

The Best of Robert Bloch

Robert Bloch

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Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper

I looked at the stage Englishman. He looked at me.

"Sir Guy Hollis?" I asked.

"Indeed. Have I the pleasure of addressing John Carmody, the psychiatrist?"

I nodded. My eyes swept over the figure of my distinguished visitor. Tall, lean, sandy-haired—with the traditional tufted mustache. And the tweeds. I suspected a monocle concealed in a vest pocket, and wondered if he'd left his umbrella in the outer office.

But more than that, I wondered what the devil had impelled Sir Guy Hollis of the British Embassy to seek out a total stranger here in Chicago.

Sir Guy didn't help matters any as he sat down. He cleared his throat, glanced around nervously, tapped his pipe against the side of the desk. Then he opened his mouth.

"Mr. Carmody," he said, "have you ever heard of—Jack the Ripper?"

"The murderer?" I asked.

"Exactly. The greatest monster of them all. Worse than Springheel Jack or Crippen. Jack the Ripper. Red Jack."

"I've heard of him," I said.

"Do you know his history?"

"I don't think we'll get any place swapping old wives' tales about famous crimes of history."

He took a deep breath.

"This is no old wives' tale. It's a matter of life or death."

He was so wrapped up in his obsession he even talked that way. Well—I was willing to listen. We psychiatrists get paid for listening.

"Go ahead," I told him. "Let's have the story."

Sir Guy lit a cigarette and began to talk.

"London, 1888," he began. "Late summer and early fall. That was the time. Out of nowhere came the shadowy figure of Jack the Ripper—a stalking shadow with a knife, prowling through London's East End. Haunting the squalid dives of Whitechapel, Spitalfields. Where he came from no one knew. But he brought death. Death in a knife.

"Six times that knife descended to slash the throats and bodies of London's women. Drabs and alley sluts. August 7th was the date of the first butchery. They found her body lying there with thirty-nine stab wounds. A ghastly murder. On August 31st, another victim. The press became interested. The slum inhabitants were more deeply interested still.

"Who was this unknown killer who prowled in their midst and struck at will in the deserted alleyways of night-town? And what was more important—when would he strike again?"

"September 8th was the date. Scotland Yard assigned special deputies. Rumors ran rampant. The atrocious nature of the slayings was the subject for shocking speculation.

"The killer used a knife—expertly. He cut throats and removed—certain portions—of the bodies after death. He chose victims and settings with a fiendish deliberation. No one saw him or heard him. But watchmen making their gray rounds in the dawn would stumble across the hacked and horrid thing that was the Ripper's handiwork.

"Who was he? What was he? A mad surgeon? A butcher? An insane scientist? A pathological degenerate escaped from an asylum? A deranged nobleman? A member of the London police?"

"Then the poem appeared in the newspapers. The anonymous poem, designed to put a stop to speculations—but which only aroused public interest to a further frenzy. A mocking little stanza:

*I'm not a butcher, I'm not a Yid
Nor yet a foreign skipper,
But I'm your own true loving friend,
Yours truly—Jack the Ripper.*

"And on September 30th, two more throats were slashed open. There was silence, then, in London for a time. Silence, and a nameless fear. When would Red Jack strike again? They waited through October. Every figment of fog concealed his phantom presence. Concealed it well—for nothing was learned of the Ripper's identity, or his purpose. The drabs of London shivered in the raw wind of early November. Shivered, and were thankful for the coming of each morning's sun.

"November 9th. They found her in her room. She lay there very quietly, limbs neatly arranged. And beside her, with equal neatness, were laid her breasts and heart. The Ripper had outdone himself in execution.

"Then, panic. But needless panic. For though press, police, and populace alike waited in sick dread, Jack the Ripper did not strike again.

"Months passed. A year. The immediate interest died, but not the memory. They said Jack had skipped to America. That he had committed suicide. They said—and they wrote. They've written ever since. Theories, hypotheses, arguments, treatises. But to this day no one knows who Jack the Ripper was. Or why he killed. Or why he stopped killing."

Sir Guy was silent. Obviously he expected some comment from me.

"You tell the story well," I remarked. "Though with a slight emotional bias."

"I suppose you want to know why I'm interested?" he snapped.

"Yes. That's exactly what I'd like to know."

"Because," said Sir Guy Hollis, "I am on the trail of Jack the Ripper now. I think he's here—in Chicago!"

"Say that again."

"Jack the Ripper is alive, in Chicago, and I'm out to find him."

He wasn't smiling. It wasn't a joke.

"See here," I said. "What was the date of these murders?"

"August to November, 1888."

"1888? But if Jack the Ripper was an able-bodied man in 1888, he'd surely be dead today! Why look, man—if he were merely born in that year, he'd be fifty-seven years old today!"

"Would he?" smiled Sir Guy Hollis. "Or should I say, 'Would she?' Because Jack the Ripper may have been a woman. Or any number of things."

"Sir Guy," I said. "You came to the right person when you looked me up. You definitely need the services of a psychiatrist."

"Perhaps. Tell me, Mr. Carmody, do you think I'm crazy?"

I looked at him and shrugged. But I had to give him a truthful answer.

"Frankly—no."

"Then you might listen to the reasons I believe Jack the Ripper is alive today."

"I might."

"I've studied these cases for thirty years. Been over the actual ground. Talked to officials. Talked to friends and acquaintances of the poor drabs who were killed. Visited with men and women in the neighborhood. Collected an entire library of material touching on Jack the Ripper. Studied all the wild

theories or crazy notions.

"I learned a little. Not much, but a little. I won't bore you with my conclusions. But there was another branch of inquiry that yielded more fruitful return. I have studied unsolved crimes. Murders.

"I could show you clippings from the papers of half the world's greatest cities. San Francisco. Shanghai. Calcutta. Omsk. Paris. Berlin. Pretoria. Cairo. Milan. Adelaide.

"The trail is there, the pattern. Unsolved crimes. Slashed throats of women. With the peculiar disfigurements and removals. Yes, I've followed a trail of blood. From New York westward across the continent. Then to the Pacific. From there to Africa. During the World War of 1914-18 it was Europe. After that, South America. And since 1930, the United States again. Eighty-seven such murders—and to the trained criminologist, all bear the stigma of the Ripper's handiwork.

"Recently there were the so-called Cleveland torso slayings. Remember? A shocking series. And finally, two recent deaths in Chicago. Within the past six months. One out on South Dearborn. The other somewhere up on Halsted. Same type of crime, same technique. I tell you, there are unmistakable indications in all these affairs—indications of the work of Jack the Ripper!"

"A very tight theory," I said. "I'll not question your evidence at all, or the deductions you draw. You're the criminologist, and I'll take your word for it. Just one thing remains to be explained. A minor point, perhaps, but worth mentioning."

"And what is that?" asked Sir Guy.

"Just how could a man of, let us say, eight-five years commit these crimes? For if Jack the Ripper was around thirty in 1888 and lived, he'd be eighty-five today."

"*Suppose he didn't get any older?*" whispered Sir Guy.

"What's that?"

"Suppose Jack the Ripper didn't grow old? Suppose he is still a young man today?"

"It's a crazy theory, I grant you," he said. "All the theories about the Ripper are crazy. The idea that he was a doctor. Or a maniac. Or a woman. The reasons advanced for such beliefs are flimsy enough. There's nothing to go by. So why should my notion be any worse?"

"Because people grow older," I reasoned with him. "Doctors, maniacs, and women alike."

"What about—*sorcerers?*"

"Sorcerers?"

"Necromancers. Wizards. Practicers of Black Magic?"

"What's the point?"

"I studied," said Sir Guy. "I studied everything. After a while I began to study the dates of the murders. The pattern those dates formed. The rhythm. The solar, lunar, stellar rhythm. The sidereal aspect. The astrological significance.

"Suppose Jack the Ripper didn't murder for murder's sake alone? Suppose he wanted to make—a sacrifice?"

"What kind of a sacrifice?"

Sir Guy shrugged. "It is said that if you offer blood to the dark gods they grant boons. Yes, if a blood offering is made at the proper time—when the moon and the stars are right— and with the proper ceremonies—they grant boons. Boons of youth. Eternal youth."

"But that's nonsense!"

"No. That's—Jack the Ripper."

I stood up. "A most interesting theory," I told him. "But why do you come here and tell it to me? I'm not an authority on witchcraft. I'm not a police official or criminologist. I'm a practicing psychiatrist. What's the connection?"

Sir Guy smiled.

"You are interested, then?"

"Well, yes. There must be some point."

"There is. But I wished to be assured of your interest first. Now I can tell you my plan."

"And just what is that plan?"

Sir Guy gave me a long look.

"John Carmody," he said, "you and I are going to capture Jack the Ripper."

2

That's the way it happened. I've given the gist of that first interview in all its intricate and somewhat boring detail, because I think it's important. It helps to throw some light on Sir Guy's character and attitude. And in view of what happened after that—

But I'm coming to those matters.

Sir Guy's thought was simple. It wasn't even a thought. Just a hunch.

"You know the people here," he told me. "I've inquired. That's why I came to you as the ideal man for my purpose. You number amongst your acquaintances many writers, painters, poets. The so-called intelligentsia. The lunatic fringe from the near north side.

"For certain reasons—never mind what they are—my clues lead me to infer that Jack the Ripper is a member of that element. He chooses to pose as an eccentric. I've a feeling that with you to take me around and introduce me to your set, I might hit upon the right person."

"It's all right with me," I said. "But just how are you going to look for him? As you say, he might be anybody, anywhere. And you have no idea what he looks like. He might be young or old. Jack the Ripper—a Jack of all trades? Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, doctor, lawyer—how will you know?"

"We shall see." Sir Guy sighed heavily. "But I must find him. At once."

"Why the hurry?"

Sir Guy sighed again. "Because in two days he will kill again."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure as the stars. I've plotted this chart, you see. All of the murders correspond to certain astrological rhythm patterns. If, as I suspect, he makes a blood sacrifice to renew his youth, he must murder within two days. Notice the pattern of his first crimes in London. August 7th. Then August 31st. September 8th. September 30th. November 9th. Intervals of 24 days, 9 days, 22 days—he killed two this time—and then 40 days. Of course there were crimes in between. There had to be. But they weren't discovered and pinned on him.

"At any rate, I've worked out a pattern for him, based on all my data. And I say that within the next two days he kills. So I must seek him out, somehow, before then."

"And I'm still asking you what you want me to do."

"Take me out," said Sir Guy. "Introduce me to your friends. Take me to parties."

"But where do I begin? As far as I know, my artistic friends, despite their eccentricities, are all normal people."

"So is the Ripper. Perfectly normal. Except on certain nights." Again that faraway look in Sir Guy's eyes. "Then he becomes an ageless pathological monster, crouching to kill."

"All right," I said. "All right. I'll take you."

We made our plans. And that evening I took him over to Lester Baston's studio.

As we ascended to the penthouse roof in the elevator I took the opportunity to warn Sir Guy.

"Baston's a real screwball," I cautioned him. "So are his guests. Be prepared for anything and everything."

"I am." Sir Guy Hollis was perfectly serious. He put his hand in his trousers pocket and pulled out a gun.

"What the—" I began.

"If I see him I'll be ready," Sir Guy said. He didn't smile, either.

"But you can't go running around at a party with a loaded revolver in your pocket, man!"

"Don't worry, I won't behave foolishly."

I wondered. Sir Guy Hollis was not, to my way of thinking, a normal man.

We stepped out of the elevator, went toward Baston's apartment door.

"By the way," I murmured, "just how do you wish to be introduced? Shall I tell them who you are and what you are looking for?"

"I don't care. Perhaps it would be best to be frank."

"But don't you think that the Ripper—if by some miracle he or she is present—will immediately get the wind up and take cover?"

"I think the shock of the announcement that I am hunting the Ripper would provoke some kind of betraying gesture on his part," said Sir Guy.

"It's a fine theory. But I warn you, you're going to be in for a lot of ribbing. This is a wild bunch."

Sir Guy smiled.

"I'm ready," he announced. "I have a little plan of my own. Don't be shocked at anything I do."

I nodded and knocked on the door.

Baston opened it and poured out into the hall. His eyes were as red as the maraschino cherries in his Manhattan. He teetered back and forth regarding us very gravely. He squinted at my square-cut homburg hat and Sir Guy's mustache.

"Aha," he intoned. "The Walrus and the Carpenter."

I introduced Sir Guy.

"Welcome," said Baston, gesturing us inside with over-elaborate courtesy. He stumbled after us into the garish parlor.

I stared at the crowd that moved restlessly through the fog of cigarette smoke.

It was the shank of the evening for this mob. Every hand held a drink. Every face held a slightly hectic flush. Over in me corner the piano was going full blast, but the imperious strains of the *March from The Love for Three Oranges* couldn't drown out the profanity from the crap-game in the other corner.

Prokofieff had no chance against African polo, and one set of ivories rattled louder than the other.

Sir Guy got a monocle-full right away. He saw LaVerne Gonnister, the poetess, hit Hymie Kralik in the eye. He saw Hymie sit down on the floor and cry until Dick Pool accidentally stepped on his stomach as he walked through to the lining room for a drink.

He heard Nadia Vilinoff, the commercial artist, tell Johnny Odcutt that she thought his tattooing was in dreadful taste, and he saw Barclay Melton crawl under the dining room table with Johnny Odcutt's wife.

His zoological observations might have continued indefinitely if Lester Baston hadn't stepped to the center of the room and called for silence by dropping a vase on the floor.

"We have distinguished visitors in our midst," bawled Lester, waving his empty glass in our direction. "None other than the Walrus and the Carpenter. The Walrus is Sir Guy Hollis, a something-or-other from the British Embassy. The Carpenter, as you all know, is our own John Carmody, the prominent dispenser of libido liniment."

He turned and grabbed Sir Guy by the arm, dragging him to the middle of the carpet. For a moment I thought Hollis might object, but a quick wink reassured me. He was prepared for this.

"It is our custom, Sir Guy," said Baston, loudly, "to subject our new friends to a little cross-examination. Just a little formality at these very formal gatherings, you understand. Are you prepared to answer questions?"

Sir Guy nodded and grinned.

"Very well," Baston muttered. "Friends—I give you this bundle from Britain. Your witness."

Then the ribbing started. I meant to listen, but at that moment Lydia Dare saw me and dragged me off into the vestibule for one of those Darling-I-waited-for-your-call-all-day routines.

By the time I got rid of her and went back, the impromptu quiz session was in full swing. From the attitude of the crowd, I gathered that Sir Guy was doing all right for himself.

Then Baston himself interjected a question that upset the apple-cart.

"And what, may I ask, brings you to our midst tonight? What is your mission, oh Walrus?"

"I'm looking for Jack the Ripper."

Nobody laughed.

Perhaps it struck them all the way it did me. I glanced at my neighbors and began to *wonder*.

LaVerne Gonnister. Hymie Kralik. Harmless. Dick Pool. Nadia Vilinoff. Johnny Odcutt and his wife. Barclay Melton. Lydia Dare. All harmless.

But what a forced smile on Dick Pool's face! And that sly, self-conscious smirk that Barclay Melton wore!

Oh, it was absurd, I grant you. But for the first time I saw these people in a new light. I wondered about their lives—their secret lives beyond the scenes of parties.

How many of them were playing a part, concealing something?

Who here would worship Hecate and grant that horrid goddess the dark boon of blood?

Even Lester Baston might be masquerading.

The mood was upon us all, for a moment. I saw questions flicker in the circle of eyes around the room.

Sir Guy stood there, and I could swear he was fully conscious of the situation he'd created, and enjoyed it.

I wondered idly just what was *really* wrong with him. Why he had this odd fixation concerning Jack the Ripper. Maybe he was hiding secrets, too. . . .

Baston, as usual, broke the mood. He burlesqued it.

"The Walrus isn't kidding, friends," he said. He slapped Sir Guy on the back and put his arm around him as he orated. "Our English cousin is really on the trail of the fabulous Jack the Ripper. You all remember Jack the Ripper, I presume? Quite a cut-up in the old days, as I recall. Really had some ripping good times when he went out on a tear.

"The Walrus has some idea that the Ripper is still alive, probably prowling around Chicago with a Boy Scout knife. In fact—" Baston paused impressively and shot it out in a rasping stage whisper—"in fact, he has reason to believe that Jack the Ripper might even be right here in our midst tonight."

There was the expected reaction of giggles and grins. Baston eyed Lydia Dare reprovingly. "You girls needn't laugh," he smirked. "Jack the Ripper might be a woman, too, you know. Sort of a Jill the Ripper."

"You mean you actually suspect one of us?" shrieked LaVerne Gonnister, simpering up to Sir Guy.

"But that Jack the Ripper person disappeared ages ago, didn't he? In 1888?"

"Aha!" interrupted Baston. "How do you know so much about it, young lady? Sounds suspicious! Watch her, Sir Guy—she may not be as young as she appears. These lady poets have dark pasts."

The tension was gone, the mood was shattered, and the whole thing was beginning to degenerate into a trivial party joke. The man who had played the *March* was eyeing the piano with a *scherzo* gleam in his eye that augured ill for Prokofieff. Lydia Dare was glancing at the kitchen, waiting to make a break for another drink.

Then Baston caught it.

"Guess what?" he yelled. "The Walrus has a gun."

His embracing arm had slipped and encountered the hard outline of the gun in Sir Guy's pocket. He snatched it out before Hollis had the opportunity to protest.

I stared hard at Sir Guy, wondering if this thing had carried far enough. But he flicked a wink my way and I remembered he had told me not to be alarmed.

So I waited as Baston broached a drunken inspiration.

"Let's play fair with our friend the Walrus," he cried. "He came all the way from England to our party on this mission. If none of you is willing to confess, I suggest we give him a chance to find out—the hard way."

"What's up?" asked Johnny Odcutt.

"I'll turn out the lights for one minute. Sir Guy can stand here with his gun. If anyone in this room is the Ripper he can either run for it or take the opportunity to—well, eradicate his pursuer. Fair enough?"

It was even sillier than it sounds, but it caught the popular fancy. Sir Guy's protests went unheard in the ensuing babble. And before I could stride over and put in my two cents' worth, Lester Baston had reached the light switch.

"Don't anybody move," he announced, with fake solemnity. "For one minute we will remain in darkness—perhaps at the mercy of a killer. At the end of that time, I'll turn up the lights again and look for bodies. Choose your partners, ladies and gentlemen."

The lights went out.

Somebody giggled.

I heard footsteps in the darkness. Mutterings.

A hand brushed my face.

The watch on my wrist ticked violently. But even louder, rising above it, I heard another thumping. The beating of my heart.

Absurd. Standing in the dark with a group of tipsy fools. And yet there was real terror lurking here, rustling through the velvet blackness.

Jack the Ripper prowled in darkness like this. And Jack the Ripper had a knife. Jack the Ripper had a madman's brain and a madman's purpose.

But Jack the Ripper was dead, dead and dust these many years—by every human law.

Only there are no human laws when you feel yourself in the darkness, when the darkness hides and protects and the outer mask slips off your face and you feel something welling up within you, a brooding shapeless purpose that is brother to the blackness.

Sir Guy Hollis shrieked.

There was a grisly thud.

Baston put the lights on.

Everybody screamed.

Sir Guy Hollis lay sprawled on the floor in the center of the room. The gun was still clutched in his hand.

I glanced at the faces, marveling at the variety of expressions human beings can assume when confronting horror.

All the faces were present in the circle. Nobody had fled. And yet Sir Guy Hollis lay there.

LaVerne Gonnister was wailing and hiding her face.

"All right."

Sir Guy rolled over and jumped to his feet. He was smiling.

"Just an experiment, eh? If Jack the Ripper *were* among those present, and thought I had been murdered, he would have betrayed himself in some way when the lights went on and he saw me lying there.

"I am convinced of your individual and collective innocence. Just a gentle spoof, my friends."

Hollis stared at the goggling Baston and the rest of them crowding in behind him.

"Shall we leave, John?" he called to me. "It's getting late, I think."

Turning, he headed for the closet. I followed him. Nobody said a word.

It was a pretty dull party after that.

3

I met Sir Guy the following evening as we agreed, on the corner of 29th and South Halsted.

After what had happened the night before, I was prepared for almost anything. But Sir Guy seemed matter-of-fact enough as he stood huddled against a grimy doorway and waited for me to appear.

"Boo!" I said, jumping out suddenly. He smiled. Only the betraying gesture of his left hand indicated that he'd instinctively reached for his gun when I startled him.

"All ready for our wild-goose chase?" I asked.

"Yes." He nodded. "I'm glad that you agreed to meet me without asking questions," he told me. "It

shows you trust my judgment." He took my arm and edged me along the street slowly.

"It's foggy tonight, John," said Sir Guy Hollis. "Like London."

I nodded.

"Cold, too, for November."

I nodded again and half-shivered my agreement.

"Curious," mused Sir Guy. "London fog and November. The place and the time of the Ripper murders."

I grinned through darkness. "Let me remind you, Sir Guy, that this isn't London, but Chicago. And it isn't November, 1888. It's over fifty years later."

Sir Guy returned my grin, but without mirth. "I'm not so sure, at that," he murmured. "Look about you. Those tangled alleys and twisted streets. They're like the East End. Mitre Square. And surely they are as ancient as fifty years, at least."

"You're in the black neighborhood of South Clark Street," I said shortly. "And why you dragged me down here I still don't know."

"It's a hunch," Sir Guy admitted. "Just a hunch on my part, John. I want to wander around down here. There's the same geographical conformation in these streets as in those courts where the Ripper roamed and slew. That's where we'll find him, John. Not in the bright lights, but down here in the darkness. The darkness where he waits and crouches."

"Isn't that why you brought a gun?" I asked. I was unable to keep a trace of sarcastic nervousness from my voice. All this talk, this incessant obsession with Jack the Ripper, got on my nerves more than I cared to admit.

"We may need a gun," said Sir Guy, gravely. "After all, tonight is the appointed night."

I sighed. We wandered on through the foggy, deserted streets. Here and there a dim light burned above a gin-mill doorway. Otherwise, all was darkness and shadow. Deep, gaping alleyways loomed as we proceeded down a slanting side-street.

We crawled through that fog, alone and silent, like two tiny maggots floundering within a shroud.

"Can't you see there's not a soul around these streets?" I said.

"He's bound to come," said Sir Guy. "He'll be drawn here. This is what I've been looking for. A *genius loci*. An evil spot that attracts evil. Always, when he slays, it's in the slums.

"You see, that must be one of his weaknesses. He has a fascination for squalor. Besides, the women he needs for sacrifice are more easily found in the dives and stewpots of a great city."

"Well, let's go into one of the dives or stewpots," I suggested. "I'm cold. Need a drink. This damned fog gets into your bones. You Britishers can stand it, but I like warmth and dry heat."

We emerged from our side street and stood upon the threshold of an alley.

Through the white clouds of mist ahead, I discerned a dim blue light, a naked bulb dangling from a beer sign above an alley tavern.

"Let's take a chance," I said. "I'm beginning to shiver."

"Lead the way," said Sir Guy. I led him down the alley passage. We halted before the door of the dive.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked.

"Just looking in," I told him. "This is a rough neighborhood, Sir Guy. Never know what you're liable to run into. And I'd prefer we didn't get into the wrong company. Some of these places resent white customers."

"Good idea, John."

I finished my inspection through the doorway. "Looks deserted," I murmured. "Let's try it."

We entered a dingy bar. A feeble light flickered above the counter and railing, but failed to penetrate the further gloom of the back booths.

A gigantic black lolled across the bar. He scarcely stirred as we came in, but his eyes flicked open quite suddenly and I knew he noted our presence and was judging us.

"Evening," I said.

He took his time before replying. Still sizing us up. Then, he grinned.

"Evening, gents. What's your pleasure?"

"Gin," I said. "Two gins. It's a cold night."

"That's right, gents."

He poured, I paid, and took the glasses over to one of the booths. We wasted no time in emptying them.

I went over to the bar and got the bottle. Sir Guy and I poured ourselves another drink. The big man went back into his doze, with one wary eye half-open against any sudden activity.

The clock over the bar ticked on. The wind was rising outside, tearing the shroud of fog to ragged shreds. Sir Guy and I sat in the warm booth and drank our gin.

He began to talk, and the shadows crept up about us to listen.

He rambled a great deal. He went over everything he'd said in the office when I met him, just as though I hadn't heard it before. The poor devils with obsessions are like that.

I listened very patiently. I poured Sir Guy another drink. And another.

But the liquor only made him more talkative. How he did run on! About ritual killings and prolonging the life unnaturally—the whole fantastic tale came out again. And of course, he maintained his unyielding conviction that the Ripper was abroad tonight.

I suppose I was guilty of goading him.

"Very well," I said, unable to keep the impatience from my voice. "Let us say that your theory is correct—even though we must overlook every natural law and swallow a lot of superstition to give it any

credence.

"But let us say, for the sake of argument, that you are right. Jack the Ripper was a man who discovered how to prolong his own life through making human sacrifices. He did travel around the world as you believe. He is in Chicago now and he is planning to kill. In other words, let us suppose that everything you claim is gospel truth. So what?"

"What do you mean, 'so what'?" said Sir Guy.

"I mean—so what?" I answered. "If all this is true, it still doesn't prove that by sitting down in a dingy gin-mill on the South Side, Jack the Ripper is going to walk in here and let you kill him, or turn him over to the police. And come to think of it, I don't even know now just what you intend to do with him if you ever did find him."

Sir Guy gulped his gin. "I'd capture the bloody swine," he said. "Capture him and turn him over to the government, together with all the papers and documentary evidence I've collected against him over a period of many years. I've spent a fortune investigating this affair, I tell you, a fortune! His capture will mean the solution of hundreds of unsolved crimes, of that I am convinced."

In vino veritas. Or was all this babbling the result of too much gin? It didn't matter. Sir Guy Hollis had another. I sat there and wondered what to do with him. The man was rapidly working up to a climax of hysterical drunkenness.

"That's enough," I said, putting out my hand as Sir Guy reached for the half-emptied bottle again. "Let's call a cab and get out of here. It's getting late and it doesn't look as though your elusive friend is going to put in his appearance. Tomorrow, if I were you, I'd plan to turn all those papers and documents over to the F.B.I. If you're so convinced of the truth of your theory, they are competent to make a very thorough investigation, and find your man."

"No." Sir Guy was drunkenly obstinate. "No cab."

"But let's get out of here anyway," I said, glancing at my watch. "It's past midnight."

He sighed, shrugged, and rose unsteadily. As he started for the door, he tugged the gun free from his pocket.

"Here, give me that!" I whispered. "You can't walk around the street brandishing that thing."

I took the gun and slipped it inside my coat. Then I got hold of his right arm and steered him out of the door. The black man didn't look up as we departed.

We stood shivering in the alleyway. The fog had increased. I couldn't see either end of the alley from where we stood. It was cold. Damp. Dark. Fog or no fog, a little wind was whispering secrets to the shadows at our backs.

Sir Guy, despite his incapacity, still stared apprehensively at the alley, as though he expected to see a figure approaching.

Disgust got the better of me.

"Childish foolishness," I snorted. "Jack the Ripper, indeed! I call this carrying a hobby too far."

"Hobby?" He faced me. Through the fog I could see his distorted face. "You call this a hobby?"

"Well, what is it?" I grumbled. "Just why else are you so interested in tracking down this mythical killer?"

My arm held his. But his stare held me.

"In London," he whispered. "In 1888 . . . one of those nameless drabs the Ripper slew . . . was my mother."

"What?"

"Later I was recognized by my father, and legitimized. We swore to give our lives to find the Ripper. My father was the first to search. He died in Hollywood in 1926—on the trail of the Ripper. They said he was stabbed by an unknown assailant in a brawl. But I knew who that assailant was.

"So I've taken up his work, do you see, John? I've carried on. And I, will carry on until I do find him and kill him with my own hands."

I believed him then. He wouldn't give up. He wasn't just a drunken babbler anymore. He was as fanatical, as determined, as relentless as the Ripper himself.

Tomorrow he'd be sober. He'd continue the search. Perhaps he'd turn those papers over to the F.B.I. Sooner or later, with such persistence—and with his motive—he'd be successful. I'd always known he had a motive.

"Let's go," I said, steering him down the alley.

"Wait a minute," said Sir Guy. "Give me back my gun." He lurched a little. "I'd feel better with the gun on me."

He pressed me into the dark shadows of a little recess.

I tried to shrug him off, but he was insistent.

"Let me carry the gun, now, John," he mumbled.

"All right," I said.

I reached into my coat, brought my hand out.

"But that's not a gun," he protested. "That's a knife."

"I know."

I bore down on him swiftly.

"John!" he screamed.

"Never mind the 'John,'" I whispered, raising the knife. "Just call me . . . Jack."

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It always starts the same way.

First, there's the feeling.

Have you ever felt the tread of little feet walking across the top of your skull? Footsteps on your skull, back and forth, back and forth?

It starts like that.

You can't see who does the walking. After all, it's on top of your head. If you're clever, you wait for a chance and suddenly brush a hand through your hair. But you can't catch the walker that way. He knows. Even if you clamp both hands flat to your head, he manages to wriggle through, somehow. Or maybe he jumps.

He is terribly swift. And you can't ignore him. If you don't pay any attention to the footsteps, he tries the next step. He wriggles down the back of your neck and whispers in your ear.

You can feel his body, so tiny and cold, pressed tightly against the base of your brain. There must be something numbing in his claws, because they don't hurt—although later, you'll find little scratches on your neck that bleed and bleed. But at the time, all you know is that something tiny and cold is pressing there. Pressing, and whispering.

That's when you try to fight him. You try not to hear what he says. Because when you listen, you're lost. You have to obey him then.

Oh, he's wicked and wise!

He knows how to frighten and threaten if you dare to resist. But I seldom try, anymore. It's better for me if I do listen and then obey.

As long as I'm willing to listen, things don't seem so bad. Because he can be soothing and persuasive, too. Tempting. The things he has promised me, in that little silken whisper!

He keeps his promises, too.

Folks think I'm poor because I never have any money and live in that old shack on the edge of the swamp. But he has given me riches.

After I do what he wants, he takes me away—out of myself—for days. There are other places besides this world, you know; places where I am king.

People laugh at me and say I have no friends; the girls in town used to call me "scarecrow." Yet sometimes—after I've done his bidding—he brings queens to share my bed.

Just dreams? I don't think so. It's the other life that's just a dream; the life in the shack at the edge of the swamp. That part doesn't seem real anymore.

Not even the killing . . .

Yes, I kill people.

That's what Enoch wants, you know.

That's what he whispers about. He asks me to kill people, for him.

I don't like that. I used to fight against it—I told you that before, didn't I?—but I can't anymore.

He wants me to kill people for him. Enoch. The thing that lives on the top of my head. I can't see him. I can't catch him. I can only feel him, and hear him, and obey him.

