efrit, as soon as it perceived me, exclaimed, "There is no deity but God; Suleyman is the Prophet of God. O Prophet of God, slay me not; for I will never again oppose thee in word, or rebel against thee in deed!" "O Marid," said I, "dost thou say Suleyman is the Prophet of God? Suleyman hath been dead a thousand and seven hundred years; and we are now in the end of time. What is thy history, and what is thy tale, and what was the cause of thy entering this bottle?" When the Marid heard these words, it said, "There is no deity but God! Receive news, O damsel!" "Of what," I inquired, "dost thou bring me news?" The 'Efrit answered, "Of thy being instantly put to a most cruel death." "Wherefore wouldst thou kill me?" I asked, "and what requires thy killing me, when I have liberated thee from the bottle?" The 'Efrit answered, "Choose what kind of death thou wilt die, and in what manner thou shalt be killed." "What is my offense?" I asked. The 'Efrit replied, "Hear my story, O damsel." "Tell it then," said I, "and be short in thy words; for my soul hath sunk down to my feet."

KNOW then," it said, "that I am one of the heretical Jinn. I rebelled against Suleyman the son of Da'ud; I and Sakhr the Jinni; and he sent to me his Wezir, Asaf the son of Barkhiya, who came upon me forcibly, and took me to him in bonds, and placed me before him. And when Suleyman saw me, he offered up a prayer for protection against me, and exhorted me to embrace the faith, and to submit to his authority; but I refused; upon which he called for this bottle, and confined me in it, and closed it upon me with the leaden stopper, which he stamped with the Most Great Name. He then gave orders to the good Jinn, who carried me away, and threw me into the midst of the sea. There I remained a hundred years; and I said in my heart, 'Whosoever shall liberate me, I shall enrich him forever'; but the hundred years passed over me, and no one liberated me, and I entered upon another hundred years; and I said, 'Whosoever shall liberate me, I will open to him the treasures of the earth'; but no one did so, and four hundred years more Passed over me, and I said, 'Whosoever shall liberate me, I will perform for him three wants'; but still no one liberated me. I then fell into a violent rage, and said within myself, 'Whosoever shall liberate me now, I will kill him; and only suffer him to choose in what manner he will die.' And lo, now thou hast liberated me, and I have given thee thy choice of the manner in which thou wilt die."

When I heard this story, I felt assured of my death, and I implored the 'Efrit, saying, "Pardon me by way of gratitude for my liberating thee." "Why," answered the 'Efrit, "I am not going to kill thee but for that very reason, because thou *hast* liberated me." "Then," said I within myself, "this is a Jinni, and I am a damsel; and God hath given me sound reason; therefore, I will now plot its destruction with my art and reason, like as it hath plotted with its cunning and perfidy." So I said to the 'Efrit, "Hast thou determined to kill me?" It answered, "Yes." Then said I, "By the Most Great Name engraved upon the seal of Suleyman Ibn-Da'ud, I will ask thee one question; and wilt thou answer it to me truly?" On hearing the mention of the Most Great Name engraved upon the seal of Suleyman, the 'Efrit was agitated, and trembled, and replied, "Yes; ask, and be brief." I then said, "How wast thou in this bottle? It will not contain thy hand or thy foot; how then can it contain thy whole body?" "Dust thou not believe that I was in it?" said the 'Efrit. I answered, "I will never believe thee until I see thee in it." Upon this, the 'Efrit shook, and became converted into smoke, which rose to the sky and then became condensed, and entered the bottle by little and little, until it was all enclosed. Then I snatched the sealed leaden stopper, and, having replaced it in the mouth of the bottle, called out to the 'Efrit, and said, "Choose in what

manner of death *thou* wilt die, for I will assuredly throw thee back into the midst of the sea." On hearing these words, the 'Efrit endeavored to escape; but could not, finding itself restrained by the impression of the seal of Suleyman, and thus imprisoned as the vilest and filthiest and least of 'Efrits. I then took the bottle to the brink of the sea, whereat the 'Efrit cried, "Nay! Nay!"; to which I answered, "Yea, without fail! Yea, without fail!" The Marid, then addressing me with a soft voice and humble manner, said, "What dost thou intend to do with me, O damsel?" I answered, "I will throw thee into the sea, and if thou hast been there these many days, I will make thee remain there until the hour of judgment. Did I not say to thee, 'Spare me, and so may God spare thee; and destroy me not, lest God destroy thee?' But thou didst reject my petition, and wouldst nothing but teachery; therefore God hath caused thee to fall into my hand, and I have betrayed thee." "Open to me," cried the 'Efrit, "and for my freedom I will tell thee of the Veil which divideth the land of men from the land of Jinn and through which ordinary mortals cannot pass." "Thou wilt tell me first," said I, "and only then, if thou hast told me well and true, will I open the bottle and set thee free." "Very well," said the 'Efrit, and it spoke as follows:

KNOW, O damsel, that there lived near the city of El Maras a certain merchant, who possessed wealth and cattle, and had a wife and children; and God (whose name be exalted) had also endowed him with the knowledge of the languages of beasts and birds. The abode of this merchant was in the country; and he had in his stable an ass and a bull. Now, the bull envied the ass excessively, because the stall of the ass was much larger and much more luxuriously appointed than his own; and the bull, being proud, considered it unseemly for himself to sleep in such mean surroundings while the ass enjoyed each night the comforts of a king. Therefore the bull began sleeping in the ass's stall, taking up the lion's share of the space and using as his bed all of the straw which the stable slave spread daily upon the floor.

"Upon perceiving the conduct of the bull, the merchant was excessively angered, and ordered the stable slave to extend by five cubits the wall which divided the two stalls and which measured four cubits, so that the bull, whose tether measured only nine cubits, could not pass around it. The stable slave did as he was bidden, and extended the wall by five cubits; but the next morning he came running to the merchant and said to him, much agitated, 'Master, last night the bull leaped over the top of the wall and slept in the ass's stall as before, for there is an impression of a heavy body in the straw.' Upon hearing this, the merchant reprimanded the slave for being untruthful. 'Verily,' said he, the wall that separates the stalls is four cubits high, and no bull could accomplish such a feat.' But the stable slave implored him to come to the stable and see for himself, and the merchant, perceiving the poor man's agitation, agreed to do so; and lo, just as the stable slave had said, there in the straw of the ass's stall was a deep impression which only an excessively heavy beast such as the bull could have made.

"Upon observing this, the merchant was exceedingly perplexed, and said within himself, 'God (whose perfection be extolled) hath endowed me with the power to understand the languages of beasts and birds, and I have taken it upon myself to divulge my ability to no one, either animal or man, believing it to be too sacred to be made known. Therefore I cannot divulge it now by asking this bull how he accomplished this marvelous feat.' So the merchant, as determined as before to protect the rights and the privacy of the ass, ordered the stable slave to heighten the wall between the stalls by six cubits, so that even were the bull able to make such a great leap, the length of his tether would prevent him from accomplishing it. The stable slave did as he was bidden, and heightened the wall by six cubits; but the next morning he came running to the merchant so excessively agitated that he could barely speak, and said, Master! Master! Last night the bull leaped the wall and slept beside the ass as before, for there is an impression of a heavy body in the straw.' The merchant, having heard these words, hurried to the stable, and saw that the stable slave had again spoken the truth: there in the straw of the ass's stall was a valley made by the heavy body of the bull. The Merchant knew then that he could no longer hide his acquaintanceship with the languages of beasts and birds, and, dismissing the stable slave, proceeded at once to the stall of the bull. He addressed himself to the animal as follows: 'Know, O wretched creature, that God (whose name be exalted) hath endowed me with the knowledge of the languages of beasts and birds, and know therefore that it is in his name that this question is asked: By what means wast thou able

to leap a wall of ten cubits in height when thy tether measures but nine, and sleep the night in the stall of the ass?' Whereupon the bull, perceiving his master's agitation and trembling in the presence of one thus marvelously endowed by God, answered, 'Master, there are four ways—not merely three—to thwart the barrier of a wall and arrive at its other side: by passing around it, by passing in under it, by passing over it, and *by passing through it*. Know then, that since I could neither pass over this wall, nor in under it, nor over it, I chose the fourth way, and passed through it.'