Sometimes he leaves me alone for days. Then, suddenly, I feel him there, scratching away at the roof of my brain. I hear his whisper ever so plainly, and he'll be telling me about someone who is coming through the swamp.

I don't know how he knows about them. He couldn't have seen them, yet he describes them perfectly.

"There's a tramp walking down, the Aylesworthy Road. A short, fat man, with a bald head. His name is Mike. He's wearing a brown sweater and blue overalls. He's going to turn into the swamp in about ten minutes when the sun goes down. He'll stop under the big tree next to the dump.

"Better hide behind that tree. Wait until he starts to look for firewood. Then you know what to do. Get the hatchet, now. Hurry."

Sometimes I ask Enoch what he will give me. Usually, I just trust him. I know I'm going to have to do it, anyway. So I might as well go ahead at once. Enoch is never wrong about things, and he keeps me out of trouble.

That is, he always did—until the last time.

One night I was sitting in the shack eating supper when he told me about this girl.

"She's coming to visit you," he whispered. "A beautiful girl, all in black. She has a wonderful quality to her head—fine bones. Fine."

At first I thought he was telling me about one of my rewards. But Enoch was talking about a real person.

"She will come to the door and ask you to help her fix her car. She has taken the side road, planning to go into town by a shorter route. Now the car is well into the swamp, and one of the tires needs changing."

It sounded funny, hearing Enoch talk about things like automobile tires. But he knows about them. Enoch knows everything.

"You will go out to help her when she asks you. Don't take anything. She has a wrench in the car. Use that."

This time I tried to fight him. I kept whimpering, "I won't do it, I won't do it."

He just laughed. And then he told me what he'd do if I refused. He told me over and over again.

"Better that I do it to her and not to you," Enoch reminded me. "Or would you rather I—"

"No!" I said. "No. I'll do it."

"After all," Enoch whispered, "I can't help it. I must be served every so often. To keep me alive. To keep me strong. So I can serve you. So I can give you things. That is why you have to obey me. If not, I'll just stay right here and—"

"No," I said. "I'll do it."

And I did it.

She knocked on my door just a few minutes later, and it was just as Enoch had whispered it. She was a pretty girl—with blond hair. I like blond hair. I was glad, when I went out into the swamp with her, that I didn't have to harm her hair. I hit her behind the neck with the wrench.

Enoch told me what to do, step by step.

After I used the hatchet, I put the body in the quicksand. Enoch was with me, and he cautioned me about heelmarks. I got rid of them.

I was worried about the car, but he showed me how to use the end of a rotten log and pitch it over. I wasn't sure it would sink, too, but it did. And much faster than I would have believed.

It was a relief to see the car go. I threw the wrench in after it. Then Enoch told me to go home, and I did, and at once I felt the dreamy feeling stealing over me.

Enoch had promised me something extra special for this one, and I sank down into sleep right away. I could barely feel the pressure leave my head as Enoch left me, scampering off back into the swamp for his reward.

I don't know how long I slept. It must have been a long time. All I remember is that I finally started to wake up, knowing somehow that Enoch was back with me again, and feeling that something was wrong.

Then I woke up all the way, because I heard the banging on my door.

I waited a moment. I waited for Enoch to whisper to me, tell me what I should do.

But Enoch was asleep now. He always sleeps—afterwards. Nothing wakes him for days on end; and during that time I am free. Usually I enjoy such freedom, but not now. I needed his help.

The pounding on my door grew louder, and I couldn't wait any longer.

I got up and answered.

Old Sheriff Shelby came through the doorway.

"Come on, Seth," he said. "I'm taking you up to the jail."

I didn't say anything. His beady little black eyes were peeping everywhere inside my shack. When he looked at me, I wanted to hide, I felt so scared.

He couldn't see Enoch, of course. Nobody can. But Enoch was there; I felt him resting very lightly on top of my skull, burrowed down under a blanket of hair, clinging to my curls and sleeping as peaceful as a baby.

"Emily Robbins' folks said she was planning on cutting through the swamp," the Sheriff told me. "We followed the tire tracks up to the old quicksand."

Enoch had forgotten about the tracks. So what could I say? Besides.

"Anything you say can be used agin you," said Sheriff Shelby. "Come on, Seth."

I went with him. There was nothing else for me to do. I went with him into town, and all the loafers were out trying to rush the car. There were women in the crowd too. They kept yelling for the men to "get" me.

But Sheriff Shelby held them off, and at last I was tucked away safe and sound in the back of the jailhouse. He locked me up in the middle cell. The two cells on each side of mine were vacant, so I was all alone. All alone except for Enoch, and he slept through everything.

It was still pretty early in the morning, and Sheriff Shelby went out again with some other men. I guess he was going to try and get the body out of the quicksand, if he could. He didn't try to ask any questions, and I wondered about that.

Charley Potter, now, he was different. He wanted to know everything. Sheriff Shelby had left him in charge of the jail while he was away. He brought me my breakfast after a while, and hung around asking questions.

I just kept still. I knew better than to talk to a fool like Charley Potter. He thought I was crazy. Just like the mob outside. Most people in that town thought I was crazy—because of my mother, I suppose, and because of the way I lived all alone out in the swamp.

What could I say to Charley Potter? If I told him about Enoch he'd never believe me anyway.

So I didn't talk.

I listened.

Then Charley Potter told me about the search for Emily Robbins, and about how Sheriff Shelby got to wondering over some other disappearances a while back. He said that there would be a big trial, and the District Attorney was coming down from the County Seat. And he'd heard they were sending out a doctor to see me right away.

Sure enough, just as I finished breakfast, the doctor came. Charley Potter saw him drive up and let him in. He had to work fast to keep some of the oafs from breaking in with him. They wanted to lynch me, I suppose. But the doctor came in all right—a little man with one of those funny beards on his chin—and he made Charley Potter go up front into the office while he sat down outside the cell and talked to me.

His name was Dr. Silversmith.

Now up to this tune, I wasn't really feeling anything. It had all happened so fast I didn't get a chance to think.

It was like part of a dream; the Sheriff and the mob and all this talk about a trial and lynching and the body in the swamp.

But somehow the sight of this Dr. Silversmith changed things.

He was real, all right. You could tell he was a doctor who wanted to send me to the Institution after they found my mother.

That was one of the first things Dr. Silversmith asked me—what had happened to my mother?

He seemed to know quite a lot about me, and that made it easier for me to talk.

Pretty soon I found myself telling him all sorts of things. How my mother and I lived in the shack. How she made the philters and sold them. About the big pot and the way we gathered herbs at night. About the nights when she went off alone and I would hear the queer noises from far away.

I didn't want to say much more, but he knew, anyway. He knew they had called her a witch. He even knew the way she died—when Santo Dinorelli came to our door that evening and stabbed her because she had made the potion for his daughter who ran away with that trapper. He knew about me living in the swamp alone after that, too.

But he didn't know about Enoch.

Enoch, up on top of my head all the time, still sleeping, not knowing or caring what was happening to me . . .

Somehow, I was talking to Dr. Silversmith about Enoch. I wanted to explain that it wasn't really I who had killed this girl. So I had to mention Enoch, and how my mother had made the bargain in the woods. She hadn't let me come with her—I was only twelve—but she took some of my blood in a little bottle.

Then, when she came back, Enoch was with her. And he was to be mine forever, she said, and look after me and help me in all ways.

I told this very carefully and explained why it was I couldn't help myself when I did anything now, because ever since my mother died Enoch had guided me.

Yes, all these years Enoch had protected me, just as my mother planned. She knew I couldn't get along alone. I admitted this to Dr. Silversmith because I thought he was a wise man and would understand.

That was wrong.

I knew it at once. Because while Dr. Silversmith leaned forward and stroked his little beard and said, "Yes, yes," over and over again, I could feel his eyes watching me. The same kind as the people in the mob. Mean eyes. Eyes that don't trust you when they see you. Prying, peeping eyes.

Then he began to ask me all sorts of ridiculous questions. About Enoch, at first—although I knew he was only pretending to believe in Enoch. He asked me how I could hear Enoch if I couldn't see him. He asked me if I ever heard any other voices. He asked me how I felt when I killed Emily Robbins and whether I—but I won't even think about that question. Why, he talked to me as if I were some kind of—crazy person!

He had only been fooling me all along about not knowing Enoch. He proved that now by asking me how many other people I had killed. And then he wanted to know, where were their heads?

He couldn't fool me any longer.

I just laughed at him, then, and shut up tighter than a clam.

After a while he gave up and went away, shaking his head. I laughed after him because I knew he hadn't found out what he wanted to find out. He wanted to know all my mother's secrets, and my secrets, and Enoch's secrets too.

But he didn't, and I laughed. And then I went to sleep. I slept almost all afternoon.

When I woke up, there was a new man standing in front of my cell. He had a big, fat smiling face, and

nice eyes.

"Hello, Seth," he said, very friendly. "Having a little snooze?"

I reached up to the top of my head. I couldn't feel Enoch, but I knew he was there, and still asleep. He moves fast even when he's sleeping.

"Don't be alarmed," said the man. "I won't hurt you."

"Did that Doctor send you?" I asked.

The man laughed. "Of course not," he told me. "My name's Cassidy. Edwin Cassidy. I'm the District Attorney, and I'm in charge here. Can I come in and sit down, do you suppose?"

"I'm locked in," I said.

"I've got the keys from the Sheriff," said Mr. Cassidy. He took them out and opened my cell; walked right in and sat down next to me on the bench.

"Aren't you afraid?" I asked him. "You know, I'm supposed to be a murderer."

"Why Seth," Mr. Cassidy laughed, "I'm not afraid of you. I know you didn't mean to kill anybody."

He put his hand on my shoulder, and I didn't draw away. It was a nice fat, soft hand. He had a big diamond ring on his finger that just twinkled away in the sunshine.

"How's Enoch?" he said.

I jumped.

"Oh, that's all right. That fool Doctor told me when I met him down the street. He doesn't understand about Enoch, does he, Seth? But you and I do."

"That Doctor thinks I'm crazy," I whispered.

"Well, just between us, Seth, it did sound a little hard to believe, at first. But I've just come from the swamp. Sheriff Shelby and some of his men are still working down there.

"They found Emily Robbins' body just a little while ago. And other bodies, too. A fat man's body, and a small boy, and some Indian. The quicksand preserves them, you know."

I watched his eyes, and they were still smiling, so I knew I could trust this man.

"They'll find other bodies too, if they keep on, won't they, Seth?"

I nodded.

"But I didn't wait any longer, I saw enough to understand that you were telling the truth. Enoch must have made you do these things, didn't he?"

I nodded again.

"Fine," said Mr. Cassidy, pressing my shoulder. "You see, we do understand each other now. So I won't blame you for anything you tell me."

"What do you want to know?" I asked.

"Oh, lots of things. I'm interested in Enoch, you see. Just how many people did he ask you to kill—all together, that is?"

"Nine," I said.

"And they're all buried in the quicksand?"

"Yes."

"Do you know their names?"

"Only a few." I told him the names of the ones I knew. "Sometimes Enoch just describes them for me and I go out to meet them," I explained.

Mr. Cassidy sort of chuckled and took out a cigar. I frowned.

"Don't want me to smoke, eh?"

"Please—I don't like it. My mother didn't believe in smoking; she never let me."

Mr. Cassidy laughed out loud now, but he put the cigar away and leaned forward.

"You can be a big help to me, Seth," he whispered. "I suppose you know what a District Attorney must do."

"He's a sort of lawyer, isn't he—at trials and things?"

"That's right. I'm going to be at your trial, Seth. Now you don't want to have to get up in front of all those people and tell them about—what happened. Right?"

"No, I don't, Mr. Cassidy. Not those mean people here in town. They hate me."

"Then here's what you do. You tell me all about it, and I'll talk for you. That's friendly enough, isn't it?"

I wished Enoch was there to help me, but he was asleep. I looked at Mr. Cassidy and made up my own mind.

"Yes," I said. "I can tell you."

So I told him everything I knew.

After a while he stopped chuckling, but he was just getting so interested he couldn't bother to laugh or do anything but listen.

"One thing more," he said. "We found some bodies in the swamp. Emily Robbins' body we could identify, and several of the others. But it would be easier if we knew something else. You can tell me this, Seth.

"Where are the heads?"

I stood up and turned away. "I won't tell you that," I said, "Because I don't know."

"Don't know?"

"I give them to Enoch," I explained. "Don't you understand—that's why I must kill people for him. Because he wants their heads."

Mr. Cassidy looked puzzled.

"He always makes me cut the heads off and leave them," I went on. "I put the bodies in the quicksand, and then go home. He puts me to sleep and rewards me. After that he goes away—back to the heads. That's what he wants."

"Why does he want them, Seth?"

I told him. "You see, it wouldn't do you any good if you could find them. Because you probably wouldn't recognize anything anyway."

Mr. Cassidy sat up and sighed. "But why do you let Enoch do such things?"

"I must. Or else he'll do it to me. That's what he always threatens. He has to have it. So I obey him."

Mr. Cassidy watched me while I walked the floor, but he didn't say a word. He seemed to be very nervous, all of a sudden, and when I came close, he sort of leaned away.

"You'll explain all that at the trial, of course," I said. "About Enoch, and everything."

He shook his head.

"I'm not going to tell about Enoch at the trial, and neither are you," Mr. Cassidy said. "Nobody is even going to know that Enoch exists."

"Why?"

"I'm trying to help you, Seth. Don't you know what the people will say if you mention Enoch to them? They'll say you're crazy! And you don't want that to happen."

"No. But what can you do? How can you help me?"

Mr. Cassidy smiled at me.

"You're afraid of Enoch, aren't you? Well, I was just thinking out loud. Suppose you gave Enoch to me?"

I gulped.

"Yes. Suppose you gave Enoch to me, right now? Let me take care of him for you during the trial. Then he wouldn't be yours, and you wouldn't have to say anything about him. He probably doesn't want people to know what he does, anyway."

"That's right," I said. "Enoch would be very angry. He's a secret, you know. But I hate to give him to you without asking—and he's asleep now."

"Asleep?"

"Yes. On top of my skull. Only you can't see him, of course."

Mr. Cassidy gazed at my head and then he chuckled again.

"Oh, I can explain everything when he wakes up," he told me. "When he knows it's all for the best, I'm sure he'll be happy."

"Well—I guess it's all right, then," I sighed. "But you must promise to take good care of him."

"Sure," said Mr. Cassidy.

"And you'll give him what he wants? What he needs?"

"Of course."

"And you won't tell a soul?"

"Not a soul."

"Of course you know what will happen to you if you refuse to give Enoch what he wants," I warned Mr. Cassidy. "He will take it—from you—by force?"

"Don't you worry, Seth."

I stood still for a minute. Because all at once I could feel something move towards my ear.

"Enoch," I whispered. "Can you hear me?"

He heard.

Then I explained everything to him. How I was giving him to Mr. Cassidy.

Enoch didn't say a word.

Mr. Cassidy didn't say a word. He just sat there and grinned. I suppose it must have looked a little strange to see me talking to—nothing.

"Go to Mr. Cassidy," I whispered. "Go to him, now."

And Enoch went.

I felt the weight lift from my head. That was all, but I knew he was gone.

"Can you feel him, Mr. Cassidy?" I asked.

"What—oh, sure!" he said, and stood up.

"Take good care of Enoch," I told him.

"The best."

"Don't put your hat on," I warned. "Enoch doesn't like hats."

"Sorry, I forgot. Well, Seth, I'll say good-bye now. You've been a mighty great help to me—and from now on we can just forget about Enoch, as far as telling anybody else is concerned.

"I'll come back again and talk about the trial. That Doctor Silversmith, he's going to try and tell the folks you're crazy. Maybe it would be best if you just denied everything you told him—now that I have Enoch."

That sounded like a fine idea, but then I knew Mr. Cassidy was a smart man.

"Whatever you say, Mr. Cassidy. Just be good to Enoch, and he'll be good to you."

Mr. Cassidy shook my hand and then he and Enoch went away. I felt tired again. Maybe it was the

strain, and maybe it was just that I felt a little queer, knowing that Enoch was gone. Anyway, I went back to sleep for a long time.

It was nighttime when I woke up. Old Charley Potter was banging on the cell door, bringing me my supper.

He jumped when I said hello to him, and backed away.

"Murderer!" he yelled. "They got nine bodies out'n the swamp. You crazy fiend!"

"Why Charley," I said. "I always thought you were a friend of mine."

"Loony! I'm gonna get out of here right now—leave you locked up for the night. Sheriff'll see that nobuddy breaks in to lynch you—if you ask me, he's wasting his time."

Then Charley turned out all the lights and went away. I heard him go out the front door and put the padlock on, and I was all alone in the jailhouse.

All alone! It was strange to be all alone for the first time in years—all alone, without Enoch.

I ran my fingers across the top of my head. It felt bare and queer.

The moon was shining through the window and I stood there looking out at the empty street. Enoch always loved the moon. It made him lively. Made him restless and greedy. I wondered how he felt now, with Mr. Cassidy.

I must have stood there for a long time. My legs were numb when I turned around and listened to the fumbling at the door.

The lock clicked open, and then Mr. Cassidy came running in.

"Take him off me!" he yelled. "Take him away!"

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Enoch—that thing of yours—I thought you were crazy—maybe I'm the crazy one—but take him off!"

"Why, Mr. Cassidy! I told you what Enoch was like."

"He's crawling around up there now. I can feel him. And I can hear him. The things he whispers!"

"But I explained all that, Mr. Cassidy. Enoch wants something, doesn't he? You know what it is. And you'll have to give it to him. You promised."

"I can't. I won't kill for him—he can't make me—"

"He can. And he will."

Mr. Cassidy gripped the bars on the cell door. "Seth, you must help me. Call Enoch. Take him back. Make him go back to you. Hurry."

"All right, Mr. Cassidy," I said.

I called Enoch. He didn't answer. I called again. Silence.

Mr. Cassidy started to cry. It shocked me, and then I felt kind of sorry for him. He just didn't understand, after all. I know what Enoch can do to you when he whispers that way. First he coaxes you, and then he pleads, and then he threatens—

"You'd better obey him," I told Mr. Cassidy. "Has he told you who to kill?"

Mr. Cassidy didn't pay any attention to me. He just cried. And then he took out the jail keys and opened up the cell next to mine. He went in and locked the door.

"I won't," he sobbed. "I won't, I won't!"

"You won't what?" I asked.

"I won't kill Doctor Silversmith at the hotel and give Enoch his head. I'll stay here, in the cell, where I'm safe! Oh you fiend, you devil—"

He slumped down sideways and I could see him through the bars dividing our cells, sitting all hunched over while his hands tore at his hair.

"You'd better," I called out. "Or else Enoch will do something. Please, Mr. Cassidy—oh, hurry—"

Then Mr. Cassidy gave a little moan and I guess he fainted. Because he didn't say anything more and he stopped clawing. I called him once but he wouldn't answer.

So what could I do? I sat down in the dark corner of my cell and watched the moonlight. Moonlight always makes Enoch wild.

Then Mr. Cassidy started to scream. Not loud, but deep down in his throat. He didn't move at all, just screamed.

I knew it was Enoch, taking what he wanted—from him.

What was the use of looking? You can't stop him, and I had warned Mr. Cassidy.

I just sat there and held my hands to my ears until it was all over.

When I turned around again, Mr. Cassidy still sat slumped up against the bars. There wasn't a sound to be heard.

Oh yes, there was! A purring. A soft, faraway purring. The purring of Enoch, after he has eaten. Then I heard a scratching. The scratching of Enoch's claws, when he frisks because he's been fed.

The purring and the scratching came from inside Mr. Cassidy's head.

That would be Enoch, all right, and he was happy now.

I was happy, too.

I reached my hand through the bars and pulled the jail keys from Mr. Cassidy's pocket. I opened my cell door and I was free again.

There was no need for me to stay now, with Mr. Cassidy gone. And Enoch wouldn't be staying, either. I called to him.

"Here, Enoch!"

That was as close as I've ever come to really seeing Enoch—a sort of a white streak that came flashing out of the big red hole he had eaten in the back of Mr. Cassidy's skull.

Then I felt the soft, cold, flabby weight landing on my own head once more, and I knew Enoch had come home.

I walked through the corridor and opened the outer door of the jail.

Enoch's tiny feet began to patter on the roof of my brain.

Together we walked out into the night. The moon was shining, everything was still, and I could hear, ever so softly, Enoch's happy chuckling in my ear.

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Catnip

Ronnie Shires stood before the mirror and slicked back his hair. He straightened his new sweater and stuck out his chest. Sharp! Had to watch the way he looked, with graduation only a few weeks away and that election for class president coming up. If he could get to be president then, next year in high school he'd be a real wheel. Go out for second team or something. But he had to watch the angles—

Ma came out of the kitchen, carrying his lunch. Ronnie wiped the grin off his face. She walked up behind him and put her arms around his waist.

"Hon, I only wish your father were here to see you—"

Ronnie wriggled free. "Yea, sure. Say, Ma."

"Yes?"

"How's about some loot, huh? I got to get some things today."

"Well, I suppose. But try to make it last, son. This graduation costs a lot of money, seems to me."

"I'll pay you back someday." He watched her as she fumbled in her apron pocket and produced a wadded-up dollar bill.

"Thanks. See you." He picked up his lunch and ran outside. He walked along, smiling and whistling, knowing Ma was watching him from the window. She was always watching him, and it was a real drag.

Then he turned the corner, halted under a tree, and fished out a cigarette. He lit it and sauntered slowly across the street, puffing deeply. Out of the corner of his eye he watched the Ogden house just ahead.

Sure enough, the front screen door banged and Marvin Ogden came down the steps. Marvin was fifteen, one year older than Ronnie, but smaller and skinnier. He wore glasses and stuttered when he got excited, but he was valedictorian of the graduating class.

Ronnie came up behind him, walking fast.

"Hello, Snot-face!"

Marvin wheeled. He avoided Ronnie's glare, but smiled weakly at the pavement.

"I said hello, Snot-face! What's the matter, don't you know your own name, jerk?"

"Hello—Ronnie."

"How's old Snot-face today?"

"Aw, gee, Ronnie. Why do you have to talk like that? I never did anything to you, did I?"

Ronnie spit in the direction of Marvin's shoes. "I'd like to see you just try doing something to me, you four-eyed little—"

Marvin began to walk away, but Ronnie kept pace.

"Slow down, jag. I wanna talk to you."

"Wh-what is it, Ronnie? I don't want to be late."

"Shut your yap."

"But—"

"Listen, you. What was the big idea in History exam yesterday when you pulled your paper away?"

"You know, Ronnie. You aren't supposed to copy somebody else's answers."

"You trying to tell me what to do, square?"

"N-no. I mean, I only want to keep you out of trouble. What if Miss Sanders found out, and you want to be elected class president? Why, if anybody knew—"

Ronnie put his hand on Marvin's shoulder. He smiled. "You wouldn't ever tell her about it, would you, Snot-face?" he murmured.

"Of course not! Cross my heart!"

Ronnie continued to smile. He dug his fingers into Marvin's shoulder. With his other hand he swept Marvin's books to the ground. As Marvin bent forward to pick them up, he kicked Marvin as hard as he could, bringing his knee up fast. Marvin sprawled on the sidewalk. He began to cry. Ronnie watched him as he attempted to rise.

"This is just a sample of what you got coming if you squeal," he said. He stepped on the fingers of Marvin's left hand. "Creep!"

Marvin's snivelling faded from his ears as he turned the corner at the end of the block. Mary June was waiting for him under the trees. He came up behind her and slapped her, hard.

"Hello, you!" he said.

Mary June jumped about a foot, her curls bouncing on her shoulders. Then she turned and saw who it was.

"Oh, Ronnie! You oughtn't to—"

"Shut up. I'm in a hurry. Can't be late the day before election. You lining up the chicks?"

"Sure, Ronnie. You know, I promised. I had Ellen and Vicky over at the house last night and they said they'd vote for you for sure. All the girls are gonna vote for you."

"Well, they better." Ronnie threw his cigarette butt against a rosebush in the Eisners' yard.

"Ronnie—you be careful—want to start a fire?"

"Quit bossing me." He scowled.

"I'm not trying to boss you, Ronnie. Only—"

"Aw, you make me sick!" He quickened his pace, and the girl bit her lip as she endeavored to keep step with him. "Ronnie, wait for me!"

"Wait for me!" he mocked her. "What's the matter, you afraid you'll get lost or something?"

"No. *You* know. I don't like to pass that old Mrs. Mingle's place. She always stares at me and makes faces."

"She's nuts!"

"I'm scared of her, Ronnie. Aren't you?"

"Me scared of that old bat? She can go take a flying leap!"

"Don't talk so loud, she'll hear you."

"Who cares?"

Ronnie marched boldly pass the tree-shadowed cottage behind the rusted iron fence. He stared insolently at the girl, who made herself small against his shoulder, eyes averted from the ramshackle edifice. He deliberately slackened his pace as they passed the cottage, with its boarded-up windows, screened-in porch, and general air of withdrawal from the world.

Mrs. Mingle herself was not in evidence today. Usually she could be seen in the weed-infested garden at the side of the cottage; a tiny, dried-up old woman, bending over her vines and plants, mumbling incessantly to herself or to the raddled black tomcat which served as her constant companion.

"Old Prune-face ain't around!" Ronnie observed, loudly. "Must be off someplace on her broomstick."

"Ronnie—please!"

"Who cares?" Ronnie pulled Mary June's curls. "You dames are scared of everything, ain't you?"

"*Aren't*, Ronnie."

"Don't tell *me* how to talk!" Ronnie's gaze shifted again to the silent house, huddled in the shadows. A segment of shadow at the side of the cottage seemed to be moving. A black blur detached itself from the end of the porch. Ronnie recognized Mrs. Mingle's cat. It minced down the path towards the gate.

Quickly, Ronnie stooped and found a rock. He grasped it, rose, aimed, and hurled the missile in one continuous movement.

The cat hissed, then squawled in pain as the rock grazed its ribs.

"Oh, Ronnie!"

"Come on, let's run before she sees us!"

They flew down the street. The school bell drowned out the cat-yowl.

"Here we go," said Ronnie. "You do my homework for me? Good. Give it here once."

He snatched the papers from Mary June's hand and splinted ahead. The girl stood watching him, smiling her admiration. From behind the fence the cat watched, too, and licked its jaws.

2

It happened that afternoon, after school. Ronnie and Joe Gordon and Seymour Higgins were futzing around with a baseball and he was talking about the outfit Ma promised to buy him this summer if the dressmaking business picked up. Only he made it sound as if he was getting the outfit for sure, and that they could all use the mask and mitt. It didn't hurt to build it up a little, with election tomorrow. He had to stand in good with the whole gang.

He knew if he hung around the school yard much longer, Mary June would come out and want him to walk her home. He was sick of her. Oh, she was all right for homework and such stuff, but these guys would just laugh at him if he went off with a dame.

So he said how about going down the street to in front of the pool hall and maybe hang around to see if somebody would shoot a game? He'd pay. Besides, they could smoke.

Ronnie knew that these guys didn't smoke, but it sounded cool and that's what he wanted. They all followed him down the street, pounding their cleats on the sidewalk. It made a lot of noise, because everything was so quiet.

All Ronnie could hear was the cat. They were passing Mrs. Mingle's and there was this cat, rolling around in the garden on its back and on its stomach, playing with some kind of ball. It purred and meowed and whined.

"Look!" yelled Joe Gordon. "Dizzy cat's havin' a fit 'r something, huh?"

"Lice," said Ronnie. "Damned mangy old thing's fulla lice and fleas and stuff. I socked it a good one this morning."

"Ya did?"

"Sure. With a rock. This big, too." He made a watermelon with his hands.

"Weren't you afraid of old lady Mingle?"

"Afraid? Why, that dried-up old—"

"Catnip," said Seymour Higgins. "That's what he's got. Ball of catnip. Old Mingle buys it for him. My old man says she buys everything for that cat; special food and sardines. Treats it like a baby. Ever see them walk down the street together?"

"Catnip, huh?" Joe peered through the fence. "Wonder why they like it so much. Gets 'em wild,

doesn't it? Cats'll do anything for catnip."

The cat squealed, sniffing and clawing at the ball. Ronnie scowled at it. "I hate cats. Somebody oughta drowned that damn thing."

"Better not let Mrs. Mingle hear you talk like that," Seymour cautioned. "She'll put the evil eye on you."

"Bull!"

"Well, she grows them herbs and stuff and my old lady says—"

"Bull!"

"All right. But I wouldn't go monkeying around her or her old cat, either."

"I'll show you."

Before he knew it, Ronnie was opening the gate. He advanced toward the black tomcat as the boys gaped.

The cat crouched over the catnip, eyes flattened against a velveteen skull. Ronnie hesitated a moment, gauging the glitter of claws, the glare of agate eyes. But the gang was watching—

"Scat!" he shouted. He advanced, waving his arms. The cat sidled backwards. Ronnie feinted with his hand and scooped up the catnip ball.

"See? I got it, you guys. I got—"

"Put that down!"

He didn't see the door open. He didn't see her walk down the steps. But suddenly she was there. Leaning on her cane, wearing a black dress that fitted tightly over her tiny frame, she seemed hardly any bigger than the cat which crouched at her side. Her hair was grey and wrinkled and dead, her face was grey and wrinkled and dead, but her eyes—

They were agate eyes, like the cat's. They glowed. And when she talked, she spit the way the cat did.

"Put that down, young man!"

Ronnie began to shake. It was only a chill, everybody gets chills now and then, and could he help it if he shook so hard the catnip just fell out of his hand?

He wasn't scared. He had to show the gang he wasn't scared of this skinny little dried-up old woman. It was hard to breathe, he was shaking so, but he managed. He filled his lungs and opened his mouth.

"You—you old witch!" he yelled.

The agate eyes widened. They were bigger than she was. All he could see were the eyes. Witch eyes. Now that he said it, he knew it was true. Witch. She was a witch.

"You insolent puppy. I've a good mind to cut out your lying tongue!"

Geez, she wasn't kidding!

Now she was coming closer, and the cat was inching up on him, and then she raised the cane in the

air, she was going to hit him, the witch was after him, oh Ma, no, don't, oh—

Ronnie ran.

3

Could he help it? Geez, the guys ran too. They'd run before he did, even. He had to run, the old bat was crazy, anybody could see that. Besides, if he'd stayed she'd of tried to hit him and maybe he'd let her have it. He was only trying to keep out of trouble. That was all.

Ronnie told it to himself over and over at supper time. But that didn't do any good, telling it to himself. It was the guys he had to tell it to, and fast. He had to explain it before election tomorrow—

"Ronnie. What's the matter? You sick?"

"No, Ma."

"Then why don't you answer a person? I declare, you haven't said ten words since you came in the house. And you aren't eating your supper."

"Not hungry."

"Something bothering you, son?"

"No. Leave me alone."

"It's that election tomorrow, isn't it?"

"Leave me alone." Ronnie rose. "I'm goin' out."

"Ronnie!"

"I got to see Joe. Important."

"Back by nine, remember."

"Yeah. Sure."

He went outside. The night was cool. Windy for this time of year. Ronnie shivered a little as he turned the corner. Maybe a cigarette—

He lit a match and a shower of sparks spiraled to the sky. Ronnie began to walk, puffing nervously. He had to see Joe and the others and explain. Yeah, right now, too. If they told anybody else—

It was dark. The light on the corner was out, and the Ogdens weren't home. That made it darker, because Mrs. Mingle never showed a light in her cottage.

Mrs. Mingle. Her cottage was up ahead. He'd better cross the street.

What was the matter with him? Was he getting chicken? Afraid of that damned old woman, that old witch! He puffed, gulped, expanded his chest. Just let her try anything. Just let her be hiding under the trees waiting to grab out at him with her big claws and hiss—what was he talking about, anyway? That was the cat. Nuts to her cat, and her too. He'd show them!

Ronnie walked past the dark shadow where Mrs. Mingle dwelt. He whistled defiance, and

emphasized it by shooting his cigarette butt across the fence. Sparks flew and were swallowed by the mouth of the night.

Ronnie paused and peered over the fence. Everything was black and still. There was nothing to be afraid of. Everything was black—

Everything except that flicker. It came from up the path, under the porch. He could see the porch now because there was a light. Not a steady light; a wavering light. Like a fire. A fire—where his cigarette had landed. The cottage was beginning to burn!

Ronnie gulped and clung to the fence. Yes, it was on fire all right. Mrs. Mingle would come out and the firemen would come and they'd find the butt and see him and then—

He fled down the street. The wind cat howled behind him, the wind that fanned the flames that burned the cottage—

Ma was in bed. He managed to slow down and walk softly as he slipped into the house, up the stairs. He undressed in the dark and sought the white womb between the bedsheets. When he got the covers over his head he had another chill. Lying there, trembling, not daring to look out the window and see the glare from the other side of the block, Ronnie's teeth chattered. He knew he was going to pass out in a minute.

Then he heard the screaming from far away. Fire engines. Somebody had called them. He needn't worry now. Why should the sound frighten him? It was only a siren, it wasn't Mrs. Mingle screaming, it couldn't be. She was all right. He was all right. Nobody knew . . .

Ronnie fell asleep with the wind and the siren wailing in his ears. His slumber was deep and only once was there an interruption. That was along towards morning, when he thought he heard a noise at the window. It was a scraping sound. The wind, of course. And it must have been the wind, too, that sobbed and whined and whimpered beneath the windowsill at dawn. It was only Ronnie's imagination, Ronnie's conscience, that transformed the sound into the wailing of a cat . . .

4

"Ronnie!"

It wasn't the wind, it wasn't a cat. Ma was calling him.

"Ronnie! Oh, Ronnie!"

He opened his eyes, shielding them from the sun-shafts.

"I declare, you might answer a person." He heard her grumbling to herself downstairs. Then she called again.

"Ronnie!"

"I'm coming, Ma."

He got out of bed, went to the bathroom, and dressed. She was waiting for him in the kitchen.

"Land sakes, you sure slept sound last night. Didn't you hear the fire engines?"

Ronnie dropped a slice of toast. "What engines?"

Ma's voice rose. "Don't you know? Why boy, it was just awful—Mrs. Mingle's cottage burned down."

"Yeah?" He had trouble picking up the toast again.

"The poor old lady—just think of it—trapped in there—"

He had to shut her up. He couldn't stand what was coming next. But what could he say, how could he stop her?

"Burned alive. The whole place was on fire when they got there. The Ogdens saw it when they came home and Mr. Ogden called the firemen, but it was too late. When I think of that old lady it just makes me—"

Without a word, Ronnie rose from the table and left the room. He didn't wait for his lunch. He didn't bother to examine himself in the mirror. He went outside, before he cried, or screamed, or hauled off and hit Ma in the puss.

The puss—

It was waiting for him on the front walk. The black bundle with the agate eyes. The cat.

Mrs. Mingle's cat, waiting for him to come out.

Ronnie took a deep breath before he opened the gate. The cat didn't make a sound, didn't stir. It just hunched up on the sidewalk and stared at him.

He watched it for a moment, then cast about for a stick. There was a hunk of lath near the porch. He picked it up and swung it. Then he opened the gate.

"Scat!" he said.

The cat retreated. Ronnie walked away. The cat moved after him. Ronnie wheeled, brandishing the stick.

"Scram before I let you have it!"

The cat stood still.

Ronnie stared at it. Why hadn't the damn thing burned up in the fire? And what was it doing here?

He gripped the lath. It felt good between his fingers, splinters and all. Just let that mangy tom start anything—

He walked along, not looking back. What was the matter with him? Suppose the cat did follow him. It couldn't hurt him any. Neither could old Mingle. She was dead. The dirty witch. Talking about cutting his tongue out. Well, she got what was coming to her, all right. Too bad her scroungy cat was still around. If it didn't watch out, he'd fix it, too. He should worry now.

Nobody was going to find out about that cigarette. Mrs. Mingle was dead. He ought to be glad, everything was all right, sure, he felt great.

The shadow followed him down the street.

"Get out of here!"

Ronnie turned and heaved the lath at the cat. It hissed. Ronnie heard the wind hiss, heard his cigarette butt hiss, heard Mrs. Mingle hiss.

He began to run. The cat ran after him.

"Hey, Ronnie!"

Marvin Ogden was calling him. He couldn't stop now, not even to hit the punk. He ran on. The cat kept pace.

Then he was winded and he slowed down. It was just in time, too. Up ahead was a crowd of kids, standing on the sidewalk in front of a heap of charred, smoking boards.

They were looking at Mingle's cottage—

Ronnie closed his eyes and darted back up the street. The cat followed.

He had to get rid of it before he went to school. What if people saw him with her cat? Maybe they'd start to talk. He had to get rid of it—

Ronnie ran clear down to Sinclair Street. The cat was right behind him. On the corner he picked up a stone and let fly. The cat dodged. Then it sat down on the sidewalk and looked at him. Just looked.

Ronnie couldn't take his eyes off the cat. It stared so. Mrs. Mingle had stared, too. But she was dead. And this was only a cat. A cat he had to get away from, fast.

The streetcar came down Sinclair Street. Ronnie found a dime in his pocket and boarded the car. The cat didn't move. He stood on the platform as the car pulled away and looked back at the cat. It just sat there.

Ronnie rode around the loop, then transferred to the Hollis Avenue bus. It brought him over to the school, ten minutes late. He got off and started to hurry across the street.

A shadow crossed the entrance to the building.

Ronnie saw the cat. It squatted there, waiting.

He ran.

That's all Ronnie remembered of the rest of the morning. He ran. He ran, and the cat followed. He couldn't get rid of the cat. He ran.

Up and down the streets, back and forth, all over the whole neighborhood; stopping and dodging and throwing stones and swearing and panting and sweating. But always the running, and always the cat right behind him. Once it started to chase him and before he knew it he was heading straight for the place where the burned smell filled the air, straight for the ruins of Mrs. Mingle's cottage. The cat wanted him to go there, wanted him to see—

Ronnie began to cry. He sobbed and panted all the way home. The cat didn't make a sound. It followed him. All right, let it. He'd fix it. He'd tell Ma. Ma would get rid of it for him. Ma.

"Ma!"

He yelled as he ran up the steps.

No answer. She was out. Marketing.

And the cat crept up the steps behind him.

Ronnie slammed the door, locked it. Ma had her key. He was safe now. Safe at home. Safe in bed—he wanted to go to bed and pull the covers over his head, wait for Ma to come and make everything all right. There was a scratching at the door.

"Ma!" His scream echoed through the empty house.

He ran upstairs. The scratching died away.

And then he heard the footsteps on the porch, the slow footsteps; he heard the rattling and turning of the doorknob. It was old lady Mingle, coming from the grave. It was the witch, coming to get him. It was—

"Ma!"

"Ronnie, what's the matter? What you doing home from school?"

He heard her. It was all right. Just in time, Ronnie closed his mouth. He couldn't tell her about the cat. He mustn't ever tell her. Then everything would come out. He had to be careful what he said.

"I got sick to my stomach," he said. "Miss Sanders said I should come home and lay down."

Then Ma was up the stairs, helping him undress, asking should she get the doctor, fussing over him and putting him to bed. And he could cry and she didn't know it wasn't from a gut-ache. What she didn't know wouldn't hurt her. It was all right.

Yes, it was all right now, and he was in bed. Ma brought him some soup for lunch. He wanted to ask her about the cat, but he didn't dare. Besides, he couldn't hear it scratching. Must have run away when Ma came home.

Ronnie lay in bed and dozed as the afternoon shadows ran in long black ribbons across the bedroom floor. He smiled to himself. What a sucker he was! Afraid of a cat. Maybe there wasn't even a cat—all in his mind.

"Ronnie—you all right?" Ma called up from the foot of the stairs.

"Yes, Ma. I feel lots better."

Sure, he felt better. He could get up now and eat supper if he wanted. In just a minute he'd put his clothes on and go downstairs. He started to push the sheets off. It was dark in the room, now. Just about supper time—

Then Ronnie heard it. A scratching. A scurrying. From the hall? No. It couldn't be in the hall. Then where?

The window. It was open. And the scratching came from the ledge outside. He had to close it, fast. Ronnie jumped out of bed, barking his shin against a chair as he groped through the dusk. Then he was at the window, slamming it down, tight.

He heard the scratching.

And it came from *inside the room!*

Ronnie hurled himself upon the bed, clawing the covers up to his chin. His eyes bulged against the darkness.

Where was it?

He saw nothing but shadows. Which shadow moved?

Where was it?

Why didn't it yowl so he could locate it? Why didn't it make a noise? Yes, and why was it here? Why did it follow him? What was it trying to do to him?

Ronnie didn't know. All he knew was that he lay in bed, waiting, thinking of Mrs. Mingle and her cat and how she was a witch and died because he'd killed her. Or had he killed her? He was all mixed up, he couldn't remember, he didn't even know what was real and what wasn't real anymore. He couldn't tell which shadow would move next.

And then he could.

The round shadow was moving. The round black ball was inching across the floor from beneath the window. It was the cat, all right, because shadows don't have claws that scrape. Shadows don't leap through the air and perch on the bedpost, grinning at you with yellow eyes and yellow teeth—grinning the way Mrs. Mingle grinned.

The cat was big. Its eyes were big. Its teeth were big, too.

Ronnie opened his mouth to scream.

Then the shadow was sailing through the air, springing at his face, at his open mouth. The claws fastened in his cheeks, forcing his jaws apart, and the head dipped down—

Far away, under the pain, someone was calling.

"Ronnie! Oh, Ronnie! What's the matter with you?"

Everything was fire and he lashed out and suddenly the shadow went away and he was sitting bolt upright in bed. His mouth worked but no sound came out. Nothing came out except that gushing red wetness,

"Ronnie! Why don't you answer me?"

A guttural sound came from deep within Ronnie's throat, but no words. There would never be any words.

"Ronnie—what's the matter? Has the cat got your tongue—?"

[{index}](#)

The Hungry House

at first there were two of them—he and she, together. That's the way it was when they bought the house.

Then *it* came. Perhaps it was there all the time, waiting for them in the house. At any rate, it was there now. And nothing could be done.

Moving was out of the question. They'd taken a five-year lease, secretly congratulating themselves on the low rental. It would be absurd to complain to the agent, impossible to explain to their friends. For that matter, they had nowhere else to go; they had searched for months to find a home.

Besides, at first neither he nor she cared to admit awareness of its presence. But both of them knew it was there.

She felt it the very first evening, in the bedroom. She was sitting in front of the high, old-fashioned mirror, combing her hair. The mirror hadn't been dusted yet and it seemed cloudy; the light above it flickered a bit, too.

So at first she thought it was just a trick of shadows or some flaw in the glass. The wavering outline behind her seemed to blur the reflection oddly, and she frowned. Then she began to experience what she often thought of as her "married feeling"—the peculiar awareness which usually denoted her husband's unseen entrance into a room she occupied.

He must be standing behind her, now. He must have come in quietly, without saying anything. Perhaps he was going to put his arms around her, surprise her, startle her. Hence the shadow on the mirror. She turned, ready to greet him.

The room was empty. And still the odd reflection persisted, together with the sensation of a presence at her back.

She shrugged, moved her head, and made a little face at herself in the mirror. As a smile it was a failure, because the warped glass and the poor light seemed to distort her grin into something alien—into a smile that was not altogether a composition of her own face and features.

Well, it had been a fatiguing ordeal, this moving business. She flicked a brush through her hair and tried to dismiss the problem.

Nevertheless she felt a surge of relief when he suddenly entered the bedroom. For a moment she thought of telling him, then decided not to worry him over her "nerves."

He was more outspoken. It was the following morning that the incident occurred. He came rushing out of the bathroom, his face bleeding from a razor-cut on the left cheek.

"Is that your idea of being funny?" he demanded, in the petulant little-boy fashion she found so engaging. "Sneaking in behind me and making faces in the mirror? Gave me an awful start—look at this nick I sliced on myself."

She sat up in bed.

"But darling, I haven't been making faces at you. I didn't stir from this bed since you got up."

"Oh." He shook his head, his frown fading into a second set of wrinkles expressing bewilderment. "Oh, I see."

"What is it?" She suddenly threw off the covers and sat on the edge of the bed, wriggling her toes and peering at him earnestly.

"Nothing," he murmured. "Nothing at all. Just thought I saw you, or somebody, looking over my shoulder in the mirror. All of a sudden, you know. It must be those damned lights. Got to get some bulbs in town today."

He patted his cheek with a towel and turned away. She took a deep breath.

"I had the same feeling last night," she confessed, then bit her lip.

"You did?"

"It's probably just the lights, as you said, darling."

"Uh-huh." He was suddenly preoccupied. "That must be it. I'll make sure and bring those new bulbs."

"You'd better. Don't forget, the gang is coming down for the housewarming on Saturday."

Saturday proved to be a long time in coming. In the interim both of them had several experiences which served to upset their minds much more than they cared to admit.

The second morning, after he had left for work, she went out in back and looked at the garden. The place was a mess—half an acre of land, all those trees, the weeds everywhere, and the dead leaves of autumn dancing slowly around the old house. She stood off on a little knoll and contemplated the grave gray gables of another century. Suddenly she felt lonely here. It wasn't only the isolation, the feeling of being half a mile from the nearest neighbor, down a deserted dirt road. It was more as though she were an intruder here—an intruder upon the past. The cold breeze, the dying trees, the sullen sky were welcome; they belonged to the house. She was the outsider, because she was young, because she was alive.

She felt it all, but did not think it. To acknowledge her sensations would be to acknowledge fear. Fear of being alone. Or, worse still, fear of *not* being alone.

Because, as she stood there, the back door closed.

Oh, it was the autumn wind, all right. Even though the door didn't bang, or slam shut. It merely closed. But that was the wind's work, it had to be. There was nobody in the house, nobody to close the door.

She felt in her housedress pocket for the door key, then shrugged as she remembered leaving it on the kitchen sink. Well, she hadn't planned to go inside yet anyway. She wanted to look over the yard, look over the spot where the garden had been and where she fully intended a garden to bloom next spring. She had measurements to make, and estimates to take, and a hundred things to do here outside.

And yet, when the door closed, she knew she had to go in. Something was trying to shut her out, shut her out of her own house, and that would never do. Something was fighting against her, fighting against all idea of change. She had to fight back.

So she marched up to the door, rattled the knob, found herself locked out as she expected. The first round was lost. But there was always the window.

The kitchen window was eye-level in height, and a small crate served to bring it within easy reach. The window was open a good four inches and she had no trouble inserting her hands to raise it further.

She tugged.

Nothing happened. The window must be stuck. But it wasn't stuck; she'd just opened it before going outside and it opened quite easily; besides, they'd tried all the windows and found them in good operating condition.

She tugged again. This time the window raised a good six inches and then—something slipped. The window came down like the blade of a guillotine, and she got her hands out just in time. She bit her lip, sent strength through her shoulders, raised the window once more.

And this time she stared into the pane. The glass was transparent, ordinary window glass. She'd washed it just yesterday and she knew it was clean. There had been no blur, no shadow, and certainly no movement.

But there was movement now. Something cloudy, something obscenely opaque, peered out of the window, peered out of itself and pressed the window down against her. Something matched her strength to shut her out.

Suddenly, hysterically, she realized that she was staring at her own reflection through the shadows of the trees. Of course, it had to be her own reflection. And there was no reason for her to close her eyes and sob as she tugged the window up and half-tumbled her way into the kitchen.

She was inside, and alone. Quite alone. Nothing to worry about. Nothing to worry him about. She wouldn't tell him.

He wouldn't tell her either. Friday afternoon, when she took the car and went into town for groceries and liquor in preparation for tomorrow's party, he stayed home from the office and arranged the final details of settling down.

That's why he carried up all the garment bags to the attic—to store the summer clothes, get them out of the way. And that's how he happened to open the little cubicle under the front gable. He was looking for the attic closet; he'd put down the bags and started to work along the wall with a flashlight. Then he noticed the door and the padlock.

Dust and rust told their own story; nobody had come this way for a long, long time. He thought again of Hacker, the glib real-estate agent who'd handled the rental of the place. "Been vacant several years and needs a little fixing up," Hacker had said. From the looks of it, nobody had lived here for a coon's age. All the better; he could force the lock with a common file.

He went downstairs for the file and returned quickly, noting as he did so that the attic dust told its own story. Apparently the former occupants had left in something of a hurry—debris was scattered everywhere, and swaths and swirls scored the dust to indicate that belongings had been dragged and hauled and swept along in a haphazard fashion.

Well, he had all winter to straighten things out, and right now he'd settle for storing the garment bags. Clipping the flashlight to his belt, he bent over the lock, file in hand, and tried his skill at breaking and entering.

The lock sprung. He tugged at the door, opened it, inhaled a gust of mouldy dampness, then raised the flash and directed the beam into the long, narrow closet.

A thousand silver slivers stabbed at his eyeballs. Golden, gleaming fire seared his pupils. He jerked the flashlight back, sent the beam upwards. Again, lances of light entered his eyes.

Suddenly he adjusted his vision and comprehension. He stood peering into a room full of mirrors. They hung from cords, lay in corners, stood along the walls in rows.

There was a tall, stately full-length mirror, set in a door; a pair of plate-glass ovals, inset in old-fashioned dressertops; a panel glass, and even a complete, dismantled bathroom medicine cabinet similar to the one they had just installed. And the floor was lined with hand-mirrors of all sizes and shapes. He noted an ornate silver-handled mirror straight from a woman's dressing-table; behind it stood the vanity-mirror removed from the table itself. And there were pocket mirrors, mirrors from purse-compacts, mirrors of every size and shape. Against the far wall stood a whole series of looking-glass slabs that appeared to have been mounted at one time in a bedroom wall.

He gazed at half a hundred silvered surfaces, gazed at half a hundred reflections of his own bewildered face.

And he thought again of Hacker, of their inspection of the house. He had noted the absence of a medicine cabinet at the time, but Hacker had glossed over it. Somehow he hadn't realized that there were no mirrors of any sort in the house—of course, there was no furniture, but still one might expect a door panel in a place this old.

No mirrors? Why? And why were they all stacked away up here, under lock and key?

It was interesting. His wife might like some of these—that silver-handled beauty mirror, for example. He'd have to tell her about this.

He stepped cautiously into the closet, dragging the garment bags after him. There didn't seem to be any clothespole here, or any hooks. He could put some up in a jiffy, though. He piled the bags in a heap, stooping, and the flashlight glittered on a thousand surfaces, sent facets of fire into his face.

Then the fire faded. The silver surfaces darkened oddly. Of course, his reflection covered them now. His reflection, and something darker. Something smoky and swirling, something that was a part of the moldy dampness, something that choked the closet with its presence. It was behind him—no, at one side—no, in front of him—all around him—it was growing and growing and blotting him out—it was making him sweat and tremble and now it was making him gasp and scuttle out of the closet and slam the door and press against it with all his waning strength, and its name was—

Claustrophobia. That was it. Just claustrophobia, a fancy name for nerves. A man gets nervous when he's cooped up in a small space. For that matter, a man gets nervous when he looks at himself too long in a mirror. Let alone fifty mirrors!

He stood there, shaking, and to keep his mind occupied, keep his mind off what he had just half-seen, half-felt, half-known, he thought about mirrors for a moment. About looking into mirrors. Women did it all the time. Men were different.

Men, himself included, seemed to be self-conscious about mirrors. He could remember going into a clothing-store and seeing himself in one of the complicated arrangements that afforded a side and rear view. What a shock that had been, the first time—and every time, for that matter! A man looks different in a mirror. Not the way he imagines himself to be, knows himself to be. A mirror distorts. That's why men hum and sing and whistle while they shave. To keep their minds off their reflections. Otherwise they'd go crazy. What was the name of that Greek mythological character who was in love with his own unage? Narcissus, that was it. Staring into a pool for hours.

Women could do it, though. Because women never saw themselves, actually. They saw an idealization, a vision. Powder, rouge, lipstick, mascara, eye-shadow, brilliantine, or merely an emptiness

to which these elements must be applied. Women were a little crazy to begin with, anyway. Had to be, to love their men.

Perhaps he'd better not tell her, after all. At least, not until he checked with the real-estate agent, Hacker. He wanted to find out about this business, anyway. Something was wrong, somewhere. Why had the previous owners stored all the mirrors up here?

He began to walk back through the attic, forcing himself to go slowly, forcing himself to think of something, anything, except the fright he'd had in the room of reflections.

Reflect on something. Reflections. Who's afraid of the big bad reflection? Another myth, wasn't it? - Vampires. They had no reflections. "Tell me the truth now, Hacker. The people who built this house—were they vampires?"

That was a pleasant thought. That was a pleasant thought to carry downstairs in the afternoon twilight, to hug to your bosom in the gloom while the floors creaked and the shutters banged and the night came down in the house of shadows where something peered around the corners and grinned at you in the mirrors on the walls.

He sat there waiting for her to come home, and he switched on all the lights, and he put the radio on too and thanked God he didn't have a television set because there was a screen and the screen made a reflection and reflection might be something he didn't want to see.

But there was no more trouble that evening, and by the time she came home with her packages he had himself under control. So they ate and talked quite naturally—oh, quite naturally, and if it was listening it wouldn't know they were both afraid.

They made their preparations for the party, and called up a few people on the phone, and just on the spur of the moment he suggested inviting Hacker, too. So that was done and they went to bed. The lights were all out and that meant the mirrors were dark, and he could sleep.

Only in the morning it was difficult to shave. And he caught her, yes he caught her, putting on her makeup in the kitchen, using the little compact from her purse and carefully cupping her hands against reflections.

But he didn't tell her and she didn't tell him, and if it guessed their secrets, it kept silent.

He drove off to work and she made canapes, and if at times during the long, dark, dreary Saturday the house groaned and creaked and whispered, that was only to be expected.

The house was quiet enough by the time he came home again, and somehow, that was worse. It was as though something were waiting for night to fall. That's why she dressed early, humming all the while she powdered and primped, swirling around in front of the mirror (you couldn't see too clearly if you swirled). That's why he mixed drinks before their hasty meal and saw to it that they both had several stiff ones (you couldn't see too clearly if you drank). And then the guests tumbled in. The Teters, complaining about the winding back road through the hills. The Valliants, exclaiming over the antique panelling and the high ceilings. The Ehres, whooping and laughing, with Vic remarking that the place looked like something designed by Charles Addams. That was a signal for a drink, and by the time Hacker and his wife arrived the blaring radio found ample competition from the voices of the guests.

He drank, and she drank, but they couldn't shut it out together. That remark about Charles Addams was bad, and there were other things. Little things. The Tal-madges had brought flowers, and she went out to the kitchen to arrange them in a cut-glass vase. There were facets in the glass, and as she stood in

the kitchen, momentarily alone, and filled the vase with water from the tap, the crystal darkened beneath her fingers, and something peered, reflected from the facets. She turned, quickly, and she was all alone. All alone, holding a hundred naked eyes in her hands.

So she dropped the vase, and the Ehres and Tal-madges and Hackers and Valliants trooped out to the kitchen, and he came too. Talmadge accused her of drinking and that was reason enough for another round. He said nothing, but got another vase for the flowers. And yet he must have known, because when somebody suggested a tour of the house, he put them off.

"We haven't straightened things out upstairs yet," he said. "It's a mess, and you'd be knocking into crates and stuff."

"Who's up there now?" asked Mrs. Teters, coming into the kitchen with her husband. "We just heard an awful crash."

"Something must have fallen over," the host suggested. But he didn't look at his wife as he spoke, and she didn't look at him.

"How about another drink?" she asked. She mixed and poured hurriedly, and before the glasses were half empty, he took over and fixed another round. Liquor helped to keep people talking and if they talked it would drown out other sounds.

The stratagem worked. Gradually the group trickled back into the living room in twos and threes, and the radio blared and the laughter rose and the voices babbled to blot out the noises of the night.

He poured and she served, and both of them drank, but the alcohol had no effect. They moved carefully, as though their bodies were brittle glasses—glasses without bottom—waiting to be shattered by some sudden strident sound. Glasses hold liquor, but they never get drunk.

Their guests were not glasses; they drank and feared nothing, and the drinks took hold. People moved about, and in and out, and pretty soon Mr. Valliant and Mrs. Tahnadge embarked on their own private tour of the house upstairs. It was irregular and unescorted, but fortunately nobody noticed either their departure or their absence. At least, not until Mrs. Tahnadge came running downstairs and locked herself in the bathroom.

Her hostess saw her pass the doorway and followed her. She rapped on the bathroom door, gained admittance, and prepared to make discreet inquiries. None were necessary. Mrs. Tahnadge, weeping and wringing her hands, fell upon her.

"That was a filthy trick!" she sobbed. "Coming up and sneaking in on us. The dirty louse—I admit we were doing a little smooching, but that's all there was to it. And it isn't as though he didn't make enough passes at Gwen Hacker himself. What I want to know is, where did he get the beard? It frightened me out of my wits."

"What's all this?" she asked—knowing all the while what it was,* and dreading the words to come.

"Jeff and I were in the bedroom, just standing there in the dark, I swear it, and all at once I looked up over my shoulder at the mirror because light began streaming in from the hall. Somebody had opened the door, and I could see the glass and his face. Oh, it was my husband all right, but he had a beard on and the way he came slinking in, glaring at us—"

Sobs choked off the rest. Mrs. Talmadge trembled so that she wasn't aware of the tremors which racked the frame of her hostess. She, for her part, strained to hear the rest. "—sneaked right out again

before we could do anything, but wait till I get him home—scaring the life out of me and all because he's so crazy jealous—the look on his face in the mirror—"

She soothed Mrs. Talmadge. She comforted Mrs. Talmadge. She placated Mrs. Talmadge. And all the while there was nothing to soothe or calm or placate her own agitation.

Still, both of them had restored a semblance of sanity by the time they ventured out into the hall to join the party—just in time to hear Mr. Talmadge's • agitated voice booming out over the excited responses of the rest.

"So I'm standing there in the bathroom and this old witch comes up and starts making faces over my shoulder in the mirror. What gives here, anyway? What kind of a house you running here?"

He thought it was funny. So did the others. Most of the others. The host and hostess stood there, not daring to look at each other. Their smiles were cracking. Glass is brittle.

"I don't believe you!" Gwen Hacker's voice. She'd had one, or perhaps three, too many. "I'm going up right now and see for myself." She winked at her host and moved towards the stairs.

"Hey, hold on!" He was too late. She swept, or wobbled, past him.

"Halloween pranks," said Talmadge, nudging him. "Old babe in a fancy hairdo. Saw her plain as day. What you cook up for us here, anyhow?"

He began to stammer something, anything, to halt the flood of foolish babbling. She moved close to him,

wanting to listen, wanting to believe, wanting to do anything but think of Gwen Hacker upstairs, all alone upstairs looking into a mirror and waiting to see—

The screams came then. Not sobs, not laughter, but screams. He took the stairs two at a time. Fat Mr. Hacker was right behind him, and the others straggled along, suddenly silent. There was the sound of feet clubbing the staircase, the sound of heavy breathing, and over everything the continuing high-pitched shriek of a woman confronted with terror too great to contain.

It oozed out of Gwen Hacker's voice, oozed out of her body as she staggered and half-fell into her husband's arms in the hall. The light was streaming out of the bathroom, and it fell upon the mirror that was empty of all reflection, fell upon her face that was empty of all expression.

They crowded around the Hackers—he and she were on either side and the others clustered in front—and they moved along the hall to her bedroom and helped Mr. Hacker stretch his wife out on the bed. She had passed out, somebody mumbled something about a doctor, and somebody else said no, never mind, she'll be all right in a minute, and somebody else said well, I think we'd better be getting along.

For the first time everybody seemed to be aware of the old house and the darkness, and the way the floors creaked and the windows rattled and the shutters banged.

Everyone was suddenly sober, solicitous, and extremely anxious to leave.

Hacker bent over his wife, chafing her wrists, forcing her to swallow water, watching her whimper her way out of emptiness. The host and hostess silently procured hats and coats and listened to expressions of polite regret, hasty farewells, and poorly formulated pretenses of, "had a marvelous time, darling."

Teters, Valliants, Talmadges were swallowed up in the night. He and she went back upstairs, back to the bedroom and the Hackers. It was too dark in the hall, and too light in the bedroom. But there they were, waiting. And they didn't wait long.

Mrs. Hacker sat up suddenly and began to talk. To her husband, to them.

"I saw her," she said. "Don't tell me I'm crazy, I saw her! Standing on tiptoe behind me, looking right into the mirror. With the same blue ribbon in her hair, the one she wore the day she—"

"Please, dear," said Mr. Hacker.

She didn't please. "But I saw her. Mary Lou! She made a face at me in the mirror, and she's dead, you know she's dead, she disappeared three years ago and they never did find the body—"

"Mary Lou Dempster." Hacker was a fat man. He had two chins. Both of them wobbled.

"She played around here, you know she did, and Wilma Dempster told her to stay away, she knew all about this house, but she wouldn't and now—oh, her face!"

More sobs. Hacker patted her on the shoulder. He looked as though he could stand a little shoulder-patting himself. But nobody obliged. He stood there, she stood there, still waiting. Waiting for the rest.

"Tell them," said Mrs. Hacker. "Tell them the truth."

"All right, but I'd rather get you home."

"I'll wait. I want you to tell them. You must, now."

Hacker sat down heavily. His wife leaned against his shoulder. The two waited another moment. Then it came.

"I don't know how to begin, how to explain," said fat Mr. Hacker. "It's probably my fault, of course, but I didn't know. All this foolishness about haunted houses—nobody believes that stuff anymore, and all it does is push property values down, so I didn't say anything. Can you blame me?"