UPON hearing these words, the merchant was excessively angered, and it was as though his resurrection took place. 'Why dost thou lie to me, O wretched animal?' he cried. 'Thou knowest as well as I that that which thou claim to have accomplished can be accomplished only by Senn, Jinn, Sheytans, 'Efrita, and Merida.' 'Nay, master,' said the bull, 'it can be accomplished by anyone once the secret is known; and the secret is this: the wall must be passed through at a certain angle,' and the bull then moved forward, turned, and stepped obliquely into, and through, the wall; and then stepped back through it in a similar fashion into his own stall. The merchant was excessively impressed by this great marvel, and said to the bull, 'Verily, thou hest spoken the truth, and that which thou hast accomplished is marvelous indeed; therefore it is not fitting that a noble creature such as thou should live in quarters lowlier than a mere ass's.' And the merchant called the stable slave to him and directed him to make the bull's stall larger by two times and to spread upon its floor each day large quantities of fresh straw. And the bull was excessively pleased, and thereafter he was content to sleep in his own stall.

"And now, O damsel," continued the 'Efrit, "it remains but for thee to make the following likenesses to understand the Veil: The stall of the ass is the land of man and the stall of the bull is the land of the Jinn. The ass is mankind, and the bull is the Jinn; and the wall separating the two stalls is the Veil itself." And the 'Efrit then said, "Since I have fulfilled my part of the covenant, thou must fulfill thy part. Liberate me, and I vow to thee that I will do thee no harm." Upon this, I accepted the covenant, and when I had bound the 'Efrit by oaths and vows, and made it swear by the Most Great Name of God, I opened the bottle; and the smoke ascended until it had all come forth, and then collected together and became, as before, an 'Efrit of hideous form. The 'Efrit kicked the brass bottle into the sea, and went its way; and I took the sealed leaden stopper and returned to the dwelling of my father the Wezir; and afterward I had this ring made after the seal of Suleyman Ibn-Da'ud, which was on the stopper, knowing the power it would give me over the Jinn. But although I knew their secret, I was unable to reach their land until now.

And that, O master (Shahrazad concluded), is the story of the Veil.* (*"The Veil" is based on two tales from *The Thousand and One Nights*.)

4. **The City of Brass**

IT was some time before Billings could think of anything to say. He would have discounted Shahrazad's story altogether and imputed its source to the potpourri of folklore out of which she had already begun to fabricate the *Arabian Nights*, if it hadn't been for the irritating fact that he had seen a genuine Jinni with his own eyes. Granted, its existence—and the more-than-probable existence of others like it—didn't prove the existence of the Veil, but it certainly argued strongly in the Veil's favor; while the fact that he and Shahrazad had been somehow shunted through time and space to a different world in a fraction of a second made it difficult to gainsay that that world and the one they had left behind them existed side by side.

The sun was now approaching meridian, and as Billings' watch indicated 1122 hours, the conclusion could safely be drawn that the land of the Jinn had a time schedule similar to that of the land of man. Looking at the sphere, which he was certain was a spaceship, he wondered whether the Jinn had a technology similar to man's. Folklore made them out to be a rather naive lot whom King Solomon used to bottle by the score; but you couldn't set much store by folklore, and they might very well turn out to be technologically superior to man, in which case the City of Brass might provide him with a means of

repairing his time-sled.

HIS mind made up, he turned to Shahrazad. "Tonight when the stars come out," he said, "you and I are going to visit the City of Brass."

She couldn't have been more excited if she had been a little kid and he had told her he was going to take her to see Santa Claus. "O master, I can hardly wait!" she cried. Then she gave a little sigh. "If I only had some lead, and a means of melting it!" He gave her a hard look. "Lead?"

"Yes. After I put the Jinn in bottles, I must seal the mouths and stamp the stoppers with the seal of Suleyman, or else they will be able to get out."

He stared at her. Up till now, he'd been able to take that silly talisman of hers in his stride, and to write off ninety percent of the claims she had made for it as harmless, superstitious nonsense. But now she was going too far, and it was high time someone acquainted her with a few of the scientific facts of life.

He opened his mouth to do so. Then he closed it again. She was looking at him as though he had made heaven and earth and could create the stars any time he wanted to. "It just so happens," he heard himself saying, "that I do have some lead, and a means of melting it. I'll get it for you and show you how, and afterwards I want you to be real quiet so that I can do some thinking. I've a great many things to figure out."

An ingot of lead and a small self-heating ladle were standard repair equipment for all time-sleds. He got both items out of the tool chest and showed her how the ladle worked. She was so delighted that she leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth. He returned the lead and the ladle to the tool chest, no longer quite the same man; then he found a tree to his liking and sat down beneath it to think. Shahrazad sat down beside him, as quiet as a mouse. He was glad now that he hadn't divulged any of the scientific facts of life—not because she had kissed him but because faith such as hers was too precious a thing to destroy out of petty scientific self-righteousness. And if an ingot of lead and a self-heating ladle had a beneficial effect on her morale, he was damned if he was going to deny them to her.

When the stars came out that night, Billings almost wished they hadn't. For constellations do not lie, and the constellations that winked into formation above his head stated unequivocally that, instead of being shunted into a different star system as he had tentatively theorized, he and Shahrazad had been catapulted nearly 100,000 years into the future.

Owing to the different directions and velocities of its stellar components, the big dipper had transmuted to a graceful slipper; while Scorpio, for an identical reason, now looked like a three-legged dog with a turned-up tail, Orion was unrecognizable, and Berenice's hair was a mess.

Even so, he didn't quite believe what the constellations said until the moon came up. She was substantially older than when he had known her, but she was undeniably the same heavenly body; and that being so, the planet on which he stood had to be the planet Earth.

The Veil, then—among unknown other things—represented nearly 100,000 years, and unless he could find a way of passing back through it he and Shahrazad were going to be stuck permanently in the far future; and even if he did manage to get through it, in all probability he would emerge in the same century he had left—the ninth—in which case he still wouldn't be able to get back to the twenty-second.

And even if the Trans-Era unit was still functioning, he couldn't bypass the Veil by retuning to his own era the long way around, because the maximum range of the time-sled was 5,000 years.

Woe was him!

AND yet, he supposed, he was no worse off than he would have been if his tentative theory had turned out to be correct, and the time-sled had been shunted into a different star system. As matters stood, he and Shahrazad could make a go of things if they had to. There was plenty of food and water available, and certainly the climate was amenable enough. As for the Jinn, from what he had seen of them thus far they should be duck soup for his icer. Icing one of them would be like seeding a cloud.

That's when the thought struck him. Down through the ages had man evolved into an overblown puff

of smoke with a dome for a head, and did the Jinn constitute mankind circa 100,000 A.D.?

Preposterous!

Preposterous or not, unless the sphere turned out to be an alien spaceship, it was the only theory that fitted the facts.