"I saw her face," whispered Mrs. Hacker.

"I know. And I should have told you. About the house, I mean. Why it hasn't rented for twenty years. Old story in the neighborhood, and you'd have heard it sooner or later anyway, I guess."

"Get on with it," said Mrs. Hacker. She was suddenly strong again and he, with his wobbling chins, was weak.

Host and hostess stood before them, brittle as glass, as the words poured out; poured out and filled them to overflowing. He and she, watching and listening, filling up with the realization, with the knowledge, with that for which they had waited.

It was the Bellman house they were living in, the house Job Bellman built for his bride back in the sixties; the house where his bride had given birth to Laura and taken death in exchange. And Job Bellman had toiled through the seventies as his daughter grew to girlhood, rested in complacent retirement during the eighties as Laura Bellman blossomed into the reigning beauty of the county—some said the state, but then flattery came quickly to men's lips in those days.

There were men aplenty, coming and going through that decade; passing through the hall in polished

boots, bowing and stroking brilliantined mustachios, smirking at old Job, grinning at the servants, and gazing in moonstruck adoration at Laura.

Laura took it all as her rightful due, but land's sakes, she'd never think of it, no, not while Papa was still alive, and no, she couldn't, she was much too young to marry, and why, she'd never heard of such a thing, she'd always thought it was so much nicer just being friends—

Moonlight, dances, parties, hayrides, sleighrides, candy, flowers, gifts, tokens, cotillion balls, punch, fans, beauty spots, dressmakers, curlers, mandolins, cycling, and the years that whirled away. And then, one day, old Job dead in the four-poster bed upstairs, and the Doctor came and the Minister, and then the Lawyer, hack-hack-hacking away with his dry, precise little cough, and his talk of inheritance and estate and annual income.

Then she was all alone, just she and the servants and the mirrors. Laura and her mirrors. Mirrors in the morning, and the careful inspection, the scrutiny that began the day. Mirrors at night before the caller arrived, before the carriage came, before she whirled away to another triumphal entry, another fan-fluttering, pirouetting descent of the staircase. Mirrors at dawn, absorbing the smiles, listening to the secrets, the tale of the evening's triumph.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?"

Mirrors told her the truth, mirrors did not lie, mirrors did not paw or clutch or whisper or demand in return for acknowledgement of beauty.

Years passed, but mirrors did not age, did not change. And Laura did not age. The callers were fewer and some of them were oddly altered. They seemed older, somehow. And yet how could that be? For Laura Bellman was still young. The mirrors said so, and they always told the truth. Laura spent more and more time with the mirrors. Powdering, searching for wrinkles, tinting and curling her long hair. Smiling, fluttering eyelashes, making deliciously delicate little *moues*. Swirling daintily, posturing before her own perfection.

Sometimes, when the callers came, she sent word that she was not at home. It seemed silly, somehow, to leave the mirrors. And after a while, there weren't many callers to worry about. Servants came and went, some of them died, but there were always new ones. Laura and the mirrors remained. The nineties were truly gay, but in a way other people wouldn't understand. How Laura laughed, rocking back and forth on the bed, sharing her giddy secrets with the glass!

The years fairly flew by, but Laura merely laughed. She giggled and tittered when the servants spoke to her, and it was easier now to take her meals on a tray in her room. Because there was something wrong with the servants, and with Dr. Turner who came to visit her and who was always being tiresome about going away for a rest to a lovely home.

They thought she was getting old, but she wasn't— the mirrors didn't lie. She wore the false teeth and the wig to please the others, the outsiders, but she didn't really need them. The mirrors told her she was unchanged. They talked to her now, the mirrors did, and she never said a word. Just sat nodding and swaying before them in the room reeking of power and *patchouli*, stroking her throat and listening to the mirrors telling her how beautiful she was and what a belle she would be if she would only waste her beauty on the world. But she'd never leave here, never; she and the mirrors would always be together.

And then came the day they tried to take her away, and they actually laid hands upon her—upon her, Laura Bellman, the most exquisitely beautiful woman in the world! Was it any wonder that she fought, clawed and kicked and whined, and struck out so that one of the servants crashed headlong into the beautiful glass and struck his foolish head and died, his nasty blood staining the image of her perfection?

Of course it was all a stupid mistake and it wasn't her fault, and Dr. Turner told the magistrate so when he came to call. Laura didn't have to see him, and she didn't have to leave the house. But they always locked the door to her room now, and they took away all her mirrors.

They *took away* all her mirrors!

They left her alone, caged up, a scrawny, wizened, wrinkled old woman with no reflection. They took the mirrors away and made her old; old, and ugly, and afraid.

The night they did it, she cried. She cried and hobbled around the room, stumbling blindly in a tearsome tour of nothingness.

That's when she realized she was old, and nothing could save her. Because she came up against the window and leaned her wrinkled forehead against the cold, cold glass. The light came from behind her and as she drew away she could see her reflection in the window.

The window—it was a mirror, too! She gazed into it, gazed long and lovingly at the tear-streaked face of the fantastically rouged and painted old harridan, gazed at the corpse-countenance readied for the grave by a mad embalmer.

Everything whirled. It was her house, she knew every inch of it, from the day of her birth onwards, the house was a part of her. It was her room, she had lived here for ever and ever. But *this*—this obscenity—was not her face. Only a mirror could show her that, and there would never be a mirror for her again. For an instant she gazed at the truth and then, mercifully, the gleaming glass of the windowpane altered and once again she gazed at Laura Bellman, the proudest beauty of them all. She drew herself erect, stepped back, and whirled into a dance. She danced forward, a prim self-conscious smile on her lips. Danced into the windowpane, half-through it, until razored splinters of glass tore her scrawny throat.

That's how she died and that's how they found her. The Doctor came, and the servants and the Lawyer did what must be done. The house was sold, then sold again. It fell into the hands of a rental agency. There were tenants, but not for long. They had troubles with mirrors.

A man died—of a heart attack, they said—while adjusting his necktie before the bureau one evening. Grotesque enough, but he had complained to people in the town about strange happenings, and his wife babbled to everyone.

A school-teacher who rented the place in the twenties "passed away" in circumstances which Doctor Turner had never seen fit to relate. He had gone to the rental agency and begged them to take the place off the market; that was almost unnecessary, for the Bellman home had its reputation firmly established by now.

Whether or not Mary Lou Dempster had disappeared here would never be known. But the little girl had last been seen a year ago on the road leading to the house and although a search had been made and nothing discovered, there was talk aplenty.

Then the new heirs had stepped in, briskly, with their pooh-poohs and their harsh dismissals of advice, and the house had been cleaned and put up for rental.

So he and she had come to live there—with it. And that was the story, all of the story.

Mr. Hacker put his arm around Gwen, harrumphed, and helped her rise. He was apologetic, he was shamefaced, he was deferential. His eyes never met those of his tenant.

He barred the doorway. "We're getting out of here, right now," he said. "Lease or no lease."

"That can be arranged. But—I can't find you another place tonight, and tomorrow's Sunday—"

"We'll pack and get out of here tomorrow," she spoke up. "Go to a hotel, anywhere. But we're leaving."

"I'll call you tomorrow," said Hacker. "I'm sure everything will be all right. After all, you've stayed here through the week and nothing, I mean nobody has—"

His words trailed off. There was no point in saying any more. The Hackers left and they were all alone. Just the two of them.

Just the *three* of them, that is.

But now they—he and she—were too tired to care. The inevitable letdown, product of overindulgence and over-excitement, was at hand.

They said nothing, for there was nothing to say. They heard nothing, for the house—and it—maintained a somber silence.

She went to her room and undressed. He began to walk around the house. First he went to the kitchen and

opened a drawer next to the sink. He took a hammer and smashed the kitchen mirror.

Tinkle-tinkle! And then a crash! That was the mirror in the hall. Then upstairs, to the bathroom. Crash and clink of broken glass in the medicine cabinet. Then a smash as he shattered the panel in his room. And now he came to her bedroom and swung the hammer against the huge oval of the vanity, shattering it to bits.

He wasn't cut, wasn't excited, wasn't upset. And the mirrors were gone. Every last one of them was gone.

They looked at each other for a moment. Then he switched off the lights, tumbled into bed beside her, and sought sleep.

The night wore on.

It was all a little silly in the daylight. But she looked at him again in the morning, and he went into his room and hauled out the suitcases. By the time she had breakfast ready he was already laying his clothes out on the bed. She got up after eating and took her own clothes from the drawers and hangers and racks and hooks. Soon he'd go up to the attic and get the garment bags. The movers could be called tomorrow, or as soon as they had a destination in mind.

The house was quiet. If it knew their plans, it wasn't acting. The day was gloomy and they kept the lights off without speaking—although both of them knew it was because of the windowpanes and the story of the reflection. He could have smashed the window glass of course, but it was all a little silly. And they'd be out of here shortly.

Then they heard the noise. Trickling, burbling. A splashing sound. It came from beneath their feet. She gasped.

"Water-pipe—in the basement," he said, smiling and taking her by the shoulders.

"Better take a look." She moved towards the stairs.

"Why should you go down there? I'll tend to it."

But she shook her head and pulled away. It was her penance for gasping. She had to show she wasn't afraid. She had to show him—and it, too.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I'll get the pipe-wrench. It's in the trunk in the car." He went out the back door. She stood irresolute, then headed for the cellar stairs. The splashing was getting louder. The burst pipe was flooding the basement. It made a funny noise, like laughter.

He could hear it even when he walked up the driveway and opened the trunk of the car. These old houses always had something wrong with them; he might have known it. Burst pipes and—

Yes. He found the wrench. He walked back to the door, listening to the water gurgle, listening to his wife scream.

She *was* screaming! Screaming down in the basement, screaming down in the dark.

He ran, swinging the heavy wrench. He clumped down the stairs, down into the darkness, the screams tearing up at him. She was caught, it had her, she was struggling with it but it was too strong, too strong, and the light came streaming in on the pool of water beside the shattered pipe and in the reflection he saw her face and the blackness of other faces swirling around her and holding her.

He brought the wrench up, brought it down on the black blur, hammering and hammering and hammering until the screaming died away. And then he stopped and looked down at her. The dark blur had faded away into the reflection of the water—the reflection that had evoked it. But she was still there, and she was still, and she would be still forever now. Only the water was getting red, where her head rested in it. And the end of the wrench was red, too.

For a moment he started to tell her about it, and then he realized she was gone. Now there were only the two of them left. He and it.

And he was going upstairs. He was walking upstairs, still carrying the bloody wrench, and he was going over to the phone to call the police and explain.

He sat down in a chair before the phone, thinking about what he'd tell them, how he'd explain. It wouldn't be easy. There was this madwoman, see, and she looked into mirrors until there was more of her alive in her reflection than there was in her own body. So when she committed suicide she lived on, somehow, and came alive in mirrors or glass or anything that reflected. And she killed others or drove them to death and their reflections were somehow joined with hers so that this thing kept getting stronger and stronger, sucking away at life with that awful core of pride that could live beyond death. Woman, thy name is vanity! And that, gentleman, is why I killed my wife.

Yes, it was a fine explanation, but it wouldn't hold water. *Water*—the pool in the basement had evoked it. He might have known it if only he'd stopped to think, to reflect. *Reflect*. That was the wrong word, now. *Reflect*. The way the windowpane before him was reflecting.

He stared into the glass now, saw it behind him, surging up from the shadows. He saw the bearded man's face, the peering, pathetic, empty eyes of a little girl, the goggling grimacing stare of an old woman. It wasn't there, behind him, but it was alive in the reflection, and as he rose he gripped the wrench tightly. It wasn't there, but he'd strike at it, fight at it, come to grips with it somehow.

He turned, moving back, the ring of shadow-faces pressing. He swung the wrench. Then he saw *her* face coming up through all the rest. Her face, with shining splinters where the eyes should be. He couldn't

smash it down, he couldn't hit her again.

It moved forward. He moved back. His arm went out to one side. He heard the tinkle of window glass behind him and vaguely remembered that this was how the old woman had died. The way he was dying now—falling through the window, and cutting his throat, and the pain lanced up and in, tearing at his brain as he hung there on the jagged spikes of glass, bleeding his life away.

Then he was gone.

His body hung there, but he was gone.

There was a little puddle on the floor, moving and growing. The light from outside shone on it, and there was a reflection.

Something emerged fully from the shadows now, emerged and capered demurely in the darkness.

It had the face of an old woman and the face of a child, the face of a bearded man, and *his* face, and *her* face, changing and blending.

It capered and postured, and then it squatted, dabbling. Finally, all alone in the empty house, it just sat there and waited. There was nothing to do now but wait for the next to come. And meanwhile, it could always admire itself in that growing, growing red reflection on the floor . . .

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The Man Who Collected Poe

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, by automobile, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of my destination.

I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with a feeling of utter confusion commingled with dismay. For it seemed to me as though I had visited this scene once before, or read of it, perhaps, in some frequently re-scanned tale. And yet assuredly it could not be, for only three days had passed since I had made the acquaintance of Launcelot Canning and received an invitation to visit him at his Maryland residence.

The circumstances under which I met Canning were simple; I happened to attend a bibliophilic meeting in Washington and was introduced to him by a mutual friend. Casual conversation gave place to absorbed and interested discussion when he discovered my preoccupation with works of fantasy. Upon learning that I was traveling upon a vacation with no set itinerary, Canning urged me to become his guest for a day and to examine, at my leisure, his unusual display of memorabilia.

"I feel, from our conversation, that we have much in common," he told me. "For you see, sir, in my love of fantasy I bow to no man. It is a taste I have perhaps inherited from my father and from his father before him, together with their considerable acquisitions in the genre. No doubt you would be gratified

with what I am prepared to show you, for in all due modesty, I beg to style myself the world's leading collector of the works of Edgar Allan Poe."

I confess that his invitation as such did not enthrall me, for I hold no brief for the literary hero-worshipper or the scholarly collector as a type. I own to a more than passing interest in the tales of Poe, but my interest does not extend to the point of ferreting out the exact date upon which Mr. Poe first decided to raise a mustache, nor would I be unduly intrigued by the opportunity to examine several hairs preserved from that hirsute appendage.

So it was rather the person and personality of Launcelot Canning himself which caused me to accept his proffered hospitality. For the man who proposed to become my host might have himself stepped from the pages of a Poe tale. His speech, as I have endeavored to indicate, was characterized by a courtly rodomontade so often exemplified in Poe's heroes—and beyond certainty, his appearance bore out the resemblance.

Launcelot Canning had the cadaverousness of complexion, the large, liquid, luminous eye, the thin, curved lips, the delicately modeled nose, finely molded chin, and dark, web-like hair of a typical Poe protagonist.

It was this phenomenon which prompted my acceptance and led me to journey to his Maryland estate which, as I now perceived, in itself manifested a Poe-esque quality of its own, intrinsic in the images of the gray sedge, the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows of the mansion of gloom. All that was lacking was a tarn and a moat—and as I prepared to enter the dwelling I half-expected to encounter therein the carved ceiling, the somber tapestries, the ebon floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies so vividly described by the author of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*.

Nor, upon entering Launcelot Canning's home was I too greatly disappointed in my expectations. True to both the atmospheric quality of the decrepit mansion and to my own fanciful presentiments, the door was opened in response to my knock by a valet who conducted me, in silence, through dark and intricate passages to the study of his master.

The room in which I found myself was very large and lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around; the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene.

Instead they rendered more distinct that peculiar quality of quasi-recollection; it was as though I found myself once again, after a protracted absence, in a familiar setting. I had read, I had imagined, I had dreamed, or I had actually beheld this setting before.

Upon my entrance, Launcelot Canning arose from a sofa on which he had been lying at full length, and greeted me with a vivacious warmth which had much in it, I at first thought, of an overdone cordiality.

Yet his tone, as he spoke of the object of my visit, of his earnest desire to see me, and of the solace he expected me to afford him in a mutual discussion of our interests, soon alleviated my initial misapprehension.

Launcelot Canning welcomed me with the rapt enthusiasm of the born collector—and I came to realize that he was indeed just that. For the Poe collection he shortly proposed to unveil before me was actually his birthright.

Initially, he disclosed, the nucleus of the present accumulation had begun with his grandfather, Christopher Canning, a respected merchant of Baltimore. Almost eighty years ago he had been one of the leading patrons of the arts in his community and as such was partially instrumental in arranging for the removal of Poe's body to the southeastern corner of the Presbyterian Cemetery at Fayette and Green Streets, where a suitable monument might be erected. This event occurred in the year 1875, and it was a few years prior to that time that Canning laid the foundation of the Poe collection.

"Thanks to his zeal," his grandson informed me, "I am today the fortunate possessor of a copy of virtually every existing specimen of Poe's published works. If you will step over here"—and he led me to a remote corner of the vaulted study, past the dark draperies, to a bookshelf which rose remotely to the shadowy ceiling—"I shall be pleased to corroborate that claim. Here is a copy of *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and minor Poems* in the eighteen twenty-nine edition, and here is the still earlier *Tamerlane and other Poems* of eighteen twenty-seven. The Boston edition, which, as you doubtless know, is valued today at fifteen thousand dollars. I can assure you that Grandfather Canning parted with no such sum in order to gain possession of this rarity."

He displayed the volumes with an air of commingled pride and cupidity which is oft-times characteristic of the collector and is by no means to be confused with either literary snobbery or ordinary greed. Realizing this, I remained patient as he exhibited further treasures—copies of the *Philadelphia Saturday Courier* containing early tales, bound volumes of *Southern Literary Messenger* during the period of Poe's editorship, *Graham's Magazine*, editions of the *New York Sun* and the *New York Mirror* boasting, respectively of *The Balloon Hoax* and *The Raven*, and files of *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*. Ascending a short library ladder, he handed down to me the Lea and Blanchard edition of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, the *Conchologist's First Book*, the Putnam *Eureka*, and, finally, the little paper booklet, published in 1843 and sold for 12½¢, entitled *The Prose Romances of Edgar A. Poe*; an insignificant trifle containing two tales which is valued by present-day collectors at \$50,000.

Canning informed me of this last fact, and, indeed, kept up a running commentary upon each item he presented. There was no doubt but that he was a Poe scholar as well as a Poe collector, and his words informed tattered specimens of the *Broadway Journal* and *Godey's Lady's Book* with a singular fascination not necessarily inherent in the flimsy sheets or their contents.

"I owe a great debt to Grandfather Canning's obsession," he observed, descending the ladder and joining me before the bookshelves. "It is not altogether a breach of confidence to admit that his interest in Poe did reach the point of an obsession, and perhaps eventually of an absolute mania. The knowledge, alas, is public property, I fear."

"In the early seventies he built this house, and I am quite sure that you have been observant enough to note that it in itself is almost a replica of a typical Poe-esque mansion. This was his study, and it was here that he was wont to pore over the books, the letters, and the numerous mementoes of Poe's life."

"What prompted a retired merchant to devote himself so fanatically to the pursuit of a hobby, I cannot say. Let it suffice that he virtually withdrew from the world and from all other normal interests. He conducted a voluminous and lengthy correspondence with aging men and women who had known Poe in their lifetime—made pilgrimages to Fordham, sent his agents to West Point, to England and Scotland, to virtually every locale in which Poe had set foot during his lifetime. He acquired letters and souvenirs as gifts, he bought them, and—I fear—stole them, if no other means of acquisition proved feasible."

Launcelot Canning smiled and nodded. "Does all this sound strange to you? I confess that once I, too, found it almost incredible, a fragment of romance. Now, after years spent here, I have lost my own objectivity."

"Yes, it is strange," I replied. "But are you quite sure that there was not some obscure personal reason for your grandfather's interest? Had he met Poe as a boy, or been closely associated with one of his friends? Was there, perhaps, a distant, undisclosed relationship?"

At the mention of the last word, Canning started visibly, and a tremor of agitation overspread his countenance.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "There you voice my own inmost conviction. A relationship—assuredly there must have been one—I am morally, instinctively certain that Grandfather Canning felt or knew himself to be linked to Edgar Poe by ties of blood. Nothing else could account for his strong initial interest, his continuing defense of Poe in the literary controversies of the day, and his final melancholy lapse into a world of delusion and illusion.

"Yet he never voiced a statement or put an allegation upon paper—and I have searched the collection of letters in vain for the slightest clue.

"It is curious that you so promptly divine a suspicion held not only by myself but by my father. He was only a child at the time of my Grandfather Canning's death, but the attendant circumstances left a profound impression upon his sensitive nature. Although he was immediately removed from this house to the home of his mother's people in Baltimore, he lost no time in returning upon assuming his inheritance in early manhood.

"Fortunately being in possession of a considerable income, he was able to devote his entire lifetime to further research. The name of Arthur Canning is still well known in the world of literary criticism, but for some reason he preferred to pursue his scholarly examination of Poe's career in privacy. I believe this preference was dictated by an inner sensibility; that he was endeavoring to unearth some information which would prove his father's, his, and for that matter, my own, kinship to Edgar Poe."

"You say your father was also a collector?" I prompted.

"A statement I am prepared to substantiate," replied my host, as he led me to yet another corner of the shadow-shrouded study. "But first, if you would accept a glass of wine?"

He filled, not glasses, but veritable beakers from a large carafe, and we toasted one another in silent appreciation. It is perhaps unnecessary for me to observe that the wine was a fine old Amontillado.

"Now, then," said Launcelot Canning. "My father's special province in Poe research consisted of the accumulation and study of letters."

Opening a series of large trays or drawers beneath the bookshelves, he drew out file after file of glassined folios, and for the space of the next half hour I examined Edgar Poe's correspondence—letters to Henry Herring, to Doctor Snodgrass, Sarah Shelton, James P. Moss, Elizabeth Poe—missives to Mrs. Rockwood, Helen Whitman, Anne Lynch, John Pendleton Kennedy—notes to Mrs. Richmond, to John Allan, to Annie, to his brother, Henry—a profusion of documents, a veritable epistolary cornucopia.

During the course of my perusal my host took occasion to refill our beakers with wine, and the heady draught began to take effect—for we had not eaten, and I own I gave no thought to food, so absorbed was I in the yellowed pages illumining Poe's past.

Here was wit, erudition, literary criticism; here were the muddled, maudlin outpourings of a mind gone in drink and despair; here was the draft of a projected story, the fragments of a poem; here were a pitiful cry for deliverance and a paean to living beauty; here were a dignified response to a dunning letter and an editorial pronunciamento to an admirer; here were love, hate, pride, anger, celestial serenity, abject

penitence, authority, wonder, resolution, indecision, joy, and soul-sickening melancholia.

Here were the gifted elocutionist, the stammering drunkard, the adoring husband, the frantic lover, the proud editor, the indigent pauper, the grandiose dreamer, the shabby realist, the scientific inquirer, the gullible metaphysician, the dependent stepson, the free and untrammelled spirit, the hack, the poet, the enigma that was Edgar Allan Poe.

Again the beakers were filled and emptied.

I drank deeply with my lips, and with my eyes more deeply still.

For the first time the true enthusiasm of Launcelot Canning was communicated to my own sensibilities—I divined the eternal fascination found in a consideration of Poe the writer and Poe the man; he who wrote *Tragedy*, lived *Tragedy*, was *Tragedy*; he who penned *Mystery*, lived and died in *Mystery*, and who today looms on the literary scene as *Mystery* incarnate.

And *Mystery* Poe remained, despite Arthur Canning's careful study of the letters. "My father learned nothing," my host confided, "even though he assembled, as you see here, a collection to delight the heart of a Mabbott or a Quinn. So his search ranged further. By this time I was old enough to share both his interest and his inquiries. Come," and he led me to an ornate chest which rested beneath the windows against the west wall of the study.

Kneeling, he unlocked the repository, and then drew forth, in rapid and marvelous succession, a series of objects each of which boasted of intimate connection with Poe's life.

There were souvenirs of his youth and his schooling abroad—a book he had used during his sojourn at West Point—mementoes of his days as a theatrical critic in the form of play-bills, a pen used during his editorial period, a fan once owned by his girl-wife, Virginia, a brooch of Mrs. Clemm's; a profusion of objects including such diverse articles as a cravat-stock and—curiously enough—Poe's battered and tarnished flute.

Again we drank, and I own the wine was potent. Canning's countenance remained cadaverously wan—but, moreover, there was a species of mad hilarity in his eye—an evident restrained hysteria in his whole demeanor. At length, from the scattered heap of curiosities, I happened to draw forth and examine a little box of no remarkable character, whereupon I was constrained to inquire its history and what part it had played in the life of Poe.

"In the *life* of Poe?" A visible tremor convulsed the features of my host, then rapidly passed in transformation to a grimace, a rictus of amusement, "This little box—and you will note how, by some fateful design or contrived coincidence it bears a resemblance to the box he himself conceived and described in his tale *Berenice*—this little box is concerned with his death, rather than his life. It is, in fact, the selfsame box my Grandfather Christopher Canning clutched to his bosom when they found him down there."

Again the tremor, again the grimace. "But stay, I have not yet told you of the details. Perhaps you would be interested in seeing the spot where Christopher Canning was stricken; I have already told you of his madness, but I did not more than hint at the character of his delusions. You have been patient with me, and more than patient. Your understanding shall be rewarded, for I perceive you can be fully entrusted with the facts."

What further revelations Canning was prepared to make I could not say, but his manner was such as to inspire a vague disquiet and trepidation in my breast.

Upon perceiving my unease he laughed shortly and laid a hand upon my shoulder. "Come, this should interest you as an *aficionado* of fantasy," he said. "But first, another drink to speed our journey."

He poured, we drank, and then he led the way from that vaulted chamber, down the silent halls, down the staircase, and into the lowest recesses of the building until we reached what resembled a donjon-keep, its floor and the interior of a long archway carefully sheathed in copper. We paused before a door of massive iron. Again I felt in the aspect of this scene an element evocative of recognition or recollection.

Canning's intoxication was such that he misinterpreted, or chose to misinterpret, my reaction.

"You need not be afraid," he assured me. "Nothing has happened down here since that day, almost seventy years ago, when his servants discovered him stretched out before this door, the little box clutched to his bosom; collapsed, and in a state of delirium from which he never emerged. For six months he lingered, a hopeless maniac—raving as wildly from the very moment of his discovery as at the moment he died—babbling his visions of the giant horse, the fissured house collapsing into the tarn, the black cat, the pit, the pendulum, the raven on the pallid bust, the beating heart, the pearly teeth, and the nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity from which a voice emanated.

"Nor was that all he babbled," Canning confided, and here his voice sank to a whisper that reverberated through the copper-sheathed hall and against the iron door. "He hinted other things far worse than fantasy; of a ghastly reality surpassing all of the phantasms of Poe.

"For the first time my father and the servants learned the purpose of the room he had built beyond this iron door, and learned what Christopher Canning had done to establish his title as the world's foremost collector of Poe.

"For he babbled again of Poe's death, thirty years earlier, in eighteen forty-nine—of the burial in the Presbyterian Cemetery—and of the removal of the coffin in eighteen seventy-four to the corner where the monument was raised. As I told you, and as was known then, my grandfather had played a public part in instigating that removal. But now we learned of the private part—learned that there was a monument and a grave, but no coffin in the earth beneath Poe's alleged resting place. The coffin now rested in the secret room at the end of this passage. That is why the room, the house itself, had been built.

"I tell you, he had stolen the body of Edgar Allan Poe—and as he shrieked aloud in his final madness, did not this indeed make him the greatest collector of Poe?"

"His ultimate intent was never divined, but my father made one significant discovery—the little box clutched to Christopher Canning's bosom contained a portion of the crumbled bones, the veritable dust that was all that remained of Poe's corpse."

My host shuddered and turned away. He led me back along that hall of horror, up the stairs, into the study. Silently, he filled our beakers and I drank as hastily, as deeply, as desperately as he.

"What could my father do? To own the truth was to create a public scandal. He chose instead to keep silence; to devote his own life to study in retirement.

"Naturally the shock affected him profoundly; to my knowledge he never entered the room beyond the iron door and, indeed, I did not know of the room or its contents until the hour of his death—and it was not until some years later that I myself found the key among his effects.

"But find the key I did, and the story was immediately and completely corroborated. Today I am the greatest collector of Poe—for he lies in the keep below, my eternal trophy!"

This time I poured the wine. As I did so, I noted for the first time the imminence of a storm; the impetuous fury of its gusts shaking the casements, and the echoes of its thunder rolling and rumbling down the time-corroded corridors of the old house.

The wild, overstrained vivacity with which my host hearkened, or apparently hearkened, to these sounds did nothing to reassure me—for his recent revelation led me to suspect his sanity.

That the body of Edgar Allan Poe had been stolen—that this mansion had been built to house it—that it was indeed enshrined in a crypt below—that grandsire, son, and grandson had dwelt here alone, apart, enslaved to a sepulchral secret—was beyond sane belief.

And yet, surrounded now by the night and the storm, in a setting torn from Poe's own frenzied fancies, I could not be sure. Here the past was still alive, the very spirit of Poe's tales breathed forth its corruption upon the scene.

As thunder boomed, Launcelot Canning took up Poe's flute, and, whether in defiance of the storm without or as a mocking accompaniment, he played; blowing upon it with drunken persistence, with eery atonality, with nerve-shattering shrillness. To the shrieking of that infernal instrument the thunder added a braying counterpoint.

Uneasy, uncertain, and unnerved, I retreated into the shadows of the bookshelves at the farther end of the room, and idly scanned the titles of a row of ancient tomes. Here was the *Chiromancy* of Robert Flud, the *Directorium Inquisitorum*, a rare and curious book in quarto Gothic that was the manual of a forgotten church; and betwixt and between the volumes of pseudo-scientific inquiry, theological speculation, and sundry incunabula I found titles that arrested and appalled me. *De Vermis Mysteriis* and the *Liber Eibon*, treatises on demonology, on witchcraft, on sorcery mouldered in crumbling binding. The books were old, but the books were not dusty. They had been read—

"Read them?" It was as though Canning divined my inmost thoughts. He had put aside his flute and now approached me, tittering as though in continued drunken defiance of the storm. Odd echoes and boomings now sounded through the long halls of the house, and curious grating sounds threatened to drown out his words and his laughter.

"Read them?" said Canning. "I study them. Yes, I have gone beyond grandfather and father, too. It was I who procured the books that held the key, and it was I who found the key. A key more difficult to discover, and more important, than the key to the vaults below. I often wonder if Poe himself had access to these selfsame tomes, knew the selfsame secrets. The secrets of the grave and what lies beyond, and what can be summoned forth if one but holds the key."

He stumbled away and returned with wine. "Drink," he said. "Drink to the night and the storm."

I brushed the proffered glass aside. "Enough," I said. "I must be on my way."

Was it fancy or did I find fear frozen on his features? Canning clutched my arm and cried, "No, stay with me! This is no night on which to be alone; I swear I cannot abide the thought of being alone, I can bear to be alone no more!"

His incoherent babble mingled with the thunder and the echoes; I drew back and confronted him. "Control yourself," I counseled. "Confess that this is a hoax, an elaborate imposture arranged to please your fancy."

"Hoax? Imposture? Stay, and I shall prove to you beyond all doubt"—and so saying, Launcelot Canning stooped and opened a small drawer set in the wall beneath and beside the bookshelves. "This

should repay you for your interest in my story, and in Poe," he murmured. "Know that you are the first, other person than myself, to glimpse these treasures."

He handed me a sheaf of manuscripts on plain white paper; documents written in ink curiously similar to that I had noted while perusing Poe's letters. Pages were clipped together in groups, and for a moment I scanned titles alone.

"*The Worm of Midnight, by Edgar Poe,*" I read, aloud. "*The Crypt,*" I breathed. And here, "*The Further Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*"—and in my agitation I came close to dropping the precious pages. "Are these what they appear to be—the unpublished tales of Poe?"

My host bowed.

"Unpublished, undiscovered, unknown, save to me—and to you."

"But this cannot be," I protested. "Surely there would have been a mention of them somewhere, in Poe's own letters or those of his contemporaries. There would have been a clue, an indication, somewhere, someplace, somehow."

Thunder mingled with my words, and thunder echoed in Canning's shouted reply.

"You dare to presume an imposture? Then compare!" He stooped again and brought out a glassined folio of letters. "Here—is this not the veritable script of Edgar Poe? Look at the calligraphy of the letter, then at the manuscripts. Can you say they are not penned by the selfsame hand?"

I looked at the handwriting, wondered at the possibilities of a monomaniac's forgery. Could Launcelot Canning, a victim of mental disorder, thus painstakingly simulate Poe's hand?

"Read, then!" Canning screamed through the thunder. "Read, and dare to say that these tales were written by any other than Edgar Poe, whose genius defies the corruption of Time and the Conqueror Worm!"

I read but a line or two, holding the topmost manuscript close to eyes that strained beneath wavering candlelight; but even in the flickering illumination I noted that which told me the only, the incontestable truth. For the paper, the curiously *unyellowed* paper, bore a visible watermark; the name of a firm of well-known modern stationers, and the date—1949.

Putting the sheaf aside, I endeavored to compose myself as I moved away from Launcelot Canning. For now I knew the truth; knew that, one hundred years after Poe's death a semblance of his spirit still lived in the distorted and disordered soul of Canning. Incarnation, reincarnation, call it what you will; Canning was, in his own irrational mind, Edgar Allan Poe.

Stifled and dull echoes of thunder from a remote portion of the mansion now commingled with the soundless seething of my own inner turmoil, as I turned and rashly addressed my host.

"Confess!" I cried. "Is it not true that you have written these tales, fancying yourself the embodiment of Poe? Is it not true that you suffer from a singular delusion born of solitude and everlasting brooding upon the past; that you have reached a stage characterized by the conviction that Poe still lives on in your own person?"

A strong shudder came over him and a sickly smile quivered about his lips as he replied. "Fool! I say to you that I have spoken the truth. Can you doubt the evidence of your senses? This house is real, the Poe collection exists, and the stories exist—they exist, I swear, as truly as the body lying in the crypt below!"

I took up the little box from the table and removed the lid. "Not so," I answered. "You said your grandfather was found with this box clutched to his breast, before the door of the vault, and that it contained Poe's dust. Yet you cannot escape the fact that the box is empty." I faced him furiously. "Admit it, the story is a fabrication, a romance. Poe's body does not lie beneath this house, nor are these his unpublished works, written during his lifetime and concealed."

"True enough." Canning's smile was ghastly beyond belief. "The dust is gone because I took it and used it—because in the works of wizardry I found the formulae, the arcana whereby I could raise the flesh, re-create the body from the essential salts of the grave. Poe does not *lie* beneath this house—he *lives!* And the tales are *his posthumous works!*"

Accented by thunder, his words crashed against my consciousness.

"That was the end-all and the be-all of my planning, of my studies, of my work, of my life! To raise, by sorcery, the veritable spirit of Edgar Poe from the grave—re clothed and animate in flesh—set him to dwell and dream and do his work again in the private chambers I built in the vaults below—and this I have done! To steal a corpse is but a ghoulish prank; mine is the achievement of true genius!"

The distinct, hollow, metallic, and clangorous, yet apparently muffled reverberation accompanying his words caused him to turn in his seat and face the door of the study, so that I could not see the workings of his countenance—nor could he read my own reaction to his ravings.

His words came but faintly to my ears through the thunder that now shook the house in a relentless grip; the wind rattling the casements and flickering the candle-flame from the great silver candelabra sent a soaring sighing in an anguished accompaniment to his speech.

"I would show him to you, but I dare not; for he hates me as he hates life. I have locked him in the vault, alone, for the resurrected have no need of food nor drink. And he sits there, pen moving over paper, endlessly moving, endlessly pouring out the evil essence of all he guessed and hinted at in life and which he learned in death.

"Do you not see the tragic pity of my plight? I sought to raise his spirit from the dead, to give the world anew of his genius—and yet these tales, these works, are filled and fraught with a terror not to be endured. They cannot be shown to the world, he cannot be shown to the world; in bringing back the dead I have brought back the fruits of death!"

Echoes sounded anew as I moved towards the door—moved, I confess, to flee this accursed house and its accursed owner.

Canning clutched my hand, my arm, my shoulder. "You cannot go!" he shouted above the storm. "I spoke of his escaping, but did you not guess? Did you not hear it through the thunder—the grating of the door?"

I pushed him aside and he blundered backwards upsetting the candelabra, so that flames licked now across the carpeting.

"Wait!" he cried. "Have you not heard his footstep on the stair? *Madman, I tell you that he now stands without the door!*"

A rush of wind, a roar of flame, a shroud of smoke rose all about us. Throwing open the huge, antique panels to which Canning pointed, I staggered into the hall.

I speak of wind, of flame, of smoke—enough to obscure all vision. I speak of Canning's screams, and

of thunder loud enough to drown all sound. I speak of terror born of loathing and of desperation enough to shatter all my sanity.

Despite these things, I can never erase from my consciousness that which I beheld as I fled past the doorway and down the hall.

There without the doors there *did* stand a lofty and enshrouded figure; a figure all too familiar, with pallid features, high, domed forehead, mustache set above a mouth. My glimpse lasted but an instant, an instant during which the man—the corpse—the apparition—the hallucination, call it what you will—moved forward into the chamber and clasped Canning to his breast in an unbreakable embrace. Together, the two figures tottered toward the flames, which now rose to blot out vision forever more.

From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast. The storm was still abroad in all its wrath, and now fire came to claim the house of Canning for its own.

Suddenly there shot along the path before me a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have issued—but it was only the flames, rising in supernatural splendor to consume the mansion, and the secrets, of the man who collected Poe.

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Mr. Steinway

The first time I saw Leo, I thought he was dead.

His hair was so black and his skin was so white—I'd never seen hands so pale and thin. They lay crossed on his chest, concealing the rhythm of his breathing. There was something almost repellent about him; he was thin and still and there was such a *nothingness* in his face. It was like a death-mask that had been made a little too late, after the last trace of the living personality had forever fled. I stared down at Leo, shuddered a little, and started to move away.

Then he opened his eyes, and I fell in love with him.

He sat up, swung his legs over the side of the enormous sofa, grinned at me, and rose. At least I suppose he did these things. All I really noticed was the deep brown of his pupils and the warm, rich hunger that poured from them into me, the hunger that poured and found a feeding-place somewhere in my heart.

I know what it sounds like. But I'm not a schoolgirl, and I don't keep a diary, and it's years since I've had a mad, mad crush. I'd been quite assured of my own emotional maturity for some time.

But he opened his eyes, and I fell in love at first sight.

Harry was making the introductions, now.

". . . Dorothy Endicott. She heard you play in Detroit last week and she wanted to meet you. Dorothy, this is Leo Winston."

He was quite tall, and he managed a little bow, or rather an inclination of his head, without once moving his gaze. I don't know *what* he said. "Charmed" or "delighted" or "pleased to meet you"—it didn't matter. He was *looking* at me.

I did all the wrong things. I blushed. I giggled. I said something about how much I admired his playing, and then I repeated myself and tripped over the words.

But I did *one* right thing. I looked back. All the while Harry was explaining how we'd just happened to stop up and we didn't mean to disturb him but the door was open so we walked right in. And he wanted to remind Leo about placing the piano for tomorrow night's concert, and the ticket-sales were going good according to the latest report this noon. And now he had to run along and arrange for the puffs for tomorrow's papers, so—

"There's no reason for you to hurry off, is there, Miss Endicott?"

There was, I agreed, no reason at all. So Harry left, like the good little Samaritan he was, and I stayed and talked to Leo Winston.

I don't know what we talked about. It's only in stories that people seem able to remember long conversations *verbatim*. (Or is it long *verbatim* conversations? It's only in stories that people have perfect control of grammar, too.)

But I learned that his name was once Leo Weinstein . . . that he was thirty-one years old . . . unmarried . . . he liked Siamese kittens . . . he broke his leg once, skiing up at Saranac . . . he liked Manhattans made with dry vermouth, too.

It was over the second of these, after I told him all about myself (and nothing, unless he could read my eyes) that he asked me if I wanted to meet Mr. Steinway.

Of course I said yes, and we went into the other room, the one behind the sliding doors. There sat Mr. Steinway, all black and polished to perfection, grinning a welcome with his eighty-eight teeth.

"Would you like to hear Mr. Steinway play something for you?" asked Leo.

I nodded, feeling a warmth far beyond the power of two Manhattans to inspire—a warmth born of the way he said it. I hadn't felt that way since I was thirteen and in love with Bill Prentice and he asked if I'd like to see him do a Full Gaynor off the high board.

So Leo sat down on the bench and he patted Mr. Steinway on the leg the way I sometimes pat Angkor, my Siamese kitten. And they played for me. They played the *Appassionata* and the *berceuse* from *The Firebird* and something very odd by Prokofieff and then several things by the two Scotts—Cyril, and Raymond. I suppose Leo wanted to show his versatility, or perhaps that was Mr. Steinway's idea. Anyway, I liked it all, and I said so, emphatically.

"I'm glad you appreciate Mr. Steinway," Leo said. "He's very sensitive, I'll have you know, like everyone in my family. And he's been with me a long time—almost eleven years. He was a surprise from my mother, when I made my debut at Carnegie."

Leo stood up. He was very close to me, because I'd been sitting on the piano bench beside him ever since the *berceuse*, and that made it easier for me to see his eyes as he closed the black lip over Mr. Steinway's teeth and said, "Time for a little rest, before they come and get you."

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Is Mr. Steinway ill?"

"Not at all—I thought he sounded in the best of spirits." Leo grinned (how could I ever have imagined him dead, with his incandescent vitality?) and faced me. "He's going over to the concert hall this evening—he has a date to play with me tomorrow night. Which reminds me, will you be there?"

The only answer for that one was "Silly boy!" but I restrained it. Restraint did not come easy with me when I was with Leo. Not when he looked at me like that. With his eyes holding such hunger, and the long slim fingers caressing the panelling as they had caressed the keys, as they could so easily caress—

I trust I'm making myself clear?

Certainly I was transparent enough the following evening. After the concert we went out, just the four of us; Harry and his wife, Leo and I. And then just Leo and I, in the candlelight of the apartment, in the big room that looked so bare and empty without Mr. Steinway squatting there where he belonged. We watched stars over Central Park and then we watched the reflections in each other's pupils, and what we said and what we did are not meant for sharing.

The next day, after we read the notices, we went for a walk in the Park. Leo had to wait until they'd moved Mr. Steinway back into the apartment, and it was lovely in the Park, as always. As it must have been for millions who, somewhere in their memories, hold an instant when they walked in Central Park in May and owned it all—the trees, the sunshine, the distant laughter rising and falling as transiently as the heartbeat quickened by a moment of ecstasy.

But—"I think they're on the way over," Leo said, glancing at his watch and rising from the bench. "I really ought to be there when they move him in. Mr. Steinway's big, but he's quite delicate, actually."

I took his hand. "Come on, then," I said.

He frowned. I'd never seen him frown before, and it seemed out of character to me. "Maybe you'd better not, Dorothy. I mean, it's a slow job up those stairs, and then I'll have to practice. Don't forget, I'm booked for Boston next Friday, and that means four hours a day for the next week—Mr. Steinway and I must get our program in shape. We're doing the Ravel *Concerto*, the Left-Hand one, with the Symphony, and Mr. Steinway isn't fond of Ravel. Besides, he'll be leaving on Wednesday morning, so there really isn't too much time."

"But you aren't taking the piano with you on tour, are you?"

"Certainly. Where I go, Mr. Steinway goes. I've never used another instrument since Mother gave him to me. I wouldn't feel right about it, and I'm sure it would break Mr. Steinway's heart."

Mr. Steinway's heart.

I had a rival, it seems. And I laughed about it, we both laughed about it, and he went away to his work and I went back to my apartment to sleep, perchance to dream . . .

I tried phoning him about five. No answer. I waited a half hour, and then I grabbed the nearest rosy pink cloud and floated over to his apartment.

As usual—as was customary with Leo, whose mother had literally kept "open house" out on the Cape—the door was unlocked. And I naturally took advantage of the situation to tiptoe in and surprise Leo. I pictured him playing, practicing, absorbed in his work. But Mr. Steinway was silent, and the sliding doors to the other room were closed. I got my surprise in the anteroom.

Leo was dead again.

He lay there on the huge couch, his pallor almost phosphorescent in the gathering twilight. And his eyes were closed and his ears were closed and his very heart seemed closed until I bent down and blended the warmth of my lips with his own.

"Dorothy!"

"Sleeping Beauty, in reverse!" I exclaimed, triumphantly, rumpling his hair. "What's the matter, darling? Tired after your rehearsal? I don't blame you, considering—"

It was still light enough for me to recognize his frown.

"Did I—startle you?" It was a B-movie line, but this was, to me, a B-movie situation. The brilliant young pianist, torn between love and a career, interrupted in his pursuit of art by the sweet young thing. He frowns, rises, takes her by the shoulders as the camera pans in close and says—

"Dorothy, there's something you and I must talk about."

I was right. Here it comes, I told myself. The lecture about how art comes first, love and work don't mix—and after last night, too! I suppose I pouted. I make a very pretty pout, on occasion. But I waited, prepared to hear him out.

And he said, "Dorothy, what do you know about Solar Science?"

"I've never heard of it."

"That's not surprising. It's not a popular system; nothing in para-psychology has gained general acceptance. But it works, you know. It works. Perhaps I'd better explain from the beginning, so you'll understand."

So he explained from the beginning, and I did my best to understand. He must have talked for over an hour, but what I got out of it boils down to just a little.

It was his mother, really, who got interested in Solar Science. Apparently the basis of the concept was similar to yoga or some of these new mental health systems. She'd been experimenting for about a year before her death—and during the past four years, since her passing, Leo had worked on it alone. The trance was part of the system. Briefly, as near as I could make out, it consisted of concentration—"but effortless effort of concentration, that's important"—on one's inner self, in order to establish "complete self-awareness." According to Solar Science one can become perfectly and utterly aware of one's entire being, and "communicate" with the organs of the body, the cells, the very atomic and molecular structure. Because everything, down to the very molecules, possesses a vibration-frequency and is therefore alive. And the personality, as an integrated unit, achieves full harmony only when complete communication is established.

Leo practiced four hours a day with Mr. Steinway. And he devoted at least two hours a day to Solar Science and "self-awareness." It had done wonders for him, done wonders for his playing. For relaxation, for renewal, for serenity, it was the ultimate answer. And it led to an *extension* of awareness. But he'd talk about that some other time.

What *did* I think?

I honestly didn't know. Like everyone else, I'd heard a lot, and listened to very little, about telepathy and extra-sensory perception and teleportation and such things. And I'd always associated these matters with the comic-strip idea of scientists and psychologists and outright charlatans and gullible old women given to wearing long ropes of wooden beads which they twisted nervously during séances.

It was something different to hear Leo talk about it, to feel the intensity of his conviction, to hear him say—with a belief that burned—that this meditation was all that had preserved his sanity in the years after his mother died.

So I told him I understood, and I'd never interfere with his scheme of living, and all I wanted was to be with him and be *for* him whenever and wherever there was a place for me in his life. And, at the time, I believed it.

I believed it even though I could only see him for an hour or so, each evening, before his Boston concert. I got a few TV leads during the week—Harry arranged some auditions, but the client postponed his decision until the first of the month—and that helped to pass the time.

Then I flew up to Boston for the concert, and Leo was magnificent, and we came back together with nary a thought or a word about Solar Science or anything except the two of us.

But on Sunday morning, we were three again. Mr. Steinway arrived.

I dashed over to my own apartment and came running back after lunch. Central Park shimmered in the sunlight, and I admit I shared something of its radiance.

Until I was in the apartment, and heard Mr. Steinway rumbling and growling and purring and screeching and cachinnating, and I hurried in to Leo and the piano stopped.

He frowned. It seemed I was developing quite a talent for making an unexpected entrance.

"I didn't expect you so soon," he said. "I was just practicing something new."

"So I heard. What's the rest of it?"

"Never mind, now. Did you want to go out this afternoon?" He said it just as if he didn't see the new shoes, the suit, the hat I'd bought from Mr. John just to surprise him.

"No. Honestly, darling, I didn't mean to interrupt. Go on with your playing."

Leo shook his head. He stared down at Mr. Steinway.

"Does it bother you to have me around when you practice?"

Leo didn't look up.

"I'll go away."

"Please," he said. "It isn't me. But I'm afraid that Mr. Steinway doesn't—respond to you properly."

That tore it. *That* ripped it to shreds. "Now wait a minute," I said, coolly (if white-hot rage is cool). "Are we doing a scene from *Harvey*, now? Is this some more of your Solar Science, and am I to infer that Mr. Steinway is alive? I admit I'm not very bright, not overly perceptive, and I couldn't be expected to share your sensitive reactions. So I've never noticed that Mr. Steinway had an existence of his own. As a matter of fact, to me, it's just another piano. And its legs don't begin to compare with my own."

"Dorothy, please—"

"Dorothy doesn't please! Dorothy isn't going to say one more word in the presence of your—your—incubus, or whatever it is! So. Mr. Steinway doesn't *respond* to me properly, is that it? Well, you tell Mr. Steinway for me that he can go plumb to—"

Somehow he got me out of the apartment, into the sunlight, into the park, into his arms. And it was peaceful there, and his voice was soft, and far away the birds made a song that hurt me in my throat.

". . . so you weren't far wrong at that, darling," Leo told me. "I know it's hard to believe for anyone who hasn't studied Solar Science or ultrakinetic phenomena. But Mr. Steinway *is* alive in a way. I can communicate with him, and he can communicate with me."

"You *talk* to it? It *talks* to you?"

His laughter was reassuring, and I desperately wanted to be reassured, now. "Of course not. I'm talking about vibratory communication. Look at it this way, darling. I don't want to sound like a lecturer—but this is science, not imagination.

"Did you ever stop to think what makes a piano? It's a highly complicated arrangement of substances and materials—thousands of tiny, carefully calculated operations go into the construction of a truly fine instrument. In a way, the result is comparable to the creation of an artificial being; a musical robot. To begin with, there's a dozen different kinds of wood, of various ages and conditions. There're special finishes, and felt, gut, animal matter, varnish, metal, ivory—a combination of elements infinitely complex. And each has its own vibratory rate, which in turn forms part of the greater vibratory rate of the whole. These vibrations can be sensed, contacted, and understood."

I listened, because I wanted to find sense and sanity and serenity somewhere in it all. I wanted to believe, because this was Leo talking.

"Now, one thing more, and that's the crux of the matter. When vibration occurs, as it does in all being, electronic structure is disturbed. There's an action sequence—and a record of that action is made on the cellular structure.

"Now if you record many messages on a single piece of tape at different speeds, you'd have to play them back at these speeds in order to understand the message as a whole. Inability to do so would keep you from knowing or comprehending these messages. That's what ordinarily bars our communication with non-human life forms and gives us the impression that they have neither thought nor sentience.

"Since we humans use the development of the human brain as criterion, we aren't aware of the intelligence of other life forms. We don't know how intelligent they are because we, most of us, don't realize that rocks and trees and everything in the material universe can 'think' or 'record' or 'communicate' at its own level.

"That's what Solar Science has taught me—and it has given me the method of entering into communication with such forms. Naturally it isn't simple. But from self-awareness I have slowly proceeded into a more general awareness of vibratory rates. It's only logical that Mr. Steinway, so much a part of my life and a part of me, would be a logical subject for an experiment in communication. I've made that experiment and succeeded, at least partially. I can share communication with Mr. Steinway; and it's not all one-way, I assure you. You remember what the Bible said about 'sermons in stones'—it's literally true."

Of course he said more than that, and less, and in different words. But I got the idea. I got the idea only too well. Leo wasn't altogether rational.

"It's really a functional entity, too, darling," he was saying. "Mr. Steinway has a personality all his own. And it's a growing one, thanks to my ability to communicate with him in turn. When I practice, Mr. Steinway practices. When I play, Mr. Steinway plays. In a sense, Mr. Steinway does the actual playing and I'm really only the mechanism that starts the operation. It may sound incredible to you, Dorothy, but

I'm not fooling when I say there are things Mr. Steinway refuses to play. There are concert halls he doesn't like, certain tuning practices he refuses to respond to or adjust to. He's a temperamental artist, believe me, but he's a great one! And I respect his individuality and his talent.

"Give me a chance, darling—a chance to communicate with him until he understands you and your place in our lives. I can override his jealousy; after all, isn't it natural that he'd be jealous? Let me attune our vibrations, until he senses the reality of your presence as I sense it. Please, try not to think of me as crazy. It's not hallucination. Believe me."

I stood up. "All right, Leo. I believe you. But the rest is up to you. I shan't be seeing you again until—until you've made some arrangements."

My high heels clip-clip-clipped up the path. He didn't try to follow me. A cloud covered the sun, wrapped it in a ragged cloth, torn and dirty. Torn and dirty—

I went to Harry, of course. After all, he was Leo's agent and he'd know. But he *didn't* know. I found that out at once, and I cut myself off before I said too much. As far as Harry was concerned, Leo was perfectly normal.

"Except, of course, you may be thinking of that business with his mother. The old lady's death hit him pretty hard: you know what show business moms are like. She ran the whole shooting-match for years, and when she kicked off like that, he kind of went haywire for a while. But he's all right now. A good man, Leo. A comer. Thinking of a European flier next season—they think Solomon is such hot stuff. Wait until they hear Leo."

That's what I got out of Harry, and it wasn't much. Or *was* it?

It was enough to set me thinking, as I walked home—thinking about little Leo Weinstein, the boy prodigy, and his adoring mother. She watched over him, shielded him, saw to it that he practiced and rehearsed, regulated the details of his life so he came to depend upon her utterly. And then, when he made his debut like a good boy, she gave him Mr. Steinway.

Leo had cracked up, a bit, when she died. I could imagine that very easily. He had cracked up until he turned to the mother's gift for support. Mr. Steinway had taken over. Mr. Steinway was more than a piano, but not in the way Leo said. In reality, Mr. Steinway had become a surrogate for the mother. An extension of the Oedipus-situation, wasn't that what they called it?

Everything was falling into a pattern, now. Leo, lying on the couch and looking as though he were dead—returning, in fantasy, to the womb. Leo "communicating" with the vibrations of inanimate objects—trying to maintain contact with his mother beyond the grave.

That was it, that must be it, and I knew no way of fighting the situation. Silver cord from the mother or silver chord from the piano—it formed a Gordian knot either way, I was weaponless.

I arrived at my apartment and my decision simultaneously. Leo was out of my life. Except—

He was waiting for me in the hall.

Oh, it's easy to be logical, and reason matters out coldly, and decide on a sensible course of action. Until somebody holds you in his arms, and you have the feeling that you *belong* there and he promises you that things will be different from now on, he understands, he can't live without you. He said all the tried and true things, the trite and true things, the right and true things. And all that had gone before faded away with the daylight, and the stars came out and spread their splendor . . .

I must be very exact now. It's important that I be exact. I want to tell just how it was the next afternoon when I walked around to his apartment.

The door was open and I came in, and it was like coming home. Until I saw that the sliding doors to the other room were closed, until I started towards them, until I heard the music. Leo—and Mr. Steinway—were playing again.

I called it "music," but it wasn't *that* any more than the sudden anguished scream thrust from a human throat is normal communication. All I can say is that the piano was playing and the sound came to me as vibrations, and for the first time I understood something of what Leo had meant.

For I heard, and understood that I heard, the shrill trumpeting of elephants, the deep groaning of boughs in the night wind, the crash of toppling timber, the slow rumble of ore filling a furnace, the hideous hissing of molten metal, the screech of steel, the agonized whine of sandpaper, the tormented thrum of twisted strings. The voices that were not voices spoke, the inanimate was animate, and Mr. Steinway was alive.

Until I slid the doors open, and the sound suddenly ceased, and I saw Mr. Steinway sitting there alone.

Yes, he was alone, and I saw it as surely as I saw Leo slumped in the chair on the far side of the room, with the look of death on his face.

He couldn't have stopped in time and run across the room to that chair—any more than he could have composed that atonal *allegro* Mr. Steinway played.

Then I shook Leo, and he came alive again, and I was crying in his arms and telling him what I'd heard, and hearing him say, "It's happened, you can see that now, can't you? Mr. Steinway exists—he communicates directly—he's an integrated personality. Communication is a two-way affair, after all. And he can tap my energy, take what he needs from me to function. When I let go, he takes over. Don't you see?"

I saw. And I tried to keep the fear from my eyes, tried to banish it from my voice, when I spoke to him. "Come into the other room, Leo. Now. Hurry, and don't ask questions."

I didn't want questions, because I didn't want to tell him that I was afraid to talk in Mr. Steinway's presence. Because Mr. Steinway could hear, and he was jealous.

I didn't want Mr. Steinway to hear when I told Leo, "You've got to get rid of it. I don't care if it's alive or if we're both crazy. The important thing is to get rid of it, now. Get away from it. Together."

He nodded, but I didn't want nods.

"Listen to me, Leo! This is the only time I'll ask it, and your only chance to answer. Will you come away with me now, today? I mean it—pack a suitcase. Meet me at my apartment in half an hour. I'll phone Harry, tell him something, anything. We haven't time for anything more. I know we haven't time."

Leo looked at me, and his face started to go dead, and I took a deep breath, waiting for the sound to start again from the room beyond—but his eyes met mine, and then the color came back to his face and he smiled at me, *with* me, and he said, "I'll see you in twenty minutes. With suitcases."

I went down the stairs swiftly, and I knew I had perfect control. I had perfect control out on the street, too, until I heard the vibrations of my own high heels. And the sound of tires on the pavement, and the singing of the telephone wires in the wind, and the snick of traffic-lights, and the creaking of an

awning, and then came the sense of the sounds *under* the sounds and I heard the voice of the city. There's agony in asphalt and a slow melancholy in concrete, and wood is tortured when it splinters, and the vibrations of a piece of cloth twisted into clothing weaves terror from a threnody of thread. And all around me I felt the waves, the endless waves, beating in and pulsing over, pouring out their life.

Nothing looked different, and everything was changed. For the world was *alive*. For the first time, everything in the world came alive, and I sensed the straggle to survive. And the steps in my hallway were alive, and the banister was a long brown serpent, and it hurt the key to be twisted in the lock, and the bed sagged and the springs complained when I put down the suitcase and crashed my protesting clothes into its confines. And the mirror was a silver shimmer of torment, and the lipstick was being bruised by my lips, and I could never, never eat food again.

But I did what I had to do, and I glanced at my watch and tried to hear only the ticking, not the cries of coils and the moan of metal; tried to see only the time and not the hands that turned in ceaseless supplication.

Twenty minutes.

Only, now, forty minutes had passed. And I hadn't even phoned Harry yet (the black mouthpiece, the Bakelite corroding, the wires nailed to the crosses of telephone poles) and I couldn't phone because Leo wasn't here.

To go down again into the street was more than flesh could bear, but the need was stronger than the needs of flesh. And I went out into the seething symphony where all sound was vibration and all vibration was life, and I came to Leo's apartment and everything was dark.

Everything was dark except Mr. Steinway's teeth, gleaming like the tusks of elephants in forests of ebony and teak. Leo couldn't have moved Mr. Steinway from the inner room to the outer room. And he hated Chopin. He wouldn't sit there in the dark playing the *Funeral March* . . .

Mr. Steinway's teeth were spotted with little drops and they gleamed, too. And Mr. Steinway's heavy legs were wet. They brushed against me, because Mr. Steinway was rolling and rumbling towards me across the room, and he was playing and playing and telling me to look, look, look at the floor where I could see Leo dead, *really* dead, and all the power was Mr. Steinway's now, the power to play, the power to live, the power to kill . . .

Yes, it's true. I scraped the box and liberated the sulphur and released the flame and started the fire and let its roaring drown out the vibrations, drown out the voice of Mr. Steinway as he screamed and gnashed his eighty-eight teeth. I set the fire. I admit it. I killed Mr. Steinway. I admit it.

But I *didn't* kill Leo.

Why don't you ask *them*? *They're* burned, but *they* know. Ask the sofa. Ask the rug. Ask the pictures on the wall. *They* saw it happen. *They* know I'm not guilty.

You can do it. All you need is the ability to communicate with the vibrations. Just as I'm doing it now. See? I can hear everything they're saying, right in this room. I can understand the cot, and the walls, and the doors, and the bars.

I don't have anything more to say. If you don't believe me, if you won't help me, then go away. Let me just sit here and listen. Listen to the bars . . .

The Past Master

Statement of Debby Gross

Honestly, I could just die. The way George acts, you'd think it was my fault or something. You'd think he never even saw the guy. You'd think I stole his car. And he keeps asking me to explain everything to him. If I told him once, I told him a hundred times—and the *cops* too. Besides, what's there to tell him? He was there.

Of course, it doesn't make sense. I already know that, Honest to Pete, I wish I'd stayed home Sunday. I wish I'd told George I had another date when he called up. I wish I'd made him take me to the show instead of that old beach. Him and his convertible! Besides, your legs stick to those leather seats in hot weather.

But you should of seen me Sunday when he called. You'd think he was taking me to Florida or someplace, the way I acted. I had this new slack suit I bought at Sterns, with the plaid top sort of a halter, like. And I quick put on some more of that Restora Rinse. You know, George is the one down at the office who started everybody calling me "Blondie."

So anyhow he came around and picked me up about four, and it was still hot and he had the top down. I guess he just finished washing the car. It looked real snazzy, and he said, "Boy, it just matches your hair, don't it?"

First we drove along the Parkway and then out over the Drive. It was just packed, the cars, I mean. So he said how about it if we didn't go to the beach until after dinner.