But enough of makeshift theories. He was sick of them. He needed more facts to build with, and the City of Brass was the logical place to look for them. He turned to Shahrazad, wondering whether she had noticed the difference in the constellations. She was praying—for the fifth time that day and for the second time since sunset. Remembering that he was supposed to be a Muslim, he joined her in a few Zikrs; then, after they finished, they proceeded to the time-sled, removed its palm-frond camouflage, and climbed on board.

LIFTING high into the night sky, Billings approached the city at an altitude of three hundred feet and at a speed of fifteen mph. Out over the lake they sailed, the anti-grays making rippling footprints on the water. The tower, now that night had fallen, had the aspect of a huge lighthouse, for a bright bluish light emanated from its apex, illuminating the city along much the same lines as the darkness Billings had noticed that morning had shrouded it. The encompassing wall, so uncompromisingly black by daylight, now glowed with a fiery luminescence, and the city, far from being the night-infested metropolis he had hoped to find, was a virtual lake of light, while the tower loomed above it like a big brass bonfire. Undaunted, he continued on over the lake and passed high above the wall. Below lay block after block of unadorned box-shaped buildings and empty narrow streets. There was neither sound nor movement; there were no signs of people or vehicles, nor was there any sign of Jinn. For all the brightness of its light, the city was apparently dead.

He said as much to Shahrazad, but she would have no part of such an assumption. "Oh no, master," she said, "the Jinn are there somewhere. Probably they are hiding from us in abject fear."

Billings hoped she was right, but he knew she wasn't. He piloted the sled in the direction of the tower, and when they were above it, descended slowly to within several yards of its dome-like apex. The bluish light emanated from a horizontal slot at an angle that brought its radiance all the way to the farthest wall, and above the slot there was a reflector of some kind that relayed part of the light straight down and to either side so that the section of the city in the immediate vicinity of the tower could enjoy—or endure, as the case might be—the same all-pervasive illumination as the rest of the city. The city-side of the tower, therefore, could be ruled out insofar as a surreptitious approach was concerned.

Billings backed away from the light and began descending along the opposite wall. Near the apex; there was a narrow aperture through which a dim light shone, but, hopeful of finding a means of entry close to the ground, he did not pause. The tower was conical in shape, and slanted gradually outward as he descended; but the wall—at least that section of it that lay in relative darkness—was broken by no more openings of any kind.

There was nothing for it, then, but to enter from the top. Returning to the aperture he had spurned a few moments ago, he moved in close to it and locked the sled on HOVER. The opening was little more than a vertical slot in the thick wall, but it would be wide enough for him to pass through sideways. Wondering whether the structure was really made out of brass as it appeared to be, he examined the wall at close range. No, the material wasn't brass—it was another kind of alloy. An alloy that resembled brass in appearance but which was comprised of far more durable metals than zinc, tin, and copper. What those metals might be, he had no idea; but he had a hunch that they weren't indigenous to Earth.

He turned to Shahrazad. "I'm going inside," he said, "and just in case I don't come back out, I'm going to show you how to make the magic carpet do your bidding. First of all—"

She was up in arms. "But master, it is I who have the ring—not you. Without it, you will be helpless against the Jinn. You must take me with you!"

BILLINGS patted the right sleeve of his melwatah. "I have a little talisman of my own," he said. Then, ignoring her continued protests, he showed her how to manipulate the three simple mechanisms that controlled the movements of the sled. "Now I want you to wait for me, of course," he went on, "but I don't want you to wait any longer than daybreak. If I'm not back by then, or if any danger threatens you in the meantime, I want you to leave, and to leave as fast as you can."

"But you must not go alone. You *must* not! Here, take my ring and thus insure thy safe return."

He shook his head and made her slip the ring back on her finger. The concern in her violet eyes touched him, and he leaned over and kissed her forehead. Again, the fragrance of nedd seemed to envelop him, but this time, far from wishing he were twenty feet tall, he wished he were the Sultan of WayBackWhen. This would never do at all. Hastily, he drew away, and, without another look at her, steeped from the sled to the sill of the aperture and began edging his way through the narrow opening.

IT gave into a large deserted chamber that was devoid of objects of any kind, save for a big brass bottle that was suspended from the ceiling, to a height of about five feet above the floor, on a trio of brass chains. The ceiling was so lofty that the place had more of the aspect of a closet than it did a room, but that was all right. Closets had doors as well as rooms did, and this one was no exception. Moreover, the door in question was ajar.

Making certain that no Jinn were lurking in any of the corners, Billings stepped down to the floor and walked across the chamber to the door. It was a good fifteen feet in height, and, judging from its thickness, must have weighed at least a quarter of a ton; but it swung inward easily enough when he opened it the rest of the way, and didn't emit so much as a single squeak. In common with the walls, the floor, and the ceiling—but not with the chains and the bottle, which were the real thing—it was made of the same brass-like alloy that constituted the tower's exterior.

Stepping through the doorway, he found himself on a semi-circular landing that, a few feet to the left, gave onto a downward winding ramp. Opposite him, a smooth brasslike wall, broken by another enormous door, bisected the entire top section of the tower. The Jinn were no more in evidence here than in the chamber.

He became aware of an acrid odor, and realized that it had been present all along, and that he had been too tense to take conscious note of it. In a way, it reminded him of the stench electric wires give off when they are shorted.

He took conscious note of something else: the subdued light that he was seeing by had no visible source and seemed to be part of the air itself. Well, there was certainly nothing remarkable about that. Even as far back as the twenty-second century, ion-atmosphere penetration had been a common thing.

But if ion-atmosphere penetration was being used, what was the purpose of the bluish light emanating from the tower?

The source of that light, he was sure, lay beyond the wall on the other side of the landing. He went over and tried the door, but found it to be as immovable as the wall itself.

Were there Jinn behind it? he wondered.

He decided to gamble that there were not, and, keeping his right forearm at right angles to his body so that his leer would be in position if he needed to use it in a hurry, he started down the ramp.

After leaving the landing, the ramp cut sharply to the left and thenceforth bordered the outer wall. The outer wall was featureless, but he hadn't proceeded a dozen yards before he came to a door on the inner wall. He tried it, and it swung inward to his touch. He peered cautiously into the chamber beyond. Except for the absence of an aperture, it was exactly like the one he had quitted a few minutes ago, and suspended from its ceiling on a trio of brass chains was a brass bottle identical to the one he had seen in the first chamber.

He was tempted to take the bottle down and see what was in it, but remembering Shahrazad sitting all alone on the time-sled way up in the sky, he decided to get on with his explorations without further delay so that he could get back to her as soon as possible.

The second door was the first of many, and apparently all of them were unfastened; but after trying three more and finding three more identical chambers, three more identical trios of brass chains, and three more identical brass bottles, he concluded that he was wasting his time, and desisted from opening any more.

AT length, the doors gave way to a smooth unbroken surface, and not long afterward the ramp leveled out into a corridor, whose curve was almost imperceptible. He knew then that he had reached the base of the tower, and he proceeded with greater caution. Presently the corridor ended, and he found himself confronted by a huge door that made the others seem small by comparison but which proved to be no less co-operative. Shoving it open, he stepped watchfully into a huge chamber.

Huge? Vast was a much more appropriate adjective. The ceiling constituted the interior of an inner dome, and its apex was a full fifty feet above the floor. Suspended from the apex on nine brass chains was a brass bottle much larger than the others he had seen, from whose mouth a tendril of smoke trailed. The acrid stench he had noted earlier was almost overpowering here, and the air was exceedingly warm and dry, as though a hot desert wind had just blown through the room.