That was all right by me, so we went to this Luigi's—it's a seafood place way south of the highway. It's real expensive and they got one of those big menus with all kinds of oozy stuff like pompanos and terrapins. That's a turtle, like.

I had a sirloin and French fries, and George had—I can't remember, oh, yes I do—he had fried chicken. Before we ate we had a couple drinks, and after we just sat in the booth and had a couple more. We were sort of kidding back and forth, you know, about the beach and all, and waiting until after dark so we could go swimming on account of not bringing any suits.

Anyways, I was kidding. That George, he'd just as soon do anything. And don't think I didn't know why he was feeding me all those drinks. When we went out he stopped over at the bar and picked up a pint.

The moon was just coming up, almost full, and we started singing while we drove, and I felt like I was getting right with it. So when he said let's not go to the regular beach—he knew this little place way off somewhere—I thought, why not?

It was like a bay, sort of, and you could park up on the bluff along this side road, and then walk down to the sand and see way out across the water.

Only that's not why George picked it. He wasn't interested in looking at water. First thing he did was

to spread out this big beach blanket, and the second thing he did was open up his pint, and the third thing he did was to start monkeying around.

Nothing serious, you understand, just monkeying around, kind of. Well, he's not so bad-looking even with that busted nose of his, and we kept working on that pint, and it was kind of romantic. I mean, the moon and all.

It wasn't until he really began messing that I made him stop. And even then, I practically had to sock him one before he figured out I wasn't kidding.

"Cut it out," I said. "Now see what you've done! You tore my halter."

"Hell, I'll buy you a new one," he said. "Come on, baby." He tried to grab me again, and I gave him a good one, right on the side of his head. For a minute I thought he'd—you know—get tough about it. But he was pretty canned up, I guess. Anyhow, he just started blubbering about how sorry he was, and that he knew I wasn't that kind, but it was just that he was so crazy about me.

I almost had to laugh, they're so funny when they get that way. But I figured it was smarter to put on an act, so I made out like I was real sore, like I'd never been so insulted in all my life.

Then he said we should have another drink and forget about it, only the pint was empty. So he said how about him taking a run up to the road and getting some more? Or we could both go to a tavern if I liked.

"With all these marks on my neck?" I told him. "I certainly will not! If you want more, you get it."

So he said he would, and he'd be back in five minutes. And he went.

Anyhow, that's how I was alone, when it happened. I was just sitting there on the blanket, looking out at the water, when I saw this thing sort of moving. At first it looked sort of like a log or something. But it kept coming closer, and then I could see it as somebody swimming, real fast.

So I kept on watching, and pretty soon I made out it was a man, and he was heading right for shore. Then he got close enough so's I could see him stand up and start wading in. He was real tall, real tall, like one of those basketball players, only not skinny or anything. And so help me he didn't have any trunks on or anything. Not a stitch!

Well, I mean, what could I do? I figured he didn't see me, and besides, you can't go running around screaming your head off. Not that there was anyone to hear me. I was all alone there. So I just sat and waited for him to come out of the water and go away up the beach or someplace.

Only he didn't go away. He came out and he walked right over to me. You can imagine—there I was, sitting, and there he was, all dripping wet and with no clothes. But he gave me a big hello, just like nothing was wrong. He looked real dreamy when he smiled.

"Good evening," he said. "Might I inquire my whereabouts, Miss?"

Dig that "whereabouts" talk!

So I told him where he was, and he nodded, and then he saw how I was staring and he said, "Might I trouble you for the loan of that blanket?"

Well, what else could I do? I got up and gave it to him and he wrapped it around his waist. That's the first I noticed he was carrying this bag in his hand. It was some kind of plastic, and you couldn't tell what

was inside of it.

"What happened to your trunks?" I asked him.

"Trunks?" You'd of thought he never heard of such things the way he said it. Then he smiled again and said, "I'm sorry. They must have slipped off."

"Where'd you start from?" I asked. "You got a boat out there?" He was real tan, he looked like one of these guys that hang around the Yacht Basin all the time.

"Yes. How did you know?" he said.

"Well, where else would you come from?" I told him. "It just stands to reason."

"It does, at that," he said.

I looked at the bag. "What you got in there?" I asked.

He opened his mouth to answer me, but he never got a chance. Because all of a sudden George came running down from the bluff. I never even seen his lights or heard the car stop. But there he was, just tearing down, with a bottle in his hand, all ready to swing.

"What the hell's going on here?" he yelled.

"Nothing," I told him.

"Who the hell is this guy? Where'd he come from?" George shouted.

"Permit me to introduce myself," the guy said. "My name is John Smith and—"

"John Smith, my foot!" yelled George, only he didn't say "foot." He was real mad. "All right, let's have it What's the big idea, you two?"

"There isn't any big idea," I said. "This man was swimming and he lost his trunks, so he borrowed the blanket. He's got a boat out there and—"

"Where? Where's the boat? I don't see any boat." Neither did I, come to think of it. George wasn't waiting for any answers, though. "You there, gimme back that blanket and get the hell out of here."

"He can't," I told him. "He hasn't got any trunks on."

George stood there with his mouth open. Then he waved the bottle. "All right, then, fella. You're coming with us." He gave me a wise look. "Know what I think? I think this guy's a phony. He could even be one of those spies the Russians are sending over in submarines."

That's George for you. Ever since the papers got full of this war scare, he's been seeing Communists all over the place.

"Start talking," he said. "What's in that bag?"

The guy just looked at him and smiled.

"Okay, so you want to do it the hard way, it's okay by me. Get up that bluff, fella. We're gonna take a ride over to the police. Come on, before I let you have it." And he waved the bottle.

The guy sort of shrugged and then he looked at George. "You have an automobile?" he asked.

"Of course, what do I look like, Paul Revere or something?" George said.

"Paul Revere? Is he alive?" The guy was kidding, but George didn't know it.

"Shut up and get moving," he said. "The car's right up there."

The guy looked up at the car. Then he nodded to himself and he looked at George.

That's all he did. So help me. He just looked at him.

He didn't make any of those funny passes with his hands, and he didn't say anything. He just looked, and he kept right on smiling. His face didn't change a bit.

But George—his face changed. It just sort of set, like it was frozen stiff. And so did everything. I mean, his hands got numb and the bottle fell and busted. George was like he couldn't move.

I opened my mouth but the guy kind of glanced over at me and I thought maybe I'd better not say anything. All of a sudden I felt cold all over, and I didn't know what would happen if he looked at me.

So I stood there, and then this guy went up to George and undressed him. Only it wasn't exactly undressing him, because George was just like one of those window dummies you see in the stores. Then the guy put all of George's clothes on himself, and he put the blanket around George. I could see he had this plastic bag in one hand and George's car keys in the other.

I was going to scream, only the guy looked at me again and I couldn't. I didn't feel stiff like George, or paralyzed, or anything like that. But I couldn't scream to save my neck. And what good would it of done anyhow?

Because this guy just walked right up the side of the bluff and climbed in George's car and drove away. He never said a word, he never looked back. He just went.

Then I could scream, but good. I was still screaming when George came out of it, and I thought he'd have a hemorrhage or something.

Well, we had to walk back all the way. It was over three miles to the highway patrol, and they made me tell the whole thing over and over again a dozen times. They got George's license number and they're still looking for the car. And this sergeant, he thinks George is maybe right about the Communists.

Only he didn't see the way the guy looked at George. Every time I think about it, I could just die!

Statement of Milo Fabian

I scarcely got the drapes pulled when he walked in. Of course, at first I thought he was delivering something. He wore a pair of those atrocious olive-drab slacks and a ready-made sports jacket, and he had on one of those caps that look a little like those worn by jockeys.

"Well, what is it?" I said. I'm afraid I was just a wee bit rude about it—truth to tell, I'd been in a perfectly filthy mood ever since Jerry told me he was running up to Cape Cod for the exhibit. You'd think he might at least have considered my feelings and invited me to go along. But no, I had to stay behind and keep the gallery open.

But I actually had no excuse for being spiteful to this stranger. I mean, he was rather an attractive sort of person when he took that idiotic cap off. He had black, curly hair and he was quite tall, really

immense; I was almost afraid of him until he smiled.

"Mr. Warlock?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"This is the Warlock Gallery, isn't it?"

"Yes. But Mr. Warlock is out of the city. I'm Mr. Fabian. Can I help you?"

"It's rather a delicate matter."

"If you have something to sell, you can show me. I do all the buying for the gallery."

"I've nothing to sell. I want to purchase some paintings."

"Well, in that case, won't you come right back with me, Mr.—"

"Smith," he said.

We started down the aisle together. "Could you tell me just what you had in mind?" I asked. "As you probably know, we tend to specialize in moderns. We have a very good Kandinsky now, and an early Mondrian—"

"You don't have the pictures I want here," he said. "I'm sure of it."

We were already in the gallery. I stopped. "Then what was it you wished?"

He stood there, swinging this perfectly enormous plastic pouch. "You mean what kind of painting? Well, I want one or two good Rembrandts, a Vermeer, a Raphael, something by Titian, a Van Gogh, a Tintoretto. Also a Goya, an El Greco, a Breughel, a Hals, a Holbein, a Gauguin. I don't suppose there's a way of getting 'The Last Supper'—that was done as a fresco, wasn't it?"

It was positively weird to hear the man. I'm afraid I was definitely piqued, and I showed it. "Please!" I said. "I happen to be busy this morning. I have no time to—"

"You don't understand," he answered. "You buy pictures, don't you? Well, I want you to buy me some. As my—my agent, that's the word, isn't it?"

"That's the word," I told him. "But surely you can't be serious. Have you any idea of the cost involved in acquiring such a collection? It would be simply fabulous."

"I've got money," he said. We were standing next to the deal table at the entrance, and he walked over to it and put his pouch down. Then he zipped it open.

I have never, but simply never, seen such a fantastic sight in my life. The pouch was full of bills, stack after stack of bills, and every single one was either a five- or ten-thousand-dollar bill. Why, I'd never even seen one before!

If he'd been carrying twenties or hundreds, I might have suspected counterfeits, but nobody would have the audacity to dream of getting away with a stunt like this. They looked genuine, and they were. I know, because—but, that's for later.

So there I stood, looking at this utterly mad heap of money lying there, and this Mr. Smith, as he called himself, said, "Well, do you think I have enough?"

I could have just passed out, thinking about it.

Imagine, a perfect stranger, walking in off the street with ten million dollars to buy paintings. And my share of the commission is five per cent!

"I don't know," I said. "You're really serious about all this?"

"Here's the money. How soon can you get me what I want?"

"Please," I said. "This is all so unusual, I hardly know where to begin. Do you have a definite list of what you wish to acquire?"

"I can write the names down for you," he told me. "I remember most of them."

He knew what he wanted, I must say. Velásquez, Giorgione, Cézanne, Degas, Utrillo, Monet, Toulouse-Lautrec, Delacroix, Ryder, Pissarro—

Then he began writing titles. I'm afraid I gasped. "Really," I said. "You can't actually expect to buy the 'Mona Lisa!'"

"Why not?" He looked perfectly serious.

"It's not for sale at any price, you know."

"I didn't know. Who owns it?"

"The Louvre. In Paris."

"I didn't know." He was serious, I'd swear he was. "But what about the rest?"

"I'm afraid many of these paintings are in the same category. They're not for sale. Most of them are in public galleries and museums here and abroad. And a number of the particular works you request are in the hands of private collectors who could never be persuaded to sell."

He stood up and began scooping the money back into his pouch. I took his arm.

"But, we can certainly do our best," I said. "We have our sources, our connections. I'm sure we can at least procure some of the lesser, representative pieces by every one of the masters you list. It's merely a matter of time."

He shook his head. "Won't do. This is Tuesday, isn't it? I've got to have everything by Sunday night."

Did you ever hear of anything so ridiculous in all your life? The man was stark staring.

"Look," he said. "I'm beginning to understand how things are, now. These paintings I want, they're scattered all over the world. Owned by public museums and private parties who won't sell. And I suppose the same thing is true of manuscripts. Things like the Gutenberg Bible, Shakespeare first folios, the Declaration of Independence—"

Stark staring. I didn't trust myself to do anything but nod at him.

"How many of the things I want are here?" he asked. "Here, in this country?"

"A fair percentage, well over half."

"All right. Here's what you do. Sit down over there and make me up a list. I want you to write me

down the names of the paintings I've noted, and just where they are. I'll give you ten thousand dollars for the list."

Ten thousand dollars for a list he could have acquired free of charge at the public library! Ten thousand dollars for less than an hour's work!

I gave him his list. And he gave me the money and walked out.

By this time, I was just about frantic. I mean, it was all so shattering. He came and he went, and there I stood—not knowing his real name, or anything. Talk about your eccentric millionaires! He went, and there I stood with ten thousand dollars in my hand.

Well, I'm not one to do anything rash. He hadn't been gone three minutes before I locked up and stepped over to the bank. I simply hopped all the way back to the gallery.

Then I said to myself, "What for?"

I didn't have to go back now, really. This was my money, not Jerry's. I'd earned it all by my little self. And as for him, he could stay up at the Cape and rot. I didn't need his precious job.

I went right down and bought a ticket to Paris. All this war scare talk is simply a lot of fluff, if you ask me. Sheer fluff.

Of course, Jerry is going to be utterly furious when he hears about it. Well, let him. All I have to say is, he can get himself another boy.

Statement of Nick Krauss

I was dead on my feet. I'd been on the job ever since Tuesday night and here it was Saturday. Talk about living on your nerves!

But I wasn't missing out on this deal, not me. Because this was the pay-off. The pay-off to the biggest caper that was ever rigged.

Sure, I heard of the Brink's job. I even got a pretty good idea who was in on it. But that was peanuts, and it took better'n a year to set up.

This deal topped 'em all. Figure it for yourself, once. Six million bucks, cash. In four days. Get that, now. I said six million bucks in four days. That's all, brother!

And who did it? Me, that's who.

Let me tell you one thing: I earned that dough. Every lousy cent of it. And don't think I didn't have to shell out plenty in splits. Right now I can't even remember just how many was in on it from the beginning to end. But what with splits and expenses—like hiring all them planes to fly the stuff down—I guess it cost pretty near a million and a half, just to swing it.

That left four and a half million. Four and a half million—and me going down to the yacht to collect.

I had the whole damn haul right in the truck. A hundred and forty pieces, some of 'em plenty heavy, too. But I wasn't letting nobody else horse around with unloading. This was dynamite. Only two miles from the warehouse where I got everything assembled. Longest two miles I ever drove.

Sure, I had a warehouse. What the hell, I bought the thing! Bought the yacht for him, too. Paid cash. When you got six million in cash to play with, you don't take no chances on something you can just as well buy without no trouble.

Plenty of chances the way it was. Had to take chances, working that fast. Beat me how I managed to get through the deal without a dozen leaks.

But the dough helped. You take a guy, he'll rat on you for two-three grand. Give him twenty or thirty, and he's yours. I'm not just talking syndicate, either. Because there was plenty guys in on it that weren't even in no mob—guys that never been mugged except maybe for these here college annual books where they show pictures of all the professors. I paid off guards and I paid off coppers and I paid off a bunch of curators, too. Not characters, curators. Guys that run museums.

I still don't know what this joker wanted with all that stuff. Only thing I can figure is maybe he was one of these here Indian rajahs or something. But he didn't look like no Hindu—he was a big, tall, youngish guy. Didn't talk like one, either. But who else wants to lay out all that lettuce for a bunch of dizzy paintings and stuff?

Anyways, he showed up Tuesday night with this pouch of his. How he got to me, how he ever got by Lefty downstairs I never figured out.

But there he was. He asked me if it was true, what he heard about me, and he asked me if I wanted to do a job. Said his name was Smith. You know the kind of con you get when they want to stay dummied up on you.

I didn't care if he dummied up or not. Because, like the fella says, money talks. And it sure hollered Tuesday night. He opens this pouch of his and spills two million bucks on the table.

So help me, two million bucks! Cash!

"I've brought this along for expenses," he said. "There's four million more in it if you can cooperate."

Let's skip the rest of it. We made a deal, and I went to work. Wednesday I had him on that yacht, and he stayed there all the way through. Every night I went down and reported.

I went to Washington myself and handled the New York and Philadelphia end, too. Also Boston, on Friday. The rest was by phone, mostly. I kept flying guys out with orders and cash to Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, and the coast. They had the lists and they knew what to look for. Every mob I contacted set up its own plans for the job. I paid whatever they asked, and that way nobody had any squawks coming. No good any of 'em holding out on me—where could they sell the stuff? Those things are too hot.

By the time Thursday come around, I was up to my damn neck in diagrams and room plans and getaway routes. There was six guys just checking on alarm systems and stuff in the joints I was supposed to cover. We had maybe fifty working in New York, not counting from the inside. You wouldn't believe it if I told you some of the guys who helped. Big professors and all, tipping us off on how to make a heist, or cutting wires and leaving doors unlocked. I hear a dozen up and lammed after it was over. That's what real dough can buy you.

Of course, I run into trouble. Lots of it. We never did get a haul out of L.A. The fix wasn't in the way it was supposed to be, and they lost the whole load trying for a getaway at the airport. Lucky thing the cops shot up all four of the guys, the ones who made the haul. So they couldn't trace anything.

All told, must of been seven or eight cashed in; the four in L.A., two in Philly, one guy in Detroit, and

one in Chicago. But no leaks. I kept the wires open, and I had my people out there, sort of supervising. Every bit of the stuff we did get came in by private plane, over in Jersey. Went right to the warehouse.

And I had the whole works, 143 pieces, on the truck when I went down for the pay-off.

It took me three hours to cart that stuff onto the yacht. This guy, this Mr. Smith, he just sat and watched the whole time.

When I was done I said, "That's the works. You satisfied now or do you want a receipt?"

He didn't smile or anything. Just shook his head. "You'll have to open them," he said.

"Open 'em up? That'll take another couple hours," I told him.

"We've got time," he said.

"Hell we have! Mister, this stuffs hot and I'm hotter. There's maybe a hundred thousand honest Johns looking for the loot—ain't you read the papers or heard the radio? Whole damn country's in an uproar. Worse than the war crisis or whatever you call it. I want out of here, fast."

But he wanted them crates and boxes open, so I opened 'em. What the hell, for four million bucks, a little flunkey work don't hurt. Not even when you're dead for sleep. It was a tough job, though, because everything was packed nice. So as not to have any damage, that is.

Nothing was in frames. He had these canvases and stuff all over the floor, and he checked them off in a notebook, every one. And when I got the last damn picture out and hauled all the wood and junk up on deck and put it over the side in the dark, I come back to find him in the forward cabin.

"What's the pitch?" I asked. "Where you going?"

"To transfer these to my ship," he told me. "After all, you didn't expect I'd merely sail off in this vessel, did you? And I'll need your assistance to get them on board. Don't worry, it's only a short distance away."

He started the engines. I came right up behind him and stuck my Special in his ribs.

"Where's the bundle?" I asked.

"In the other cabin, on the table." He didn't even look around.

"You're not pulling anything, are you?"

"See for yourself."

I went to see. And he was leveling.

Four million bucks on the table. Five- and ten-thousand-dollar bills, and no phony geetus either. Wouldn't be too damn easy passing this stuff—the Feds would have the word out about big bills—but then, I didn't count on sticking around with the loot. There's plenty countries where they like them big bills and don't ask any questions. South America, such places. That part didn't worry me too much, as long as I knew I'd get there.

And I figured on getting there all right. I went back to the other cabin and showed him my Special again. "Keep going," I said "I'll help you, but the first time you get cute I'm set to remove your appendix with a slug."

He knew who I was. He knew I could just let him have it and skid out of there any time I wanted. But he never even blinked at me—just kept right on steering.

He must of gone about four-five miles. It was pitch dark and he didn't carry any spot, but he knew where he was going. Because all at once we stopped and he said, "Here we are."

I went up on deck with him and I couldn't see nothing. Just the lights off on shore and the water all around. I sure as hell didn't see no boat anywheres.

"Where is it?" I asked him.

"Where is what?"

"Your boat?"

"Down there." He pointed over the side.

"What the hell you got, a submarine or something?"

"Something." He leaned over the side. His hands was empty, he didn't do anything but lean. And so help me, all of a sudden up comes this damn thing. Like a big round silver ball, sort of, with a lid on top.

I didn't even notice the lid until it opened up. And it floated alongside, so's he could run the gangplank out to rest on the lid.

"Come on," he said. "I'll help you. It won't take long this way."

"You think I'm gonna carry stuff across that lousy plank?" I asked him. "In the dark?"

"Don't worry, you can't fall. It's magnomeshed."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I'll show you."

He walked across that plank and climbed right down into the thing before I thought to try and stop him. The plank never moved an inch.

Then he was back out. "Come on, there's nothing to be afraid of."

"Who's afraid?"

But I was scared, plenty. Because now I knew what he was. I'd been reading the papers a lot these days, and I didn't miss none of the war talk. Them Commies with all their new weapons and stuff—well, this was one of them. It is no wonder he was tossing around millions of bucks like that.

So I figured on doing my patriotic duty. Sure, I'd haul these lousy pictures on board for him. I wanted to get a look inside that sub of his. But when I finished, I made up my mind he wasn't gonna streak out for Russia or someplace. I'd get him first.

That's the way I played it I helped him cart the whole mess down into the sub.

Then I changed my mind again. He wasn't no Russian. He wasn't anything I ever heard of except an inventor, maybe. Because that thing he had was crazy.

It was all hollow inside. All hollow, with just a thin wall around. I could tell there wasn't space for an

engine or anything. Just enough room to stack the stuff and leave space for maybe two or three guys to stand.

There wasn't any electric light in the place either, but it was light. And daylight. I know what I'm talking about—I know about neon and fluorescent lights too. This was something else. Something new.

Instruments? Well, he had some kind of little slots on one part, but they was down on the floor. You had to lay down next to them to see how they'd work. And he kept watching me, so I didn't want to take a chance on acting too nosy. I figured it wasn't healthy.

I was scared because he wasn't scared.

I was scared because he wasn't no Russian.

I was scared because there ain't any round balls that float in water, or come up from under water when you just look at 'em. And because he come from nowhere with his cash and he was going nowhere with the pictures. Nothing made any sense anymore, except one thing. I wanted out! I wanted out bad.

Maybe you think I'm nuts, but that's because you never was inside a shiny ball floating in water, only not bobbing around or even moving when the waves hit it, and all daylight with nothing to light it with. You never saw this Mr. Smith who wasn't named Smith and maybe not even Mr.

But if you had, you would of understood why I was so glad to get back on that yacht and go down in the cabin and pick up the dough.

"All right," I said. "Let's go back."

"Leave whenever you like," he said. "I'm going now."

"Going yourself? Then how the hell do I get back?" I yelled.

"Take the yacht," he told me. "It's yours." Just like that he said it.

"But I can't run no yacht, I don't know how."

"It's very simple. Here, I'll explain—I picked it up myself in less than a minute. Come up to the cabin."

"Uh-uh." I got the Special out. "You're taking me back to the dock right now."

"Sorry, there isn't time. I wanted to be on my way before—"

"You heard me," I said. "Get this boat moving."

"Please. You're making this difficult. I must leave now."

"First you take me back. Then you go off to Mars or wherever it is."

"Mars? Who said anything about—"

He sort of smiled and shook his head. And then he looked at me.

He looked—right—at—me. He looked—into—me. His eyes were like two of those big round silver balls, rolling down into slots behind my eyeballs and crashing right into my skull. They came towards me real slow and real heavy, and I couldn't duck. I felt them coming, and I knew if they ever hit I'd be a goner.

I was out on my feet. Everything was numb. He just smiled and stared and sent his eyes out to get me. They rolled and I could feel them hit. Then I was—gone.

The last thing I remember was pulling the trigger.

Statement of Elizabeth Rafferty, M.D.

At 9:30 Sunday morning, he rang the bell. I remember the time exactly, because I'd just finished breakfast and I was switching on the radio to get the war news. Apparently they'd found another Soviet boat, this one in Charleston harbor, with an atomic device aboard. The Coast Guard and the Air Force were both on emergency, and it—

The bell rang, and I opened the door.

There he stood. He must have been six-foot-four at the very least. I had to look up at him to see his smile, but it was worth it.

"Is the doctor in?" he asked.

"I'm Dr. Rafferty."

"Good. I was hoping I'd be lucky enough to find you here. I just came along the street, taking a chance on locating a physician. You see, it's rather an emergency—"

"I gathered that." I stepped back. "Won't you come inside? I dislike having my patients bleed all over the front stoop."

He glanced down at his left arm. He was bleeding, all right. And from the hole in his coat, and the powder-marks, I knew why.

"In here," I said. We went into the office. "Now, if you'll let me help you with your coat and shirt, Mr.—"

"Smith," he said.

"Of course. Up on the table. That's it. Now, easy—let me do it—there. Well! A nice neat perforation, upper triceps. In again, out again. It looks as if you were lucky, Mr. Smith. Hold still now. I'm going to probe. . . . This may hurt a bit. . . . Good! . . . We'll just sterilize, now—"

All the while I kept watching him. He had a gambler's face, but not the mannerisms. I couldn't make up my mind about him. He went through the whole procedure without a sound or a change of expression.

Finally, I got him bandaged up. "Your arm will probably be stiff for several days. I wouldn't advise you to move around too much. How did it happen?"

"Accident."

"Come now, Mr. Smith." I got out the pen and looked for a form. "Let's not be children. You know as well as I do that a physician must make a full report on any gunshot wound."

"I didn't know." He swung off the table. "Who gets the report?"

"The police."

"No!"

"Please, Mr. Smith!! I'm required by law to—"

"Take this."

He fished something out of his pocket with his right hand and threw it on the desk. I stared at it. I'd never seen a five-thousand-dollar bill before, and it was worth staring at.

"I'm going now," he said. "As a matter of fact, I've never really been here."

I shrugged. "As you will," I told him. "Just one thing more, though."

I stooped, reached into the left-hand upper drawer of the desk, and showed him what I kept there.

"This is a .22, Mr. Smith," I said. "It's a lady's gun. I've never used it before, except on the target range. I would hate to use it now, but I warn you that if I do you're going to have trouble with your right arm. As a physician, my knowledge of anatomy combines with my ability as a marksman. Do you understand?"

"Yes, *I* do. But *you* don't. Look, you've got to let me go. It's important. I'm not a criminal!"

"Nobody said you were. But you will be, if you attempt to evade the law by neglecting to answer my questions for this report. It must be in the hands of the authorities within the next twenty-four hours."

He chuckled. "They'll never read it."

I sighed. "Let's not argue. And don't reach into your pocket, either."

He smiled at me. "I have no weapon. I was just going to increase your fee."

Another bill fluttered to the table. Ten thousand dollars. Five thousand plus ten thousand makes fifteen. It added up.

"Sorry," I said. "This all looks very tempting to a struggling young doctor—but I happen to have old-fashioned ideas about such things. Besides, I doubt if I could get change from anyone, because of all this excitement in the newspapers over—"

I stopped, suddenly, as I remembered. Five-thousand- and ten-thousand-dollar bills. They added up, all right. I smiled at him across the desk.

"Where are the paintings, Mr. Smith?" I asked.

It was his turn to sigh. "Please, don't question me. I don't want to hurt anyone. I just want to go, before it's too late. You were kind to me. I'm grateful. Take the money and forget it. This report is foolishness, believe me."

"Believe you? With the whole country in an uproar, looking for stolen art masterpieces, and Communists hiding under every bed? Maybe it's just feminine curiosity, but I'd like to know." I took careful aim. "This isn't conversation, Mr. Smith. Either you talk or I shoot."

"All right. But it won't do any good." He leaned forward. "You've got to believe that. It won't do any good. I could show you the paintings, yes. I could give them to you. And it wouldn't help a bit. Within twenty-four hours they'd be as useless as that report you wanted to fill out."

"Oh, yes, the report. We might as well get started with it," I said. "In spite of your rather pessimistic outlook. The way you talk, you'd think the bombs were going to fall here tomorrow."

"They will," he told me. "Here, and everywhere."

"Very interesting." I shifted the gun to my left hand and took up the fountain pen. "But now, to business. Your name, please. Your real name."

"Kim Logan."

"Date of birth?"

"November 25th, 2903."

I raised the gun. "The right arm," I said. "Medial head of the triceps. It will hurt, too."

"November 25th, 2903," he repeated. "I came here last Sunday at 10 p.m., your time. By the same chronology I leave tonight at nine. It's a 169-hour cycle."

"What are you talking about?"

"My instrument is out there in the bay. The paintings and manuscripts are there. I intended to remain submerged until the departure moment tonight, but a man shot me."

"You feel feverish?" I asked. "Does your head hurt?"

"No. I told you it was no use explaining things. You won't believe me, any more than you believed me about the bombs."

"Let's stick to facts," I suggested. "You admit you stole the paintings. Why?"

"Because of the bombs, of course. The war is coming, the big one. Before tomorrow morning your planes will be over the Russian border and their planes will retaliate. That's only the beginning. It will go on for months, years. In the end—shambles. But the masterpieces I take will be saved."

"How?"

"I told you. Tonight, at nine, I return to my own place in the time-continuum." He raised his hand. "Don't tell me it's not possible. According to your present-day concepts of physics it would be. Even according to our science, only forward movement is demonstrable. When I suggested my project to the Institute they were skeptical. But they built the instrument according to my specifications, nevertheless. They permitted me to use the money from the Historical Foundation at Fort Knox. And I received an ironic blessing prior to my departure. I rather imagine my actual vanishment caused raised eyebrows. But that will be nothing compared to the reaction upon my return. My triumphant return, with a cargo of art masterpieces presumably destroyed nearly a thousand years in the past!"

"Let me get this straight," I said. "According to your story, you came here because you knew war was going to break out and you wanted to salvage some old masters from destruction. Is that it?"

"Precisely. It was a wild gamble, but I had the currency. I've studied the era as closely as any man can from the records available. I knew about the linguistic peculiarities of the age—you've had no trouble understanding me, have you? And I managed to work out a plan. Of course I haven't been entirely successful, but I've managed a great deal in less than a week's time. Perhaps I can return again—earlier—maybe a year or so beforehand, and procure more." His eyes grew bright. "Why not?"

We could build more instruments, come in a body. We could get everything we wanted, then."

I shook my head. "For the sake of argument, let's say for a minute that I believe you, which I don't. You've stolen some paintings, you say. You're taking them back to 29-something-or-other with you, tonight. You hope. Is that the story?"

"That's the truth."

"Very well. Now you suggest that you might repeat the experiment on a larger scale. Come back to a point a year before this in time and collect more masterpieces. Again, let's say you do it. What will happen to the paintings you took with you?"

"I don't follow you."

"Those paintings will be in your era, according to you. But a year ago they hung in various galleries. Will they be there when you come back? Surely they can't coexist."

He smiled. "A pretty paradox. I'm beginning to like you, Dr. Rafferty."