Like the other chambers, this one was also devoid of furniture. But not of equipment. Fronting the concave wall opposite the doorway was a huge instrument panel covered with dials, buttons, knobs, teletypers, and numerous other items, some of which he couldn't identify; and above and on either side of the panel, seemingly a part of the wall itself, were tier upon tier of postage-stamp sized screens. Both the panel and its accessories were made of the same brass-like material that was in evidence everywhere, and the screens, for all their glass-like transparency, appeared to be made of a similar, if not an identical, substance.

MESMERIZED, Billings advanced across the room and gazed up at the lowest tier of screens. Finding them to be too high to permit him to see into any of them, he glanced around the room in hopes of seeing something he could use to stand on. There appeared to be nothing. He noticed the edge of a thin shelf protruding from the left side of the instrument panel. Experimenting, he found that the shelf could be pulled out several feet and that it would more than support his weight. Climbing up on it, he chose a screen at random and leaned forward and examined it closely. It carried a three dimensional image of a tiny room. In the tiny room there was a tiny bed, a tiny table, and a tiny chair. And on the tiny chair, elbows propped upon the tiny table, sat a tiny man with a dome-like head. He was unquestionably alive, unquestionably deep in thought, and unquestionably a fraction of his actual size. From the tiny ceiling a tiny wire ran down to a tiny node on his tiny dome-like head.

Billings examined several adjacent screens. Each of them carried a similar image, only in some cases the tiny figure sitting at the tiny table was a woman—hairless and dome-like of head, but unquestionably gynecomorphous in all other respects.

The tiny rooms looked an awful lot like cells.

And the whole city, now that he came to think of it, looked an awful lot like a penitentiary.

Or a modernistic concentration camp.

But what was the purpose of the screens? What did they signify?

Billings thought he knew. Unless he was badly mistaken, he was looking at the control board of a human computing machine. And beyond the shadow of a doubt, the human beings imprisoned in the myriad cells of the city, which, of course, constituted the machine proper, were the rightful heirs of the planet Earth.

Was it growing warmer in the room, or was it his imagination? And what was that peculiar humming noise behind him?

Turning around, he saw the Jinni.

COMPARED to this one, the Jinni Billings had seen at the oasis had been a good-looking kid. That one had been an 'Efrut. This one, therefore, must be a Marid, for Marids—according to no less an authority than Shahrazad herself—were the most powerful Jinn of all.

Discounting the smoke—or dust, or whatever it was—that hadn't solidified yet, the creature was about thirty-five feet tall. Its legs rose like a pair of brass pillars, its feet looked like the cornerstones of a seven-story building, its arms resembled a pair of snorkel booms, and its hands brought to mind a couple of outsize pitchforks. Its head was like a brass dome, its eyes were like gasoline lanterns, its nose was like a French horn, its ears were like TV antennae, and its mouth made Billings think of the Grand Canyon. How in the world it had ever crept up behind him without making a sound dismayed his imagination.

"Don't look at me as though I were some kind of a freak," it "said" in his mind. "We Jinn approximate the human form to the best of our ability, and no being is well pleased to have its best depreciated, be it ever so little."

By this time, Billings had regained most of the seven years' growth that had been scared out of him; and as the Marid was well within icer range, and apparently inclined to be amenable in any case, he saw no immediate cause for alarm. "Can't you make yourself a little bit smaller?" he asked, employing twenty-second century English, since it obviously didn't matter what language he used. "It's not easy talking to a young mountain."

Obligingly, the Marid diminished itself to the dimensions of a young hill. "I am Ed-Dimiryat," it said, "the officer in charge of Terrestrial Rehabilitation. I witnessed the emergence of your aircraft this morning and dispatched a scout to report on it. Concluding from the report that you were harmless, I decided to make my headquarters accessible to you in the event you paid our Rehabilitation Center a visit."

Said the spider to the fly, thought Billings, wondering how anyone could be as dumb as he himself was. Well, anyway, he'd had brains enough not to let Shahrazad accompany him into the tower, and maybe if he Played his cards right he could still rejoin her. Lord, he hoped she was all right. If anything happened to her, he'd die.

Ed-Dimiryat was still "speaking": "I've deduced from the manner of its arrival that your aircraft must be a time-ship of some kind; but the mere fact that you and your companion were riding on an aircraft of any kind would preclude your being from the ninth century, regardless of the authenticity of your clothing, while the conformation of your craniums alone proves you can't possibly be from this one. What century are you from?"

SUDDENLY Billings remembered that the Marid was reading his thoughts. Was it reading the rest of his mind also? The fact that it had needed to ask a question indicated that it wasn't doing so at the moment, but didn't necessarily prove that it couldn't if it wanted to. "The answer's right here in my mind," he said. "Help yourself."

"Like your remote descendants, I can read only those thoughts that come to the surface of a being's mind while it's forming words. I repeat: what century are you from?"

Relieved, Billings answered, "The twenty-second."

"Did you come through the Veil by accident or design?"

"By accident."

"What's your name?"

"Billings, Marcus N.," Billings said. Then, figuring that it was his turn to ask a few questions: "What century is this?"

"Computed on your calendar, it would be the 100,141st."

"And what planet are you from?"

Ed-Dimiryat smiled, revealing two rows of sparkling white tombstones, "If you and your contemporaries were aware of its existence, it would be listed in your star catalogues as Alioth XVI. Earth is one of the many planets we have taken into our fold. What else have you deduced so far?"

"That far from being a Rehabilitation Center, this place is a concentration camp—one of God knows how many others that you use for turning mankind into human computing machines for the benefit of Jinnkind."

Again, Ed-Dimiryat smiled. "You're correct in assuming that we use mankind's collective brain power to solve our problems. But that's only the secondary purpose of our human computers. Their primary purpose is to prevent mankind, by forcing them to think collectively, from trampling one another to death in selfish campaigns for power. The 'Great Man' complex began on a small scale even before your own era, I believe, and during subsequent millennia it gradually intensified to a degree where, two thousand years ago, it threatened the existence of the human race. Everybody and his brother and sister wanted to become a leader, to build a shrine for him- or herself, and to go down in history as a Great Man or a Great Woman. It was a new religion—a new way, or rather, a popularization of an old way, of acquiring immortality. Meanwhile, perhaps because of world wide miscegenation or perhaps in spite of it, human intelligence had reached its peak and had distributed itself on an even scale, putting 'Greatness'—theoretically at least—within everybody's reach. We arrived just in time to avert a catastrophe."

"Well, good for you," Billings said. "But in what capacity did you arrive?"

"The term in your language that fits us best is 'The Salvation Army.' Our mission in life is to do good wherever and whenever possible. Experiments showed us that after a human being reached adulthood, ten years service as a cog in a computer was enough to cure him of his selfishness forever, and we've been applying the treatment ever since. We've also been gradually transferring the human race to the various planetary utopias which we maintain throughout the galaxy. After we vacate all the people, we're going to build a galactic museum here—one that'll span the oceans and reach from pole to pole and provide room enough for every race in the galaxy to display its fossils and artifacts. This Center is one of the last of its kind."

WELL, talk about your nerve! Billings was furious—and unconvinced as well. Not for one minute did he believe that mankind had degenerated into a race of self-seeking monsters, nor did he believe for one minute that Ed-Dimiryat & Co. had mankind's best interests at heart. Far from freeing the poor souls incarcerated in those bleak little computer cells, the Jinn would probably keep them there till they dropped dead from overthinking and then replace them with a fresh batch. But since he represented mankind's only chance of regaining their freedom, he would be wise to pretend to be as dumb as the Marid thought he was, and to defer turning it and its henchmen, who were probably lurking just beyond the tower walls (or maybe in them) into rainfalls until after he obtained some more information. "No doubt," he said, "the remaining centers are scattered all over the globe."