"Well, don't let the feeling grow on you. It's not reciprocal, I assure you. Even if you were telling the truth, I can't admire your motives."

"What's wrong with my motives?" He stood up, ignoring the gun. "Isn't it a worthwhile goal—to save immortal treasures from the senseless destruction of a tribal war? The world deserves the preservation of its artistic heritage. I've risked my existence for the sake of bringing beauty to my own time—where it can be properly appreciated and enjoyed by minds no longer obsessed with the greed and cruelty I find here."

"Big words," I said. "But the fact remains. You stole those paintings."

"Stole? I saved them! I tell you, before the year is out they'd be utterly destroyed. Your galleries, your museums, your libraries—everything will go. Is it stealing to carry precious articles from a burning temple?" He leaned over me. "Is that a crime?"

"Why not stop the fire, instead?" I countered. "You know—from historical records, I suppose—that war breaks out tonight or tomorrow. Why not take advantage of your foresight and try to prevent it?"

"I can't. The records are sketchy, incomplete. Events are jumbled. I've been unable to discover just how the war began—or will begin, rather. Some trivial incident, unnamed. Nothing is clear on that point."

"But couldn't you warn the authorities?"

"And change history? Change the actual sequence of events, rather? Impossible!"

"Aren't you changing them by taking the paintings?"

"That's different."

"Is it?" I stared into his eyes. "I don't see how. But then, the whole thing is impossible. I've wasted too much time in arguing."

"Time!" He looked at the wall clock. "Almost noon. I've got just nine hours left. And so much to do. The instrument must be adjusted."

"Where is this precious mechanism of yours?"

"Out in the bay. Submerged, of course, I had that in mind when it was constructed. You can conceive of the hazards of attempting to move through time and alight on a solid surface; the face of the land alters. But the ocean is comparatively unchanging. I knew if I departed from a spot several miles offshore and arrived there, I'd eliminate most of the ordinary hazards. Besides, it offers a most excellent place of concealment. The principle, you see, is simple. By purely mechanical means, I shall raise the instrument above the stratospheric level tonight and then intercalculate dimensionally when I am free of earth's orbit. The gantic-drive will be—"

No doubt about it. I didn't have to wait for the double-talk to know he was crazier than a codfish. A pity, too; he was really a handsome specimen.

"Sorry," I said. "Time's up. This is something I hate to do, but there's no other choice. No, don't move. I'm calling the police, and if you take one step I'll plug you."

"Stop! You mustn't call! I'll do anything. I'll even take you with me. That's it, I'll take you with me! Wouldn't you like to save your life? Wouldn't you like to escape?"

"No. Nobody escapes," I told him. "Especially not you. Now stand still, and no more funny business. I'm making that call."

He stopped. He stood still. I picked up the phone, with a sweet smile. He smiled back. He looked at me.

Something happened.

There has been a great dispute about the clinical aspects of hypnotic therapy. I remember, in school, an attempt being made to hypnotize me. I was entirely immune. I concluded that a certain degree of cooperation or conditioned suggestibility is required of an individual in order to render him susceptible to hypnosis.

I was wrong.

I was wrong, because I couldn't move now. No lights, no mirrors, no voices, no suggestion. It was just that I couldn't move. I sat there holding the gun. I sat there and watched him walk out, locking the door behind him. I could see and I could feel. I could even hear him say "Good-by."

But I couldn't move. I could function, but only as a paralytic functions. I could, for example, watch the clock.

I watched the clock from noon until almost seven. Several patients came during the afternoon, couldn't get in, and went away. I watched the clock until its face was lost in darkness. I sat there and endured hysteric rigidity until—providentially—the phone rang.

That broke it. But it broke me. I couldn't answer that phone. I merely slumped over on the desk, my muscles tightening with pain as the gun fell from my numb fingers. I lay there, gasping and sobbing, for a long time. I tried to sit up. It was agony. I tried to walk. My limbs rejected sensation. It took me an hour to gain control again. And even then, it was merely a partial control—a physical control. My thoughts were another matter.

Seven hours of thinking. Seven hours of true or false? Seven hours of accepting and rejecting the impossibly possible.

It was after eight before I was on my feet again, and then I didn't know what to do.

Call the police? Yes—but what could I tell them? I had to be sure, I had to know.

And what did I know? He was out in the bay, and he'd leave at nine o'clock. There was an instrument which would rise above the stratosphere—

I got in the car and drove. The dock was deserted. I took the road over to the Point, where there's a good view. I had the binoculars. The stars were out, but no moon. Even so, I could see pretty clearly.

There was a small yacht bobbing on the water, but no lights shone. Could that be it?

No sense taking chances. I remembered the radio report about the Coast Guard patrols.

So I did it. I drove back to town and stopped at a drugstore and made my call. Just reported the presence of the yacht. Perhaps they'd investigate, because there were no lights. Yes, I'd stay there and wait for them if they wished.

I didn't stay, of course. I went back to the Point. I went back there and trained my binoculars on the yacht. It was almost nine when I saw the cutter come along, moving up behind the yacht with deadly swiftness.

It was exactly nine when they flashed their lights—and caught, for an incredible instant, the gleaming reflection of the silver globe that rose from the water, rose straight up toward the sky.

Then came the explosion and I saw the shattering before I heard the echo of the report. They had portable anti-aircraft, something of the sort. It was effective.

One moment, the globe roared upward. The next moment, there was nothing. They blew it to bits.

And they blew me to bits with it. Because if there was a globe, perhaps he was inside. With the masterpieces, ready to return to another time. The story was true, then, and if that was true, then—

I guess I fainted. My watch showed 10:30 when I came to and stood up. It was 11:00 before I made it to the Coast Guard Station and told my story.

Of course, nobody believed me. Even Dr. Halvorsen from emergency—he said he did, but he insisted on the injection and they took me here to the hospital.

It would have been too late, anyway. That globe did the trick. They must have contacted Washington immediately with their story of a new secret Soviet weapon destroyed offshore. Coming on the heels of finding those bomb-laden ships, it was the final straw. Somebody gave the orders and our planes were on their way.

I've been writing all night. Outside in the corridor they're getting radio reports. We've dropped bombs over there. And the alert has gone out, warning us of possible reprisals.

Maybe they'll believe me now. But it doesn't matter anymore. It's going to be the way he said it was.

I keep thinking about the paradoxes of time-travel. This notion of carrying objects from the present to the future—and this other notion, about altering the past. I'd like to work out the theory, only there's no need. The old masters aren't going into the future. Any more than he, returning to our present, could stop the war.

What had he said? "I've been unable to discover just how the war began—or will begin, rather. Some trivial incident, unnamed."

Well, this was the trivial incident. His visit. If I hadn't made that phone call, if the globe hadn't risen—but I can't bear to think about it anymore. It makes my head hurt. All that buzzing and droning noise . . .

I've just made an important discovery. The buzzing and the droning does not come from inside my head. I can hear the sirens sounding, too. If I had any doubts about the truth of his claims, they're gone now.

I wish I'd believed him. I wish the others would believe me now. But there just isn't any time. . . .

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I Like Blondes

Of course, it's all a matter of taste, nothing more. It's a weakness with me, I suppose. My friends have their own opinions: some are partial to brunettes or redheads, and I suppose that's all right. I certainly don't criticize them in the least.

But blondes are my favorites. Tall ones, short ones, fat ones, thin ones, brilliant ones, dumb ones—all sorts, sizes, shapes, and nationalities. Oh, I've heard all the objections: their skin ages faster, they have peculiar personalities; they're giddy and mercenary and conceited. None of which bothers me a bit, even if it's true. I like blondes for their special qualities and I'm not alone in my weakness. I notice Marilyn Monroe hasn't done too badly in general favor. Nor Kim Novak.

Enough of this; after all, I'm not apologizing. What I do is my own business. And if I wanted to stand on the corner of Reed and Temple at eight o'clock at night and pick up a blonde, I owed no apologies to anyone.

Perhaps I was a bit obvious and overdressed for the occasion. Perhaps I shouldn't have winked, either. But that's a matter of opinion, too, isn't it?

I have mine. Other people have theirs. And if the tall girl with the page-boy cut chose to give me a dirty look and murmur, "Disgusting old man," that was her affair. I'm used to such reactions, and it didn't bother me a bit.

A couple of cute young things in blue jeans came sauntering along. Both of them had hair like Minnesota wheat, and I judged they were sisters. Not for me, though. Too young. You get into trouble that way, and I didn't want trouble.

It was a nice, warm, late-spring evening. Lots of couples out walking. I noticed one blonde in particular—she was with a sailor, I recall—and I remember thinking to myself that she had the most luscious calves I've ever seen. But she was with a sailor. And there was one with a child and one with a party of stenographers out on the town for a night, and one I almost spoke to, until her boy friend came up suddenly after parking the car.

Oh, it was exasperating, I can tell you! It was beginning to seem as though everybody had his blonde but me. Sometimes it's like that for weeks, but I'm philosophical about such things.

I glanced up at the clock, around nine, and concluded that I'd best be on my way. I might be a "disgusting old man" but I know a trick or two. Blondes are where you find them.

Right now, I knew, the best place to find them would be over at Dreamway. Sure, it's a dime-a-dance hall. But there's no law against that.

There was no law against my walking in and standing there at the back before I bought tickets. There was no law to prevent me from looking, from sorting out and selecting.

Ordinarily I didn't much care for these public dance halls. The so-called "music" hurts my ears, and my sensibilities are apt to be offended by the spectacle of dancing itself. There is a vulgar sexual connotation which dismays me, but I suppose it's all a part of the game.

Dreamway was crowded tonight. The "operators" were out in force: filling-station attendants with long sideburns, middle-aged dandies incongruous in youthfully styled "sharp" suits, wistful little Filipinos and lonesome servicemen on leave. And mixing and mingling with them, the girls.

Those girls, those hostesses! Where did they get their dresses—the crimson Day-Glow gowns, the orange and cerise abominations, the low-cut black atrocities, the fuchsia horrors? And who did their hair—poodle cuts and pony cuts and tight ringlets and loose maenad swirls? The garish, slashing, red-and-white make-up, the dangling, banging cheap jewelry gave the effect of pink ribbons tied to the horns of a prize heifer.

And yet there were some prize heifers here. I don't mean to be crude in the least; merely honest. Here, in the reeking cheap-perfume-deodorant-cigarette-smoke-talcum-scented mist of music and minglement, strange beauty blossomed.

Poor poetry? Rich truth! I saw a tall girl with the body of a queen, whose eyes held true to a far-off dream. She was only a brunette, of course, but I'm not one to adhere to blind prejudice. There was a redhead whose dancing was stiff and stately; she held her body like a white candle surmounted by a scarlet flame. And there was a blonde—

Yes, *there* was a blonde! Quite young, a bit too babyishly plump, and obviously a prey to fatigue, but she had what I was looking for. The true, fair-haired type, bred blondely to the bone. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's a fake blonde. Dyed hair, or the partial blonde who becomes a "brownette" in her late twenties. I've been fooled by them before, and I know.

But this was a real blonde, a harvest goddess. I watched her as she swept, in unutterable boredom, around the floor. Her dancing partner was a clod—visiting rancher, I'd guess. Expensively dressed, but with that telltale red neck rising out of the white collar of his shirt. Yes—and unless my eyes deceived me, he was chewing on a toothpick as he danced!

I made my decision. This was it. I went up and bought myself three dollars' worth of tickets. Then I waited for the number to end.

They play short numbers at Dreamway, of course. In about a minute the clamor ceased. My blonde was standing on the edge of the floor. The rancher broke away, apparently determined to buy more tickets.

I walked over to her, displayed my handful. "Dance?" I asked. She nodded, scarcely looking at me. She *was* tired. She wore an emerald-green gown, low-cut and sleeveless. There were freckles on her plump arms and—intriguingly enough—on her shoulders and down the neckline to the V. Her eyes seemed green, but that was probably the dress. No doubt they were actually gray.

The music started. Now I may have given the impression that, since I dislike dance halls and dancing, I am not particularly adept at the ballet of the ballroom. In all modesty, this is far from the case. I have made it my business to become an expert dancer. I find it inevitably to be of help to me in establishing contacts.

Tonight was no exception.

We weren't out on the floor thirty seconds before she glanced up and looked at me—really looked at me, for the first time.

"Gee, you're a good dancer!"

That "Gee" was all I needed. Together with her rather naïve tone of voice, it gave me an immediate insight into her character and background. Small-town girl, probably, who quit school and came to the city. Perhaps she came with some man. If not, she met one shortly after her arrival. It ended badly, of course. Maybe she took a job in a restaurant or a store. And then she met another man, and the dance hall seemed easier. So here she was.

Quite a lot to adduce from a single exclamation? Yes, but then I've met so many blondes in similar situations, and the story is always the same; that is, if they're the "Gee!" type. And I'm not deprecatory in the least. I happen to like the "Gee!" type best of all.

She could tell that I liked her, of course, from the way I danced. I almost anticipated her next remark. "There's life in the old boy yet."

I smiled, not at all resentful. "I'm younger than I look." I winked. "You know, I could dance with you all night—and something tells me that's not a bad idea."

"You flatter me." But she looked worried. That was the whole idea. She believed me.

I gave her just under a minute for the thought to take hold. Then I pulled the switch. "I wouldn't fool you," I told her. "I'm like all the other men you meet—just lonely. I'm not going to ask if we couldn't go somewhere and talk, because I know the answer. You're paid to dance. But I happen to know that if I buy, say, ten dollars' more worth of tickets, you can get off. And we can sneak off for a few drinks." I winked again. "Sitting down."

"Well, I don't know—"

"Of course you don't. But I do. Look, if you have any worries about me pulling a fast one, I'm old enough to be your grandfather."

It was obvious, and she considered it. She also considered the delightful prospect of sitting down. "I guess it's O.K.," she murmured. "Shall we go, Mr.—?"

"Beers," I said.

"What?" She checked a giggle. "Not really."

"Really. Beers is the name. Not the drink. You can drink anything you like, Miss—"

"Shirley Collins." Now the giggle came out. "Sort of a coincidence, don't you think? Beers and Collins."

"Come on, what are we waiting for?" I steered her over to the edge of the floor, went to buy my

tickets, and made the necessary arrangements with the manager while she got her coat. It cost me an extra five for his tip, but I didn't begrudge him the money. We all have to eat, you know.

She didn't look bad at all, once she had some of that mascara washed off. Her eyes *were* gray, I discovered. And her arms were soft and rounded. I escorted her quite gallantly to the bar down the street and hung up her coat when we found a nice quiet back booth.

The waitress was one of those scrawny, sallow-faced brunettes. She wore slacks and chewed gum; I'd never consider her for a moment. But she served her purpose—drinks, rather. I ordered rye on the rocks and she brought the two glasses.

I paid her, not forgetting to tip, because I'd be wanting prompt service. She snapped her gum in friendly acknowledgment and left us alone. I pushed my drink over to Shirley.

"What's the matter?" she said.

"Nothing. It's just that I don't indulge."

"Now, wait a minute, Mr. Beers. You aren't trying to get a girl loaded, are you?"

"My dear young lady—please!" I sounded for all the world like an elderly college professor admonishing his class. "You don't have to drink if you don't want to."

"Oh, that's O.K. Only you know, a girl has to be careful." The way she downed the first rye belied her words. She toyed with the second glass. "Say, this can't be much fun for you, sitting and watching me drink."

"If you only knew," I said. "Didn't I tell you I was lonely? And wanted someone to talk to?"

"A girl hears some funny lines, but I guess you're on the level. What'll we talk about?"

That was an easy one. "You." From now on I didn't even need to think about what I was saying. Everything proceeded automatically. My mind was free to consider her blondness, her ripe and ample richness. Why should anyone insist on the presence of a brain in a body like that?

I certainly didn't. I was content to let her ramble on, ordering drinks for her whenever the glass was empty. "And honest, you have no idea what that grind does to your feet—"

"Excuse me a moment," I said. "I must say hello to an old friend."

I walked down to the other end of the bar. He had just come in and was standing there with a lovely black girl. Ordinarily I wouldn't have known him, but something about the way he kept staring at her tipped me off.

"Hello," I said softly. "See you're up to your old tricks."

"Look here!" He tried to appear arrogant, but he couldn't hide the fright. "I don't know you."

"Yes, you do," I told him. "Yes, you do." I pulled him away and put my mouth to his ear. When he heard what I had to say he laughed.

"Dirty trick, trying to scare me, but I forgive you. It's just that I didn't expect to see you here. Where you located?"

"Something called the Shane Apartments. And you?"

"Oh, I'm way outside town. How do you like her?" He nudged me and indicated his girl.

"Nice. But you know my weakness."

We both laughed.

"Well," I concluded, "I won't disturb you any longer. I just wondered if you were making out all right."

"Perfectly. No trouble at all."

"Good," I said. "We've got to be extra careful these days, with all that cheap publicity going around."

"I know." He waved me along. "Best of luck."

"Same to you," I said and walked back to the booth. I felt fine.

Shirley Collins felt fine too. She'd ordered another drink during my absence. I paid and tipped the waitress.

"My, my!" the blonde gushed. "You certainly do throw your dough around."

"Money means nothing to me," I said. I fanned five twenties from the roll. "Here—have some."

"Why, Mr. Beers! I couldn't, really."

She was positively drooling. "Go ahead," I urged. "Plenty more where that came from. I like to see you happy."

So she took the money. They always do. And, if they're as high as Shirley was, their reactions are always the same.

"Gee, you're a nice old guy." She reached for my hand. "I've never met anyone quite like you. You know, kind and generous. And no passes, either."

"That's right." I drew my hand away. "No passes."

This really puzzled her. "I dunno, I can't figure you out, Mr. Beers. Say, by the way, where'd you get all this money?"

"Picked it up," I told her. "It's easy if you know how."

"Now you're kidding me. No fooling, what do you do for a living?"

"You'd be surprised." I smiled. "Actually you might say I'm retired. I devote all my time to my hobbies."

"You mean, like books or paintings or something? Are you a collector?"

"That's right. Come to think of it, maybe you'd like to get acquainted with my collection."

She giggled. "Are you inviting me up to see your etchings?"

I went right along with the gag. "Certainly. You aren't going to pretend that you won't come, are you?"

"No. I'll be glad to come."

She put the five twenty-dollar bills in her purse and rose. "Let's go, Pappy."

I didn't care for that "Pappy" stuff at all—but she was such a luscious blonde. Even now, slightly tipsy, she was wholly delectable. What the young folks call "a real dish."

A half-dozen stares knifed my back as we walked past the bar on our way outside. I knew what they were thinking. "Old dried-up fossil like that with a young girl. What's the world coming to nowadays?"

Then, of course, they turned back to their drinks, because they really didn't want to know what the world was coming to nowadays. Bombs can drop, saucers can fly, and still people will sit at bars and pass judgments between drinks. All of which suits me perfectly.

Shirley Collins suited me perfectly, too, at the moment. I had no difficulty finding a cab or bundling her inside. "Shane Apartments," I told the driver. Shirley snuggled up close to me.

I pulled away.

"What's the matter, Pappy—don't you like me?"

"Of course I do."

"Then don't act as if I was gonna bite you."

"It's not that. But I meant it when I said I had no—er—intentions along such lines."

"Sure, I know." She relaxed, perfectly content. "So I'll settle for your etchings."

We pulled up and I recognized the building. I gave the driver a ten-dollar bill and told him to keep the change.

"I can't figure you out, Mr. Beers," Shirley said—and meant it. "Way you toss that moola around."

"Call it one last fling. I'm leaving town shortly." I took her arm and we stepped into the lobby. The self-service elevator was empty. I pressed the button for the top floor. We rose slowly.

On the way up Shirley sobered suddenly. She faced me and put her arms on my shoulders. "Look here, Mr. Beers. I just got to thinking. I saw a movie once and—say, what I mean is, way you hand out dough and talking about leaving town and all—you aren't sick, are you? I mean, you haven't just come from the doctor and heard you're gonna die from some disease?"

Her solicitude was touching, and I didn't laugh. "Really," I said, "I can assure you that your fears are groundless. I'm very much alive and expect to stay that way for a long time to come."

"Good. Now I feel better. I like you, Mr. Beers."

"I like you, too, Shirley." I stepped back just in time to avoid a hug. The elevator halted and we got out. I led her down the hallway to the stairs.

"Oh, you have the penthouse!" she squealed. Now she was really excited.

"You go first," I murmured.

She went first. At the top of the stairs she halted, puzzled. "But there's a door here—it's the roof or something."

"Keep going," I directed.

She stepped out on the rooftop and I followed. The door closed behind us, and everything was still.

Everything was still with a midnight stillness. Everything was beautiful with a midnight beauty. The dark body of the city stretched below us, wearing its neon necklaces, its bracelets and rings of incandescence. I've seen it many times from the air, many times from rooftops, and it's always a thrilling spectacle to me. Where I come from things are different. Not that I'd ever care to trade—the city's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there.

I stared, and the blonde stared. But she wasn't staring at the streets below.

I followed her gaze to the shadow of the building abutment, to the deep shadows where something shimmered roundly and iridescently in the darkness. It was completely out of sight from the surrounding buildings, and it couldn't be seen at first glance from the doorway here on the roof. But she saw it now, and she said, "Gee!"

She said, "Gee! Mr. Beers—look at that!"

I looked.

"What is it, a plane? Or—could it be one of those saucer things?"

I looked.

"Mr. Beers, what's the matter?—you aren't even surprised."

I looked.

"You—you knew about this?"

"Yes. It's mine."

"Yours? A saucer? But it can't be. You're a man and—"

I shook my head slowly. "Not exactly, Shirley. I don't really look like this, you know. Not where I came from." I gestured down toward the tired flesh. "I borrowed this from Ril."

"Ril?"

"Yes. He's one of my friends. He collects too. We all collect, you know. It's our hobby. We come to Earth and collect."

I couldn't read her face, because as I came close she drew away.

"Ril has a rather curious hobby, in a way. He collects nothing but *B*'s. You should see his trophy room! He has a Bronson, three Bakers, and a Beers—that's the body I'm using now. Its name was Ambrose Beers, I believe. He picked it up in Mexico a long time ago."

"You're crazy!" Shirley whispered, but she listened as I went on. Listened and drew away.

"My friend Kor has a collection of people of all nations. Mar you saw in the tavern a while ago—Melanesian types are his hobby. Many of us come here quite often, you know, and in spite of the recent publicity and the danger, it's an exhilarating pastime." I was quite close to her now, and she didn't step back any further. She couldn't—she stood on the edge of the roof.

"Now, take Vis," I said. "Vis collects redheads, nothing but redheads. He has a magnificent grouping, all of them stuffed. Ril doesn't stuff his specimens at all—that's why we can use them for our trips. Oh, it's a fascinating business, I can tell you! Ril keeps them in preservative tanks and Vis stuffs them—his redheads, I mean. Now as for me, I collect blondes."

Her eyes were wide, and she could scarcely get the words out for panting. "You're—going to—stuff me?"

I had to chuckle. "Not at all, dear. Set your mind at rest. I neither stuff nor preserve. I collect for different reasons entirely." She edged sideways, toward the iridescent bubble. There was nowhere else to go, and I followed closely, closely.

"You're—fooling me—" she gasped.

"No. Oh, my friends think I have peculiar ideas, but I enjoy it this way. There's nothing like a blonde, as far as I'm concerned. And I ought to know. I've collected over a hundred so far since I started. You are number one hundred and three."

I didn't have to do anything. She fainted, and I caught her, and that made things just perfect—no need to make a mess on the roof. I merely carried her right into the ship and we were off in a moment.

Of course people would remember the old man who picked up Shirley Collins in the dance hall, and I'd left a trail of money all over town. There'd be an investigation and all that. There almost always was an investigation.

But that didn't bother me. Ril has many bodies for use besides old Beers, whoever he might have been. Next time I'd try a younger man. Variety is the spice of life.

Yes, it was a very pleasant evening. I sang to myself almost all the way back. It had been good sport, and the best was yet to come.

But then, I like blondes. They can laugh at me all they please—I'll take a blonde any time. As I say, it's a matter of taste.

And blondes are simply delicious.

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All on a Golden Afternoon

The uniformed man at the gate was very polite, but he didn't seem at all in a hurry to open up. Neither Dr. Prager's new Cadillac nor his old goatee made much of an impression on him.

It wasn't until Dr. Prager snapped, "But I've an appointment—Mr. Dennis said it was urgent!" that the uniformed man turned and went into the little guard booth to call the big house on the hill.

Dr. Saul Prager tried not to betray his impatience, but his right foot pressed down on the accelerator and a surrogate of exhaust did his fuming for him.

Just how far he might have gone in polluting the air of Bel Air couldn't be determined, for after a moment the man came out of the booth and unlocked the gate. He touched his cap and smiled.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Doctor," he said. "You're to go right on up."

Dr. Prager nodded curtly and the car moved forward.

"I'm new on this job and you got to take precautions, you know," the man called after him, but Dr. Prager wasn't listening. His eyes were fixed on the panorama of the hillside ahead. In spite of himself he was mightily impressed.

There was reason to be—almost half a million dollars' worth of reason. The combined efforts of a dozen architects, topiarists, and landscape gardeners had served to create what was popularly known as "the Garden of Eden." Although the phrase was a complimentary reference to Eve Eden, owner of the estate, there was much to commend it, Dr. Prager decided. That is, if one can picture a Garden of Eden boasting two swimming pools, an eight-car garage, and a corps of resident angels with power mowers.

This was by no means Dr. Prager's first visit, but he never failed to be moved by the spectacle of the palace on the hill. It was a fitting residence for Eve, the First Woman. The First Woman of the Ten Box-Office Leaders, that is.

The front door was already open when he parked in the driveway, and the butler smiled and bowed. He was, Dr. Prager knew, a genuine English butler, complete with accent and sideburns. Eve Eden had insisted on that, and she'd had one devil of a time obtaining an authentic specimen from the employment agencies. Finally she'd managed to locate one—from Central Casting.

"Good afternoon," the butler greeted him. "Mr. Dennis is in the library, sir. He is expecting you."

Dr. Prager followed the manservant through the foyer and down the hall. Everything was furnished with magnificent taste—as Mickey Dennis often observed, "Why not? Didn't we hire the best interior decorator in Beverly Hills?"

The library itself was a remarkable example of calculated décor. Replete with the traditional overstuffed chairs, custom-made by a firm of reliable overstuffers, it boasted paneled walnut walls, polished mahogany floors, and a good quarter mile of bookshelves rising to the vaulted ceiling. Dr. Prager's glance swept the shelves, which were badly in need of dusting anyway. He noted a yard of Thackeray in green, two yards of brown Thomas Hardy, complemented by a delicate blue Dostoevski. Ten feet of Balzac, five feet of Dickens, a section of Shakespeare, a mass of Molière. Complete works, of course. The booksellers would naturally want to give Eve Eden the works. There must have been two thousand volumes on the shelves.

In the midst of it all sat Mickey Dennis, the agent, reading a smudged and dog-eared copy of *Variety*.

As Dr. Prager stood, hesitant, in the doorway, the little man rose and beckoned to him. "Hey, Doc!" he called. "I been waiting for you!"

"Sorry," Dr. Prager murmured. "There were several appointments I couldn't cancel."

"Never mind the appointments. You're on retainer with us, ain'cha? Well, sweetheart, this time you're really gonna earn it."

He shook his head as he approached. "Talk about trouble," he muttered—although Dr. Prager had not even mentioned the subject. "Talk about trouble, we got it. I ain't dared call the studio yet. If I did there'd be wigs floating all over Beverly Hills. Had to see you first. And you got to see *her*."

Dr. Prager waited. A good 50 per cent of his professional duties consisted of waiting. Meanwhile he indulged in a little private speculation. What would it be this time? Another overdose of sleeping pills—a return to narcotics—an attempt to prove the old maxim that absinthe makes the heart grow fonder? He'd handled Eve Eden before in all these situations and topped it off with more routine assignments, such as the time she'd wanted to run off with the Japanese chauffeur. Come to think of it, that hadn't been exactly routine. Handling Eve was bad; handling the chauffeur was worse, but handling the chauffeur's wife and seven children was a nightmare. Still, he'd smoothed things over. He always smoothed things over, and that's why he was on a fat yearly retainer.

Dr. Prager, as a physician, generally disapproved of obesity, but when it came to yearly retainers he liked them plump. And this was one of the plumpest. Because of it he was ready for any announcement Mickey Dennis wanted to make.

The agent was clutching his arm now. "Doc, you gotta put the freeze on her, fast! This time it's murder!"

Despite himself, Dr. Prager blanched. He reached up and tugged reassuringly at his goatee. It was still there, the symbol of his authority. He had mastered the constriction in his vocal chords before he started to speak. "You mean she's killed someone?"

"No!" Mickey Dennis shook his head in disgust. "*That* would be bad enough, but we could handle it. I was just using a figger of speech, like. She wants to murder herself, Doc. Murder her career, throw away a brand-new seven-year non-cancelable no-option contract with a percentage of the gross. She wants to quit the industry."

"Leave pictures?"

"Now you got it, Doc. She's gonna walk out on four hundred grand a year."

There was real anguish in the agent's voice—the anguish of a man who is well aware that 10 per cent of four hundred thousand can buy a lot of convertibles.

"You gotta see her," Dennis moaned. "You gotta talk her out of it, fast."

Dr. Prager nodded. "Why does she want to quit?" he asked.

Mickey Dennis raised his hands. "I don't know," he wailed. "She won't give any reasons. Last night she just up and told me. Said she was through. And when I asked her politely just what the hell's the big idea, she dummied up. Said I wouldn't understand." The little man made a sound like trousers ripping in a tragic spot. "Damned right I wouldn't understand! But I want to find out."

Dr. Prager consulted his beard again with careful fingers. "I haven't seen her for over two months," he said. "How has she been behaving lately? I mean, otherwise?"

"Like a doll," the agent declared. "Just a living doll. To look at her you wouldn't of thought there was anything in her head but sawdust. Wrapped up the last picture clean, brought it in three days ahead of schedule. No blowups, no goofs, no nothing. She hasn't been hitting the sauce or anything else. Stays home mostly and goes to bed early. Alone, yet." Mickey Dennis made the pants-ripping sound again. "I might of figgered it was too good to be true."

"No financial worries?" Dr. Prager probed.

Dennis swept his arm forward to indicate the library and the expanse beyond. "With *this*? All clear and paid for. Plus a hunk of real estate in Long Beach and two oil wells gushing like Lolly Parsons over a

hot scoop. She's got more loot than Fort Knox and almost as much as Crosby."

"Er—how old is Eve, might I ask?"

"You might ask, and you might get some funny answers. But I happen to know. She's thirty-three. I can guess what you're thinking, Doc, and it don't figger. She's good for another seven years, maybe more. Hell, all you got to do is look at her."

"That's just what I intend to do," Dr. Prager replied, "Where is she?"