"Oh, no. The whole project was conducted in this area. Because of our physical constitution, we have to live in hot, dry climates, and the climate of this region proved to be the most congenial to us. It also proved to be congenial to the agricultural program that we instituted in conjunction with the project. You've seen our orchards. The fruit they bear was developed through hybridization to provide our computers with a maximum of intellectual energy, and is largely responsible for the Cerebralites' ability to solve problems that we Jinn can't even begin to cope with."

"Cerebralites'?"

"It's not a very good word, is it? But you coined it—I didn't—and it will have to suffice. It refers to the denizens of the computer cells."

"You implied that the project has been going on for two thousand years," Billings said. "How long have you been part of it?"

"Ever since it began."

BILLINGS blinked. Recovering himself, he said, "Next, I suppose you're going to tell me that you were a thousand years old at the time of its inception and that you've still got a couple of thousand to go."

"As a matter of fact, I was going to tell you something like that. But I can see that it would be a waste of time."

"Well, anyway," Billings went on, "whether you yourself have been around here for the past two thousand years, the Jinn in general must have been. Folklore is full of them—especially Mohammedan—which means that they didn't—and don't—confine their activities to this side of the Veil."

"During the early days of our occupation," Ed-Dimiryat said, "we went through the Veil out of curiosity alone. Then we discovered that there existed in those times a metal that has long since disappeared from the face of the Earth and that could, when combined with two other metals, provide us with a degree of comfort that our own metals couldn't match. We've been making periodic trips through the Veil ever since."

"But how do you *get* through it?"

"It's very simple—for a Jinni. We simply move sideways, and there we are. You must have done something of the sort when you came through on your time-ship."

"No doubt I did," Billings said, "but that doesn't help much. Tell me, why have the people behind the Veil classified you and your friends as Jann, Jinn, Sheytans, Writs, and Marids—and why do they consider some of you to be benevolent, some of you to be bad, and others of you to be downright mean?"

"Because, like all primitive races, they rationalize phenomena they don't understand by interpreting it according to their religious predilections. But to be fair, I suppose we do look a little like devils to them when we approximate the human form. We wouldn't dream of hurting any of them, though."

"Their folklore tells a different story. According to their legends, you made yourselves so obnoxious some sixteen or seven teen hundred years ago that one of them imprisoned thousands of you in brass bottles and threw the bottles into the sea."

Billings had expected a reaction, but he was unprepared for the one he got. Ed-Dimiryat's gasoline-lantern eyes incandescend, its French-horn nose flared, and its graveyard teeth ground together so violently that they threw off sparks. "That's a lie!" it "screamed." "Legends such as those were probably fabricated from the fact that we sleep in brass bottles and are capable of remaining in them for long periods of time. But no mere human could make us get into a bottle, much less confine us in one. Sometimes I wonder whether it pays for a Jinni to be a good Joe," the Marid went on in a sad "voice." "You knock yourself out trying to be nice to savages, and what do they do in return? They invent lies about you, they malign you behind your back, and they denigrate you in their folklore. It's not fair!"

Billings would have laughed if he hadn't been playing reluctant host to a certain frightening thought. If Ed-Dimiryat was telling the truth and the Jinn really did sleep in brass bottles, the chambers Billings had passed on his way down the ramp could be but one thing—bedrooms—while the brass bottles hanging from their ceilings could be but one thing also—beds. Hence, each of those chambers could have contained a sleeping—or a hiding—Jinni, and those same Jinn could have roused themselves—or have come out of hiding—by this time, and have captured Shahrazed.

BUT he'd told her to leave at the sign of danger, hadn't he? Surely, she would have obeyed. After all, she called him "master," and when a woman called you "master," surely you could assume that she considered herself to be your slave and would do as you commanded.

Or could you? From what he had seen of Shahrazad thus far, he couldn't imagine her running away from anything, whether she was ordered to or not. He especially couldn't imagine her running away from a Sheytan or an 'Efrit or a Marid.

THAT silly ring of hers! It made him mad just to think of it. As soon as he got a chance, he'd take it away from her!

But to get back to Ed-Dimiryat. Ed-Dimiryat, however, had apparently had enough of answering questions. At any rate, it had finally gotten around to asking another of its own. "What," it demanded,

fixing Billings With its gasoline-lantern eyes, "is the Veil?"

Billings was bewildered. "Don't *you* know what it is?"

"Naturally—I'm a Jinni. Phenomena such as the Veil are part of a Jinni's domain. But you're not a Jinni, and consequently you can only theorize. I find such theories fascinating, and would like to hear yours."

"Very well," Billings said. "To my mind, the Veil can be but one thing—a trans-dimensional partition of some kind that prevents two realities that exist in the same place at the same time from *being* in the same place at the same time. Twenty-second century physicists have theorized that space-time warps back upon itself in the form of a quadri-dimensional Mobius strip, and they're right. But they mistakenly assume that this Mobius warp of theirs began with the birth of the cosmos and won't complete itself till the cosmos comes to an end. Actually, it can't have begun that long ago because it's already reached its halfway point—the presence of the Veil proves that. To understand what happened, it's necessary to simplify the warp by visualizing it as an ordinary Mobius strip, and by drawing a mental line along its surface. When this is done, it becomes apparent that when the line reaches the halfway point on the strip, it comes opposite its own beginning and that nothing separates the two points except the thickness of the strip. This same situation persists throughout the remainder of the strip, and we have two lines—or, in this case, the past and the present—paralleling each other and separated only by the strip's thickness. But the thickness doesn't exist in reality, because the strip has only one surface, so actually the two lines are one line, and the past and the present are indistinguishable. The same holds true for our quadri-dimensional Mobius warp. Space-time has overlapped itself, and the year 898 A.D. and the year 100,141 A.D. exist simultaneously and coincidentally. To eliminate this paradox, the cosmos has interposed the Veil, and since the Veil represents 99,243 years, we may conclude that the duration of the warp is twice that length of time, or 198,486 years. Now, going by what you've told me and by the chronological references to the Jinn in folklore, I would estimate that the halfway point in the warp was reached sometime during the ninth or eighth century B.C., which means that the warp will have completed itself before the year 200,000 A.D."

"Excellent! Ed-Dimiryat "exclaimed." "I'm happy to inform you that you more than qualify. Now, if your com—"

"Qualify for what?" Billings asked, although he suspected what was coming.

"For service in the computer, of course. I must admit that for a while there I was at a loss to know what to do with you till I discovered during our conversation that despite your unremarkable cranial conformation you have a remarkable mind. Now, if your companion—"

Billings aligned his leer. "All aside from the fact that I'm not afflicted with the 'Great Man' complex," he said, "and as a result can derive no therapeutic value from such service, why should you want to lock me up in one of those cells when you've already got more brain power on your hands than you know what to do with?"

"*One*," said Ed-Dimiryat, apparently unaware that Billings had a bead on it, "I can't let you return through the Veil to the ninth century and thence to your own age, because you might take it into your head to come back with an army of liberation and try to free the Cerebralites; *two*, since I can't let you go, I must provide accommodations for you; and *three*, the computer cells are the only accommodations I have available. Now, if your companion can come up with a Veil theory comparable with yours, she, too, will be given a lovely little room of her own, and—"

BILLINGS had no idea how high on its intellectual yardstick the Marid would place Shahrazad's tale of the ass and the bull, and he had no intentions of waiting to find out. He unloosed the icer straight at the monster's belly—or rather, where its belly would have been if it had had one—and waited for it to rain. There was a sputter and a *pop!*, as of drops of water colliding with a hot skillet, and then a big gout of steam. When the steam cleared away, there stood the Marid, as unaffected as an elephant that had been hit by a pea.

Billings unloosed two more charges. He got two more gouts of steam, but no rain. By this time,

Ed-Dimiryat was laughing—if you could call the sound of rocks bumping around in a cement mixer laughter. "Do you know how this Center and all the others like it were built, Billings?" it asked. "The Jinn took deep breaths, and blew the buildings into being like bubbles. We May be the Salvation Army in one sense, but in another we constitute the most indestructible force the galaxy has ever known—a force comprised of matter you can't even conceive of!" Still laughing, the Marid reached down with a pitchfork hand, plucked the icer out of Billings' sleeve, and popped it into its mouth.

CLEARLY, the day had long since fled when David could kill Goliath with a sling. But David could still run. Diving between the pillar-like legs, Billings headed for the door. Precisely six steps later, he tripped over the hem of his melwatah and went sprawling on his face. Rolling over on his back, he saw a big pitchfork descending towards his face; then he saw the pitchfork pause in midair and heard a familiar golden voice say, "In the name of Suleyman Ibn-Da'ud, I command thee to desist, wretched Marid!"

Billings sat up then. Shah-razed was standing in the doorway. She had removed the big seal ring from her right forefinger and pinned it to her jubbeh, just above her heart. In one hand she carried a ladle of molten lead; in the other, a brass bottle.

6. Suleyman's Seal

CARRYING the ladle and the bottle, Shahrazad advanced into the room. "Get to your feet, master," she said to Billings, "and stand to one side. I must act quickly while the lead is still hot."

"No, no, Shahrazad! Run for your life I'll try to hold the monster off till you make it to the magic carpet and—" Billings saw the change that had come over Ed-Dimiryat then, and his voice trailed away. The Marid was staring at the seal ring as though hypnotized, its cavernous mouth was hanging open, and its eyes were flickering as though they were running out of gasoline.

"Get to your feet and stand to one side, master," Shahrazad repeated. "I beseech you."

This time, Billings obeyed.

Advancing deeper into the room, Shahrazad set the bottle on the floor. Fearlessly, she gazed up into Ed-Dimiryat's awesome face. "Condense thyself, O Marid," she cried, "and get into this bottle that I may stopper it with lead and place thereon the seal of Suleyman Ibn-Da'ud!"

To Billings' consternation, Ed Dimiryat clasped its pitchfork hands together and kneeled on the floor—or kneeled, at least, to the extent that a being without knees can. "No! No!" it begged in ninth-century Arabic. "Spare me, mistress—spare me, please! I will do anything thou commandeth. I will enrich thee forever. I will build thee a palace fit for a queen. I will grant thee three wishes. Spare me—spare me, please!"

But Shahrazad was inexorable. "Get into this bottle, wretched creature. Get into it at once!"

"But it is not my size, O damsel! My own hangs above my head. Let me get into that."

"Thou wilt get into this one," said Shahrazad, "and thou wilt get into it at once. The other is too high for me to reach, and thou knowest it full well, wretched Marid!"

Not once had the Marid moved its gaze from the seal ring, and Billings saw now that the gasoline-lantern eyes had lost most of their luminescence. As he watched, the gigantic torso turned to smoke. The pitchfork hands followed; then the columnar legs; then the cornerstone feet; finally, the dome-like head. At length, the smoke began to whirl, to shrink in upon itself. *Hum-hum-hum*, it went, and the smell of shorted wires filled the room, only it wasn't the smell of shorted wires, Billings realized now, but the smell of alien matter transmuting into ultra-alien matter. Smaller and smaller the cloud became, more and more tapered on either end. Then it rose from the floor, moved above the bottle, and little by little inched down into it. When the last wisp of vapor disappeared, Shahrazad tilted the ladle, filled the neck, and, after removing her ring from the little clasp that held it to her jubbeh, stamped the lead with the seal of Suleyman.

She replaced the ring on her finger and raised triumphant violet eyes to Billings' face. "See, master? I told you there is nothing to fear from the Jinn when one has in one's possession the seal of Suleyman."

By this time Billings had his voice back. Most of it, anyway. "But the tower is probably filled with them, Shahrazad. You can't seal all of them in bottles!"

"I have already done so, master. Some of them were already in bottles, and I needed only to fill the necks with lead and place thereon the seal. But the three 'Efrits, the two Sheytans, and the Jinniyeh who came for me a little while after you left—those I had to put in bottles, and Put them in, I did, and there they will remain forever. 'Long time they ate and drank; but now, after pleasant eating, they themselves have been eaten'."

For a long while Billings just stared at her. At length, he said, "I thought I told you to leave if you were in danger. I thought—"

"But there was no *need* for me to leave, master, because there was no danger. And I—I would not have left even had there been. I—I could not let you die. After you left, the light became darkness before my eyes, and my heart almost burst from my body; but now the darkness is light again, and my heart rejoices. Thy turban has become unwound again," she continued. "Here, let me repair it," and setting the ladle aside, she reached up and made Billings' headpiece presentable again. "There, it is much better now."

BILLINGS reminded himself six times that, appearances to the contrary, standing before him was not an innocent young girl smitten with puppy love, but the resourceful mistress of the Sultan of WayBackWhen. Then, just for good measure, he reminded himself six times that she was also a VIPP, and doubly verboten. But neither remedy was enough to counteract the tumultuous goings on that had recently begun in the region of his heart. He needed something to take his mind off that full, heart-shaped face of hers, something to get the pervasive radiation of those violet eyes out of his system; and fortunately something was available. "Let me see your ring," he said, "so that I can more fully appreciate the power of Suleyman Ibn-Da'ud."

She held out her right hand and he took it in his, an action that did nothing to quiet his heartbeat either. Forcing himself to concentrate on the ring, he discovered that, just as she had said, it was made of both iron and brass. Arabic characters were engraved upon both components—Suleyman's commands to the bad and the good Jinn, no doubt—and in addition there was a line of characters that he took to be the Most Great Name.

FOR the most part, the characters were too minute for him to have deciphered them even if he had been capable of such a task; but he was less interested in the meanings of the words than he was in the geometric figure that they formed. Releasing Shahrazad's hand, he told her to hold the ring up, seal facing outward; then he stepped back several paces. The figure stood out clearly at this distance, and he wondered why he hadn't noticed it before. The two equilateral triangles formed by the tiny characters were the forerunner—possibly a variation—of the six-pointed star that someday would be—and in one sense was already—known as the Star of David. In the present instance, the triangles only partially overlapped, forming the following outline:

Staring at the seal, Billings discovered that it had a slight hypnotic effect even upon him. To Ed-Dimiryat & Co. the effect must have been overwhelming; but just the same, something more had been needed than a pair of equilateral triangles to reduce the Marid and its henchmen to the Alioth XVI equivalent of jelly. And that something, logically enough, was the iron that the ring contained.

Why not? Since entering the tower, he hadn't seen a single object that was made of material other than brass, either the real thing, or the brass-like alloy out of which the tower—and probably the whole Center—was constructed (and which, to hear Ed-Dimiryat talk, the Jinn manufactured in their own bodies). Moreover, Billings himself had no iron on his person (his icer had been made of steelite, which despite its trade name had no more to do with steel than cotton candy did), and it was reasonable to assume that, with the exception of Shahrazad's ring, there was none in the immediate vicinity. Certainly, then, in view of what had happened, it wasn't unreasonable to conclude that to the Jinn the metal was as toxic as endrin was to man.

Here, therefore, in the form of a simple talisman, was the ultimate weapon insofar as the Han were concerned, and it had remained not for the intellectual giants of the future to invent it but—assuming the legend to be true—for a primitive king who had lived in the days when the Jinn had first started coming through the Veil. And in the last analysis, it had remained for the daughter of a ninth-century wezir to duplicate it some seventeen centuries later and to employ it to free the world of a quantity at least of its oppressors, and to make possible the eventual liberation of the human race.

Billings turned and faced the tiers of screens. He wondered what this particular batch of Cerebralites would say when they learned that they owed their forthcoming freedom to a damsel out of a past so distant they had probably forgotten its existence. They weren't about to be freed just yet, though. First, while they still functioned as a single entity, they were going to solve a pair of top-priority problems—to wit, the problem posed by the disconnected Trans-Era coaxial cable and the problem posed by the Veil.

He took Shahrazad over to the computer control-board and helped her climb up on the instrument-panel shelf so she could get a close view of the screens. "Do you know what those are?" he asked.

"Of course, master. They are magic pictures. But they are excessively stupid: each one is almost exactly like the other."

OH well, Billings thought, and climbed up on the shelf beside her. Leaning over the panel, he examined the various instruments. Among them was a device that resembled a small radio telescope but which was clearly nothing of the sort. The longer he looked at it, the more inclined he was to believe that it was a thought-receiver into which questions could be fed telepathically. Since his spoken words had registered in Ed-Dimiryat's mind as thoughts, he saw no reason why he shouldn't give the device a try, so he leaned closer to it, and, employing twenty-second century English, broke the news that the Jinn in charge of the Center had been overcome and that all the rest of the Jinn could be similarly overcome; then he explained his and Shahrazad's predicament, described in detail what had happened to the Trans-Era A.P., and asked how the unit could be repaired. "Answer must be given in twenty-second century English," he added.

Scanning several of the nearer screens, he saw that the faces depicted in them showed no reaction. He was about to try some of the other panel paraphernalia when he noticed a tiny button at the base of the "radio telescope." After depressing it, he repeated everything he had said. This time, the tiny faces showed a definite reaction, but whether the change in their expressions denoted delight or disdain, he could not tell.

PRESENTLY one of the teletypers began to hum, and words and sentences began marching along a luminiscent strip just above it. **TAKE TWO HAIRPINS**, Billings read. **ANY KIND WILL DO. STRAIGHTEN THEM. ATTACH HAIRPIN NO. 1 TO GREEN COAXIAL STRAND. ATTACH HAIRPIN NO. 2 TO BLUE COAXIAL STRAND, CROSS HAIRPINS. ATTACH OTHER END OF HAIRPIN NO. 1 TO YELLOW POWER-PAC NODE. ATTACH OTHER END OF HAIRPIN NO. 2 TO PURPLE POWER-PAC NODE. ACTIVATE UNIT AND PROCEED AS USUAL.**

Sheepishly, he turned to Shahrazad. "Do you have two hairpins, doll?"

"Oh, yes, master—I have many," she said, and pulled two of them out of her night-dark hair and handed them to him.

Pocketing them, he saw that the teletypes was still in operation and that more words and sentences were marching across the luminiscent strip: LIBERATE US LIBERATE US LIBERATE US AND WE WILL MAKE YOU OUR LEADER. TURN OFF THE TOWER LIGHT—THAT IS WHAT HOLDS US IN SUBJUGATION. THE SWITCH IS NEXT TO THE THOUGHT-RELAY UNIT THAT YOU HAVE JUST SPOKEN INTO. LIBERATE US LIBERATE US LIBERATE US!

"One more question," Billings said. "How can my companion and I pass back through the Veil on the time-sled and get back to when and where we were?"

The answer came promptly: BY RETURNING TO THE APPROXIMATE POINT OF YOUR EMERGENCE AND DUPLICATING THE ACTION THAT RESULTED IN YOUR BEING CATAPULTED THROUGH THE VEIL IN THE FIRST PLACE. YOU CAN RE-REPAIR THE TRANS-ERAPOWER-PAC COAXIAL CABLE AND PROCEED TO WHENEVER YOU WISH TO GO. LIBERATE US LIBERATE US LIBERATE US! Flash: WE HAVE ALREADY MADE YOU OUR LEADER!

Just like that, Billings thought a little giddily. A scant second ago he'd been an obscure VIPPnaper; now he was a Leader of the People!

He found the switch and turned out the tower light.

Instantly, the tiny figures leaped from their tiny chairs, detached the tiny electrodes from their tiny heads, and dashed out of their tiny cells.

Mere seconds later, a giant ten feet tall burst into the computer room with innumerable other giants crowding behind him. "You aren't the leader any more!" he "bellowed" in Billings' mind. "I am. I rose to power on the way over, and now I'm going to assassinate you!"

Billings groaned. When it came to opening boxes, Pandora had nothing on him.

Collectively, the Cerebralites had chosen him as their leader, and probably they had done so out of genuine gratitude; but collectively they were one thing, and individually they were quite another. To put it bluntly, they were monsters compared to whom the Jinn Shahrazad had bottled were a troop of boy scouts.

He looked at Shahrazad. It was apparent from the prenatal wideness of her violet eyes that the new leader's declaration had gotten through to her too, and it was equally as apparent from the way she was looking first at the vacant screens and then at the Cerebralites that she had deduced the provenance of the latter.

Billings groaned again. A lot of good Suleyman's seal was going to do her now.

The new leader advanced into the room, the foremost ranks of his People crowding behind him. Each and everyone of them looked as though he or she was capable of stabbing him in the back at the next tick of the political clock. Altogether, it was as ominous a gathering as Billings had ever seen, and proved to him beyond a doubt not only that most of what Ed-Dimiryat had said was true but that the change in the physical stature of mankind that had set in during the twentieth century had continued unabated down through to the 100,141st.

Lord help the Jinn.

Lord help Shahrazad.

"Look," he said, "I'll make a deal with you. Send the girl back through the Veil on the time-sled, and I'll promise not to put up any resistance."

THE statement called for a laugh, and it got one. "Ha!" said the new leader.

"H'm'm," said Shahrazad.

The former looked at the latter. The latter returned the former's gaze with fearless violet eyes. "How wert thou and thy companions in those little rooms?" she asked in that marvelous golden voice of hers. "They will not contain thy hands or thy feet—how then can they contain thy bodies?"

The new leader stared at her. It was obvious that he, like Billings, had never seen anyone quite like her. "Don't you believe we were in them?" he asked.

"I will never believe thou wert in them until I see thee in them."

The Cerebralites had come to a dead stop. It was clear from the blank expressions on their faces that they were confronted with a situation with which, despite their *avant-garde* intellectuality—or perhaps because of it—they were no more qualified to cope than Shahrazad would have been qualified to cope with a twentieth-century traffic jam. "You really don't believe we were in those rooms?" the new leader asked. "You *really* don't?"

"I will never believe thou wert in them until I see thee in them," Shahrazad repeated stoutly.

THERE was a long pause. Then; "Let's show her!" the new leader shouted. "It won't take long!"
SHOW HER SHOW HER SHOW HER, the thoughts of his companions echoed, as the Cerebralites filed from the room. SHOW HER SHOW HER SHOW HER!

Presently the room was empty.

Stunned, Billings turned and looked at the screens. Shahrazad turned and looked at them too. In the lower ones, tiny men and women could be seen entering tiny rooms, sitting down on tiny chairs, and attaching tiny electrodes to their tiny heads. At length, the teletyper came to life, and another parade of words and sentences began on the luminescent strip. THERE, ARE YOU SATISFIED? ARE YOU ARE YOU ARE YOU?

Billings turned the teletyper off.

He turned on the tower light.

He still couldn't believe it.

He faced Shahrazad and opened his mouth to say something. Then he closed it again and climbed down from the shelf. He helped her down beside him. "I guess you know," he said, "that we've got to liberate the Jinn."

"Yes, master. There are some evils in the world that are necessary, and the Jinn are one of them. But first, we will make a covenant with their leader."

The Marid was in no position to argue. Would it see to it that once they were cured the Cerebralites lived full and happy lives? It would. Would it promise never to go through the Veil again and to see to it that none of the other Jinn did either? So help it, it would. Would it, hereafter, pray to the One True God once at dawn, once after midday, once before sunset, once after sunset, and once just before nightfall?

On bended knees . . .

Drifting over the lake in the light of the 100,141st-century moon, Shahrazad said, "Is it thy intention, master, to take me as thy bride upon our arrival at thy palace?"

Miserably, Billings answered, "I can't, Shahrazad."

She stiffened on the seat beside him. "Dost thou not love me?"

"I love you very much."

"Then why wilt thou not take me as thy bride? The poet says, 'Defer not pleasure when it can be had; for fortune often destroyeth our plans'."

"I know, Shahrazad. But I can never take you as my bride."

"Because of King Shahriyar perhaps? I do not care a fig for him."

"It's not that, Shahrazad. It's something else."

He wanted to tell her how it was with VIPPs like herself. How it was forbidden by law to remove them permanently from the day and age that had given them birth. How it was impossible to remove them permanently in any event, or to interfere with the pattern of their lives, because Time, while it ignored Unimportant Past Persons, regarded VIPPs the way a mother hen regards her chicks, and would have a cosmic conniption were one of them to stray from the fold. But how could he tell her? How could he make her understand? "I'm sorry, Shahrazad."

"Thy abode is between my heart and my eyes; and my heart will not relinquish thee, nor my tears conceal my pain."

The sled was above the oasis now. Miserably, Billings punched H-O-V-E-R on the Intra-Era A.P. Then, deliberately, he leaned forward and punched P-R on the Trans-Era A.P. As before, his right ankle

informed him that he had further outraged its already outraged cartilage, and as before, he straightened his right leg to relieve the pain—and in the process kicked the TransEra-power-pac coaxial cable partway from its moorings. There was a jar, a lurch, and a brief period of darkness . . .

7. Dunyzad

THE Story of the Porter and The Ladies of Baghdad, and of The Three Royal Mendicants" had almost come to an end, but Billings still stood spellbound. People still pressed in upon him from behind and on either side, and still he remained unaware of their existence. He knew only the lovely animannikin reclining on the Sultan's couch, and the cadence of his heart.

And oh, yes, the remembered fragrance of nedd, for the fragrance was all around him.

In the background, songs from *Scheherazade*; in the foreground, the beauty of Shahrazad's golden voice . . . "The Khalifeh then sent for Kadis and witnesses, and the first lady and her two sisters who had been transformed into bitches he married to the three mendicants who had related that they were the sons of Kings ; and these he made chamberlains of his court, appointing them all that they required, and allotting them apartments in the palace of Bagdad. The lady who had been beaten he restored to his son El-Emin, giving her a large property, and ordering that the house should be rebuilt in a more handsome style. Lastly, the lady cateress he took as his own wife; he admitted her at once to his own apartment, and, on the following day, he appointed her a separate lodging for herself, with female slaves to wait upon her: he also allotted to her a regular income; and afterwards built for her a palace. . ."

THE golden voice trailed away. Billings could not move. He would return in the night and steal her and spirit her away, and they would climb upon a magic carpet and speed to some wind-blown oasis; and there he would build a palace, and in the palace there would be a couch, and nightly he would lie upon the couch and she would recline beside him, telling him the tales she had told long ago to a real king, perhaps some of those she had told to a lonely time-traveler who had kidnaped her from her lord and master's palace and become marooned with her in the land beyond the Veil; who had fallen in love with her and had had to let her go because of the selfishness of Time.... Time, you have been my undoing, for I have fallen in love with a woman who has lain for centuries dead. Yes, I will steal this lovely damsel, I will steal her again—and this time I will keep her, and be damned to Time. I will not deliver her to Big Pygmalion as I did before, and turn to her and say, "Good by, Shahrazad," and rush off on an assignment that will put six months between us, only to rush to her life-sized replica the moment I return, more in love than I was when I left. Be damned to Time. I spit on Time. If I cannot have her, I will have the doll I made possible for Big Pygmalion to create. Yes, I will steal this charming wonderful doll and spirit it away in the night, and I will cherish it as though it were flesh and blood, and keep it with me forever. . . .

But a doll was a doll, and for all of Big Pygmalion's electronic sorcery could never be anything more, and Billings knew it. Wretchedly, he turned and started to walk away. As he did so, he collided with a brunette who was standing just behind him. Her night-dark hair was upswept in one of the latest coiffures, her face was heart-shaped and full, and her eyes were the hue of violets after a warm spring rain. The black shift she was wearing was having no more success in concealing her curves than a jubbeh and a pair of ankle-length bloomers had had way back in the land of WayBackWhen.

"I have lost my existence among mankind since your absence," she said, "for my heart loveth none but you."

THE fragrance of nedd was all around him, and she had sprinkled willow-flower water in her hair. . . He realized presently that he was kissing her and that she was kissing him, and after a while he became aware that they were walking hand in hand toward the animuseum door. "I am not Shahrazad," she said, this time in twenty-second century English. "I am her sister, whom you stole by mistake. Her sister

Dunyzad. I would have told you before, but I knew it was Shahrazad you had come to bear away, and I wanted it to be me, because I was unhappy in the Sultan's palace, and miserable and afraid. And when I learned why you had really stolen me, I refused to go back. And when the people you work for found out I really wasn't Shahrazad but only an Unimportant Past Person, they let me stay. And they sent me to speed-school, where I learned to speak your language and learned many things about this marvelous kingdom in which you live. And they said that they were glad in a way that I wasn't Shahrazad, because Shahrazad couldn't possibly have had more tales in her head for Big Pygmalion to have drawn on. And they said, 'We won't say a thing about this to Mark, and you can surprise him when he gets back; so when you got back, I did.'

Yes, yes, Billings remembered now. When Shahrazad had gone to live with the Sultan, she had taken her kid sister with her as a sort of "straight-girl," and evenings Dunyzad had sat at the foot of the Sultan's couch, and when it came time for a tale she would say, "By Allah! O my sister, relate to us a story to beguile the waking hour of our night," and Shahrazad would.

They were in the street now, riding a walk-walk to the HOVER lot where Billings' commutabout was parked. Billings signaled to it, and down it came just like a magic carpet, and hovered beside them; and they stepped on board and climbed into the twenty-second century sky. "How much do you love me?" Dunyzad asked, as a bluebird winged past the windshield.

"Excessively," said Billings, Marcus N., and bent and kissed her. . . . And they lived together in the utmost happiness for many wondrous and fruitful years till at last they were visited by the terminator of delights and the separator of companions.