"Upstairs, in her room. Been there all day. Won't see me." Mickey Dennis hesitated. "She doesn't know you're here either. I said I was gonna call you and she got kind of upset."

"Didn't want to see me, eh?"

"She said if that long-eared nanny goat got within six miles of this joint she'd—" The agent paused and shifted uncomfortably. "Like I mentioned, she was upset."

"I think I can handle the situation," Dr. Prager decided.

"Want me to come along and maybe try and soften her up a little?"

"That won't be necessary." Dr. Prager left the room, walking softly.

Mickey Dennis went back to his chair and picked up the magazine once more. He didn't read, because he was waiting for the sound of the explosion.

When it came he shuddered and almost gritted his teeth until he remembered how much it would cost to buy a new upper plate. Surprisingly enough, the sound of oaths and shrieks subsided after a time, and Dennis breathed a deep sigh of relief.

The doc was a good head shrinker. He'd handle her. He was handling her. So there was nothing to do now but relax.

2

"Relax," Dr. Prager said. "You've discharged all your aggression. Now you can stretch out. That's better."

The spectacle of Eve Eden stretched out in relaxation on a chaise longue was indeed better. In the words of many eminent lupine Hollywood authorities, it was the best.

Eve Eden's legs were long and white and her hair was long and blond; both were now displayed to perfection, together with a whole series of coming attractions screened through her semitransparent lounging pajamas. The face that launched a thousand close-ups was that of a petulant child, well-versed in the more statutory phases of juvenile delinquency.

Dr. Prager could cling to his professional objectivity only by clinging to his goatee. As it was, he dislodged several loose hairs and an equal number of loose impulses before he spoke again.

"Now," he said, "tell me all about it."

"Why should I?" Eve Eden's eyes and voice were equally candid. "I didn't ask you to come here. I'm not in any jam."

"Mr. Dennis said you're thinking of leaving pictures."

"Mr. Dennis is a cockeyed liar. I'm not thinking of leaving. I've left, period. Didn't he call the lawyers? Hasn't he phoned the studio? I told him to."

"I wouldn't know," Dr. Prager soothed.

"Then he's the one who's in a jam," Eve Eden announced happily. "Sure, I know why he called you. You're supposed to talk me out of it, right? Well, it's no dice, Doc. I made up my mind."

"Why?"

"None of your business."

Dr. Prager leaned forward. "But it is my business, Wilma."

"Wilma?"

Dr. Prager nodded, his voice softening. "Wilma Kozmowski. Little Wilma Kozmowski. Have you forgotten that I know all about her? The little girl whose mother deserted her. Who ran away from home when she was twelve and lived around. I know about the waitress jobs in Pittsburgh, and the burlesque show, and the B-girl years in Calumet City. And I know about Frank, and Eddie, and Nino, and Sid, and—all the others." Dr. Prager smiled. "You told me all this yourself, Wilma. And you told me all about what happened after you became Eve Eden. When you met me you weren't Eve Eden yet, not entirely. Wilma kept interfering, didn't she? It was Wilma who drank, took the drugs, got mixed up with the men, tried to kill herself. I helped you fight Wilma didn't I, Eve? I helped you *become* Eve Eden, the movie star. That's why it's my business now to see that you stay that way. Beautiful, admired, successful, happy—"

"You're wrong, Doc. I found that out. If you want me to be happy, forget about Eve Eden. Forget about Wilma too. From now on I'm going to be somebody else. So please, just go away."

"Somebody else?" Dr. Prager leaped at the phrase. An instant later he leaped literally.

"What's that?" he gasped.

He stared down at the floor, the hairs in his goatee bristling as he caught sight of the small white furry object that scuttled across the carpet.

Eve Eden reached down and scooped up the creature, smiling.

"Just a white rabbit," she explained. "Cute, isn't he? I bought him the other day."

"But—but—"

Dr. Prager goggled. It was indeed a white rabbit which Eve Eden cradled in her arms, but not *just* a white rabbit. For this rabbit happened to be wearing a vest and a checkered waistcoat, and Dr. Prager could almost swear that the silver chain across the vest terminated in a concealed pocket watch.

"I bought it after the dream," Eve Eden told him.

"Dream?"

"Oh, what's the use?" She sighed. "I might as well let you hear it. All you head shrinkers are queer for dreams anyway."

"You had a dream about rabbits?" Dr. Prager began.

"Please, Doc, let's do it my way," she answered. "This time *you* relax and I'll do the talking. It all started when I fell down this rabbit hole . . ."

3

In her dream, Eve Eden said, she was a little girl with long golden curls. She was sitting on a riverbank when she saw this white rabbit running close by. It was wearing the waistcoat and a high collar, and then it took a watch out of its pocket, muttering, "Oh dear, I shall be too late." She ran across the field after it, and when it popped down a large rabbit hole under a hedge, she followed.

"Oh no!" Dr. Prager muttered. "Not *Alice*!"

"Alice who?" Eve Eden inquired.

"*Alice in Wonderland*."

"You mean that movie Disney made, the cartoon thing?"

Dr. Prager nodded. "You saw it?"

"No. I never waste time on cartoons."

"But you know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

"Well—" Eve Eden hesitated. Then from the depths of her professional background an answer came. "Wasn't there another movie, 'way back around the beginning of the thirties? Sure, Paramount made it, with Oakie and Gallagher and Horton and Ruggles and Ned Sparks and Fields and Gary Cooper. And let's see now, who played the dame—Charlotte Henry?"

Dr. Prager smiled. *Now* he was getting somewhere. "So that's the one you saw, eh?"

Eve Eden shook her head. "Never saw that one either. Couldn't afford movies when I was a brat, remember?"

"Then how do you know the cast and—"

"Easy. Gal who used to work with Alison Skipworth told me. She was in it too. And Edna May Oliver. I got a good memory, Doc. You know that."

"Yes." Dr. Prager breathed softly. "And so you must remember reading the original book, isn't that it?"

"Was it a book?"

"Now look here, don't tell me you've never read *Alice in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll. It's a classic."

"I'm no reader, Doc. You know that too."

"But surely as a child you must have come across it Or had somebody tell you the story."

The blond curls tossed. "Nope. I'd remember if I had. I remember everything I read. That's why I'm

always up on my lines. Best sight reader in the business. I not only haven't read *Alice in Wonderland*, I didn't even know there was such a story, except in a screenplay."

Dr. Prager gave an irritable tug at his goatee. "All right. You *do* have a remarkable memory, I know. So let's think back now. Let's think back very carefully to your earliest childhood. Somebody must have taken you on their lap, told you stories."

The star's eyes brightened. "Why, sure!" she exclaimed. "That's right! Aunt Emma was always telling me stories."

"Excellent." Dr. Prager smiled. "And can you recall now the first story she ever told you? The very first?"

Eve Eden closed her eyes, concentrating with effort. When her voice came it was from far away. "Yes," she whispered, "I remember now. I was only four. Aunt Emma took me on her lap and she told me my first story. It was the one about the drunk who goes in this bar, and he can't find the John, see, so the bartender tells him to go upstairs and—"

"No," said Dr. Prager. "No, no! Didn't she ever tell you any fairy tales?"

"Aunt Emma?" Eve Eden laughed. "I'll say she didn't. But stories—she had a million of 'em! Did you ever hear the one about the young married couple who wanted to—"

"Never mind." The psychiatrist leaned back. "You are quite positive you have never read or heard or seen *Alice in Wonderland*?"

"I told you so in the first place, didn't I? Now, do you want to hear my dream or not?"

"I want to very much," Dr. Prager answered, and he did. He took out his notebook and uncapped his fountain pen. In his own mind he was quite certain that she had heard or read *Alice*, and he was interested in the reasons for the mental block which prevented her from recalling the fact. He was also interested in the possible symbolism behind her account. This promised to be quite an enjoyable session. "You went down the rabbit hole," he prompted.

"Into a tunnel," Eve continued. "I was failing, falling very slowly."

Dr. Prager wrote down *tunnel—womb fixation?* And he wrote down *falling dream*.

"I fell into a well," Eve said. "Lined with cupboards and bookshelves. There were maps and pictures on pegs."

Forbidden sex knowledge, Dr. Prager wrote.

"I reached out while I was still falling and took a jar from a shelf. The jar was labeled 'Orange Marmalade.'"

Marmalade—Mama? Dr. Prager wrote.

Eve said something about "Do cats eat bats?" and "Do bats eat cats?" but Dr. Prager missed it. He was too busy writing. It was amazing, now that he thought of it, just how much Freudian symbolism was packed into *Alice in Wonderland*. Amazing, too, how well her subconscious recalled it.

Eve was telling now how she had landed in the long hall with the doors all around and how the rabbit disappeared, muttering, "Oh, my ears and whiskers, how late it's getting." She told about approaching the

three-legged solid-glass table with the tiny golden key on it, and Dr. Prager quickly scribbled *phallic symbol*. Then she described looking through a fifteen-inch door into a garden beyond and wishing she could get through it by shutting up like a telescope. So Dr. Prager wrote *phallic envy*.

"Then," Eve continued, "I saw this bottle on the table, labeled 'Drink Me.' And so I drank, and do you know something? I did shut up like a telescope. I got smaller and smaller, and if I hadn't stopped drinking I'd have disappeared! So of course I couldn't reach the key, but then I saw this glass box under the table labeled 'Eat Me,' and I ate and got bigger right away."

She paused. "I know it sounds silly, Doc, but it was real interesting."

"Yes indeed," Dr. Prager said. "Go on. Tell everything you remember."

"Then the rabbit came back, mumbling something about a Duchess. And it dropped a pair of white gloves and a fan."

Fetishism, the psychiatrist noted.

"After that it got real crazy." Eve giggled. Then she told about the crying and forming a pool on the floor composed of her own tears. And how she held the fan and shrank again, then swam in the pool.

Grief fantasy, Dr. Prager decided.

She went on to describe her meeting with the mouse and with the other animals, the caucus race, and the recital of the curious poem about the cur, Fury, which ended, "I'll prosecute you, I'll be judge, I'll be jury—I'll try the whole cause and condemn you to death."

Superego, wrote Dr. Prager and asked, "What are you afraid of, Eve?"

"Nothing," she answered. "And I wasn't afraid in the dream either. I liked it. But I haven't told you anything yet."

"Go on."

She went on, describing her trip to the rabbit's house to fetch his gloves and fan and finding the bottle labeled "Drink Me" in the bedroom. Then followed the episode of growth, and being stuck inside the house (*Claustrophobia*, the notebook dutifully recorded), and her escape from the animals who pelted her with pebbles as she ran into the forest.

It was *Alice* all right, word for word, image for image. *Father image* for the caterpillar, who might (Dr. Prager reasoned wisely) stand for himself as the psychiatrist, with his stern approach and enigmatic answers. The *Father William* poem which followed seemed to validate this conclusion.

Then came the episode of eating the side of the mushroom, growing and shrinking. Did this disguise her drug addiction? Perhaps. And there was a moment when she had a long serpentine neck and a pigeon mistook her for a serpent. A viper was a serpent. And weren't drug addicts called "vipers"? Of course. Dr. Prager was beginning to understand now. It was all symbolic. She was telling about her own life. Running away and finding the key to success—alternating between being very "small" and insignificant and trying every method of becoming "big" and important. Until she entered the garden—her Garden of Eden here—and became a star and consulted him and took drugs. It all made sense now.

He could understand as she told of the visit to the house of the Duchess (*mother image*) with her cruel, "Chop off her head." He anticipated the baby who turned into a pig and wrote down *rejection fantasy* quickly.

Then he listened to the interview with the Cheshire cat, inwardly marveling at Eve Eden's perfect memory for dialogue.

" 'But I don't want to go among mad people,' I said. And the crazy cat came back with, 'Oh, you can't help that. We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.' And I said, 'How do you know I'm mad?' and the cat said, 'You must be—or you wouldn't have come here.' Well, I felt plenty crazy when the cat started to vanish. Believe it or not, Doc, there was nothing left but a big grin."

"I believe it," Dr. Prager assured her.

He was hot on the trail of another scent now. The talk of madness had set him off. And sure enough, now came the tea party. With the March Hare and the Mad Hatter, of course—the *Mad Hatter*. Sitting in front of their house (*asylum*, no doubt) with the sleeping dormouse between them. *Dormouse*—*dor*mant sanity. She was afraid of going insane, Dr. Prager decided. So much so did he believe it that when she quoted the line, "Why is a raven like a writing desk?" he found himself writing down, *Why is a raving like a Rorschach test?* and had to cross it out.

Then came the sadistic treatment of the poor dormouse and another drug fantasy with mushrooms for the symbol, leading her again into a beautiful garden. Dr. Prager heard it all: the story of the playing-card people (*club* soldiers and *diamond* courtiers and *heart* children were perfectly fascinating symbols too!).

And when Eve said, "Why, they're only a pack of cards after all—I needn't be afraid of them," Dr. Prager triumphantly wrote *paranoid fantasies: people are unreal*.

"Now I must tell you about the croquet game," Eve went on, and so she told him about the croquet game and Dr. Prager filled two whole pages with notes.

He was particularly delighted with Alice-Eve's account of the conversation with the ugly Duchess, who said among other things, "Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves," and, "Be what you seem to be—or more simply, never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been who have appeared to them to be otherwise."

Eve Eden rattled it off, apparently verbatim. "It didn't seem to make sense at the time," she admitted. "But it does now, don't you think?"

Dr. Prager refused to commit himself. It made sense all right. A dreadful sort of sense. This poor child was struggling to retain her identity. Everything pointed to that. She was adrift in a sea of illusion, peopled with Mock Turtles—*Mock* Turtle, very significant, that—and distorted imagery.

Now the story of the Turtle and the Gryphon and the Lobster Quadrille began to take on a dreadful meaning. All the twisted words and phrases symbolized growing mental disturbance. Schools taught "reeling and writhing" and arithmetic consisted of "ambition, distraction, uglification, and derision." Obviously fantasies of inferiority. And Alice-Eve growing more and more confused with twisted, inverted logic in which "blackening" became "whiting"—it was merely an inner cry signifying she could no longer tell the difference between black and white. In other words, she was losing all contact with reality. She was going through an ordeal—a trial.

Of course it was a trial! Now Eve was telling about the trial of the Knave of Hearts, who stole the tarts. (*Hadn't Eve once been a "tart" herself?*) and Alice-Eve noted all the animals on the jury (*another paranoid delusion: people are animals*) and she kept growing (*delusions of grandeur*) and then came the white rabbit reading the anonymous letter.

Dr. Prager picked up his own ears, rabbit-fashion, when he heard the contents of the letter.

"My notion was that you had been
(before she had this fit)
An obstacle that came between
Him, and ourselves, and it.
Don't let him know she liked them best
For this must ever be
A *secret* kept from all the rest
Between yourself and me."

Of course. A *secret*, Dr. Prager decided. Eve Eden had been afraid of madness for a long time. That was the root of all her perverse behavior patterns, and he'd never probed sufficiently to uncover it. But the dream, welling up from the subconscious, provided the answer.

"I said I didn't believe there was an atom of meaning in it," Eve told him. "And the Queen cried, 'Off with her head,' but I said, 'Who cares for *you*? You're nothing but a pack of cards.' And they all rose up and flew at me, but I beat them off, and then I woke up fighting the covers."

She sat up. "You've been taking an awful lot of notes," she said. "Mind telling me what you think?"

Dr. Prager hesitated. It was a delicate question. Still, the dream content indicated that she was perfectly well aware of her problem on the subliminal level. A plain exposition of the facts might come as a shock but not a dangerous one. Actually a shock could be just the thing now to lead her back and resolve the initial trauma, wherever it was.

"All right," Dr. Prager said. "Here's what I think it means." And in plain language he explained his interpretation of her dream, pulling no punches but, occasionally, his goatee.

"So there you have it," he concluded. "The symbolic story of your life—and the dramatized and disguised conflict over your mental status which you've always tried to hide. But the subconscious is wise, my dear. It always knows and tries to warn. No wonder you had this dream at this particular time. There's nothing accidental about it. Freud says—"

But Eve was laughing. "Freud says? What does he know about it? Come to think of it, Doc, what do you know about it either? You see, I forgot to tell you something when I started. I didn't just *have* this dream." She stared at him, and her laughter ceased. "I bought it," Eve Eden said. "I bought it for ten thousand dollars."

4

Dr. Prager wasn't getting anywhere. His fountain pen ceased to function and his goatee wouldn't respond properly to even the most severe tugging. He heard Eve Eden out and waved his arms helplessly, like a bird about to take off. He felt like taking off, but on the other hand he couldn't leave this chick in her nest. Not with a big nest egg involved. But why did it have to be so involved?

"Go over that again," he begged finally. "Just the highlights. I can't seem to get it."

"But it's really so simple," Eve answered. "Like I already told you. I was getting all restless and keyed up, you know, like I've been before. Dying for a ball, some new kind of kick. And then I ran into Wally Redmond and he told me about this Professor Laroc."

"The charlatan," Dr. Prager murmured.

"I don't know what nationality he is," Eve answered. "He's just a little old guy who goes around selling these dreams."

"Now wait a minute—"

"Sure, it sounds screwy. I thought so, too, when Wally told me. He'd met him at a party somewhere and got to talking. And pretty soon he was spilling his—you'll pardon the expression—guts about the sad story of his life and how fed up he was with everything, including his sixth wife. And how he wanted to get away from it all and find a new caper.

"So this Professor Laroc asked him if he'd ever been on the stuff, and Wally said no, he had a weak heart. And he asked him if he'd tried psychiatry, and Wally said sure, but it didn't help him any."

"Your friend went to the wrong analyst," Dr. Prager snapped in some heat. "He should have come to a Freudian. How could he expect to get results from a Jungian—?"

"Like you say, Doc, relax. It doesn't matter. What matters is that Professor Laroc sold him this dream. It was a real scary one, to hear him tell it, all about being a burglar over in England someplace and getting into a big estate run by a little dwarf with a head like a baboon. But he liked it; liked it fine. Said he was really relaxed after he had it: made him feel like a different person. And so he bought another, about a guy who was a pawnbroker, only a long time ago in some real gone country. And this pawnbroker ran around having himself all kinds of women who—"

"*Jurgen*," Dr. Prager muttered. "And if I'm not mistaken, the other one was from *Lukundoo*. I think it was called *The Snout*."

"Let's stick to the point, Doc," Eve Eden said. "Anyway, Wally was crazy about these dreams. He said the professor had a lot more to peddle, and even though the price was high, it was worth it. Because in the dream you felt like somebody else. You felt like the character you were dreaming about. And, of course, no hang-over, no trouble with the law. Wally said if he ever tried some of the stuff he dreamed about on real women they'd clap him into pokey, even here in Hollywood. He planned to get out of pictures and buy more. Wanted to dream all the time. I guess the professor told him if he paid enough he could even *stay* in a dream without coming back."

"Nonsense!"

"That's what I told the man. I know how you feel, Doc. I felt that way myself before I met Professor Laroc. But after that it was different."

"You met this person?"

"He isn't a person, Doc. He's a real nice guy, a sweet character. You'd like him. I did when Wally brought him around. We had a long talk together. I opened up to him, even more than I have to you, I guess. Told him all my troubles. And he said what was wrong with me was I never had any childhood. That somewhere underneath there was a little girl trying to live her life with a full imagination. So he'd sell me a dream for that. And even though it sounded batty it made sense to me. He really seemed to understand things I didn't understand about myself.

"So I thought here goes, nothing to lose if I try it once, and I bought the dream." She smiled. "And now that I know what it's like I'm going to buy more. All he can sell me. Because he was right, you know. I don't want the movies. I don't want liquor or sex or H or gambling or anything. I don't want Eve

Eden. I want to be a little girl, a little girl like the one in the dream, having adventures and never getting hurt. That's why I made up my mind. I'm quitting, getting out while the getting is good. From now on, me for dreamland."

Dr. Prager was silent for a long time. He kept staring at Eve Eden's smile. It wasn't *her* smile—he got the strangest notion that it belonged to somebody else. It was too relaxed, too innocent, too utterly seraphic for Eve. It was, he told himself, the smile of a ten-year-old girl on the face of a thirty-three-year-old woman of the world.

And he thought *hebephrenia* and he thought *schizophrenia* and he thought *incipient catatonia* and he said, "You say you met this Professor Laroc through Wally Redmond. Do you know how to reach him?"

"No, he reaches me." Eve Eden giggled. "He sends me, too, Doc."

She was really pretty far gone, Dr. Prager decided. But he had to persist. "When you bought this dream, as you say, what happened?"

"Why, nothing. Wally brought the professor here to the house. Right up to this bedroom actually. Then he went away and the professor talked to me and I wrote out the check and he gave me the dream."

"You keep saying he 'gave' you this dream. What does that mean?" Dr. Prager leaned forward. He had a sudden hunch. "Did he ask you to lie down, the way I do?"

"Yes. That's right."

"And did he talk to you?"

"Sure. How'd you guess?"

"And did he keep talking until you went to sleep?"

"I—I think so. Anyway, I did go to sleep, and when I woke up he was gone."

"Aha."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you were hypnotized, my dear. Hypnotized by a clever charlatan, who sold you a few moments of prepared patter in return for ten thousand dollars."

"But—but that's not true!" Eve Eden's childish smile became a childish pout. "It was *real*. The dream, I mean. It *happened*."

"Happened?"

"Of course. Haven't I made that clear yet? The dream *happened*. It wasn't like other dreams. I mean, I could feel and hear and see and even taste. Only it wasn't *me*. It was this little girl. Alice. I was Alice. That's what makes it worth while, can't you understand? That's what Wally said too. The dream place is real. You *go* there, and you *are* somebody else."

"Hypnotism," Dr. Prager murmured.

Eve Eden put down the rabbit. "All right," she said. "I can prove it." She marched over to the big

bed—the bed large enough to hold six people, according to some very catty but authenticated reports. "I didn't mean to show you this," she said, "but maybe I'd better."

She reached under her pillow and pulled out a small object which glittered beneath the light. "I found this in my hand when I woke up," she declared. "Look at it."

Dr. Prager looked at it. It was a small bottle bearing a little white label. He shook it and discovered that the bottle was half filled with a colorless transparent liquid. He studied the label and deciphered the hand-lettered inscription which read simply, "Drink Me."

"Proof, eh?" he mused. "Found in your hand when you woke up?"

"Of course. I brought it from the dream."

Dr. Prager smiled. "You were hypnotized. And before Professor Laroc stole away—and *stole* is singularly appropriate, considering that he had your check for ten thousand dollars—he simply planted this bottle in your hand as you slept. That's my interpretation of your proof." He slipped the little glass container into his pocket. "With your permission, I'd like to take this along," he said. "I'm going to ask you now to bear with me for the next twenty-four hours. Don't make any announcements about leaving the studio until I return. I think I can clear everything up to your satisfaction."

"But I am satisfied," Eve told him. "There's nothing to clear up. I don't want to—"

"Please." Dr. Prager brushed his brush with authority. "All I ask is that you be patient for twenty-four hours. I shall return tomorrow at this same time. And meanwhile, try to forget about all this. Say nothing to anyone."

"Now wait a minute, Doc—"

But Dr. Prager was gone. Eve Eden frowned for a moment, then sank back on the chaise longue. The rabbit scampered out from behind a chair and she picked it up again. She stroked its long ears gently until the creature fell asleep. Presently Eve's eyes closed and she drifted off to slumber herself. And the child's smile returned to her face.

5

There was no smile, childish or adult, on Dr. Prager's face when he presented himself again to the gatekeeper on the following day.

His face was stern and set as he drove up to the front door, accepted the butler's greeting, and went down the hall to where Mickey Dennis waited.

"What's up?" the little agent demanded, tossing his copy of *Hollywood Reporter* to the floor.

"I've been doing a bit of investigating," Dr. Prager told him. "And I'm afraid I have bad news for you."

"What is it, Doc? I tried to get something out of her after you left yesterday, but she wasn't talking. And today—"

"I know." Dr. Prager sighed. "She wouldn't be likely to tell you, under the circumstances. Apparently she realizes the truth herself but won't admit it. I have good reason to believe Miss Eden is disturbed. Seriously disturbed."

Mickey Dennis twirled his forefinger next to his ear. "You mean she's flipping?"

"I disapprove of that term on general principles," Dr. Prager replied primly. "And in this particular case the tense is wrong. *Flipped* would be much more correct."

"But I figgered she was all right lately. Outside of this business about quitting, she's been extra happy—happier'n I ever seen her."

"Euphoria," Dr. Prager answered. "Cycloid manifestation."

"You don't say so."

"I just did," the psychiatrist reminded him.

"Level with me," Dennis pleaded. "What's this all about?"

"I can't until after I've talked to her," Dr. Prager told him. "I need more facts. I was hoping to get some essential information from this Wally Redmond, but I can't locate him. Neither his studio nor his home seems to have information as to his whereabouts for the past several days."

"Off on a binge," the agent suggested. "It figgers. Only just what did you want from him?"

"Information concerning Professor Laroc," Dr. Prager answered. "He's a pretty elusive character. His name isn't listed on any academic roster I've consulted, and I couldn't find it in the City Directory of this or other local communities. Nor could the police department aid me with their files. I'm almost afraid my initial theory was wrong and that Professor Laroc himself is only another figment of Eve Eden's imagination."

"Maybe I can help you out there, Doc."

"You mean you met this man, saw him when he came here with Wally Redmond that evening?"

Mickey Dennis shook his head. "No. I wasn't around then. But I been around all afternoon. And just about a half hour ago a character named Professor Laroc showed up at the door. He's with Eve in her room right now."

Dr. Prager opened his mouth and expelled a gulp. Then he turned and ran for the stairs.

The agent sought out his overstuffed chair and rifled the pages of his magazine.

More waiting. Well, he just hoped there wouldn't be any explosions this afternoon.

6

There was no explosion when Dr. Prager opened the bedroom door. Eve Eden was sitting quietly on the chaise longue, and the elderly gentleman occupied an armchair.

As Dr. Prager entered, the older man rose with a smile and extended his hand. Dr. Prager felt it wise to ignore the gesture. "Professor Laroc?" he murmured.

"That is correct." The smile was a bland blend of twinkling blue eyes behind old-fashioned steel-rimmed spectacles, wrinkled creases in white cheeks, and a rictus of a prim, thin-lipped mouth. Whatever else he might be, Professor Laroc aptly fitted Mickey Dennis's description of a "character." He appeared to be about sixty-five, and his clothing seemed of the same vintage, as though fashioned in

anticipation at the time of his birth.

Eve Eden stood up now. "I'm glad you two are getting together," she said. "I asked the professor to come this afternoon so we could straighten everything out."

Dr. Prager preened his goatee. "I'm very happy that you did so," he answered. "And I'm sure that matters can be set straight in very short order now that I'm here."

"The professor has just been telling me a couple of things," Eve informed him. "I gave him your pitch about me losing my buttons and he says you're all wet."

"A slight misquotation," Professor Laroc interposed. "I merely observed that an understanding of the true facts might dampen your enthusiasm."

"I think I have the facts," Dr. Prager snapped. "And they're dry enough. Dry, but fascinating."

"Do go on."

"I intend to." Dr. Prager wheeled to confront Eve Eden and spoke directly to the girl. "First of all," he said, "I must tell you that your friend here is masquerading under a pseudonym. I have been unable to discover a single bit of evidence substantiating the identity of anyone named Professor Laroc."

"Granted," the elderly man murmured.

"Secondly," Dr. Prager continued, "I must warn you that I have been unable to ascertain the whereabouts of your friend Wally Redmond. His wife doesn't know where he is, or his producer. Mickey Dennis thinks he's off on an alcoholic fugue. I have my own theory. But one fact is certain—he seems to have completely disappeared."

"Granted," said Professor Laroc.

"Third and last," Dr. Prager went on. "It is my considered belief that the man calling himself Professor Laroc did indeed subject you to hypnosis and that, once he had managed to place you in a deep trance, he deliberately read to you from a copy of *Alice in Wonderland* and suggested to you that you were experiencing the adventures of the principal character. Whereupon he placed the vial of liquid labeled 'Drink Me' in your hand and departed."

"Granted in part." Professor Laroc nodded. "It is true that I placed Miss Eden in a receptive state with the aid of what you choose to call hypnosis. And it is true that I suggested to her that she enter into the world of *Alice*, as Alice. But that is all. It was not necessary to read anything to her, nor did I stoop to deception by supplying a vial of liquid, as you call it. Believe me, I was as astonished as you were to learn that she had brought back such an interesting souvenir of her little experience."

"Prepare to be astonished again then," Dr. Prager said grimly. He pulled the small bottle from his pocket and with it a piece of paper.

"What's that, Doc?" Eve Eden asked.

"A certificate from Haddon and Haddon, industrial chemists," the psychiatrist told her. "I took this interesting souvenir, as your friend calls it, down to their laboratories for analysis." He handed her the report. "Here, read for yourself. If your knowledge of chemistry is insufficient, I can tell you that H₂O means water." He smiled. "Yes, that's right. This bottle contains nothing but half an ounce of water."

Dr. Prager turned and stared at Professor Laroc. "What have you to say now?" he demanded.

"Very little." The old man smiled. "It does not surprise me that you were unable to find my name listed in any registry or directory of activities, legal or illegal. As Miss Eden already knows, I chose to cross over many years ago. Nor was 'Laroc' my actual surname. A moment's reflection will enable you to realize that 'Laroc' is an obvious enough anagram for 'Carroll,' give or take a few letters."

"You don't mean to tell me—"

"That I am Lewis Carroll, or rather, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson? Certainly not. I hold the honor of being a fellow alumnus of his at Oxford, and we did indeed share an acquaintance—"

"But Lewis Carroll died in 1898," Dr. Prager objected.

"Ah, you *were* interested enough to look up the date." The old man smiled. "I see you're not as skeptical as you pretend to be."

Dr. Prager felt that he was giving ground and remembered that attack is the best defense. "Where is Wally Redmond?" he countered.

"With the Duchess of Towers, I would presume," Professor Laroc answered. "He chose to cross over permanently, and I selected *Peter Ibbetson* for him. You see, I'm restricted to literature which was directly inspired by the author's dream, and there's a rather small field available. I still have Cabell's *Smirt* to sell, and *The Brushwood Boy* of Kipling, but I don't imagine I shall ever manage to dispose of any Lovecraft—too gruesome, you know." He glanced at Eve Eden. "Fortunately, as I told you, I've reserved something very special for you. And I'm glad you decided to take the step. The moment I saw you my heart went out to you. I sensed the little girl buried away beneath all the veneer, just as I sensed the small boy in Mr. Redmond. So many of you Hollywood people are frustrated children. You make dreams for others but have none of your own. I am glad to offer my modest philanthropy—"

"At ten thousand dollars a session!" Dr. Prager exploded.

"Now, now," Professor Laroc chided. "That sounds like professional jealousy, sir! And I may as well remind you that a permanent crossover requires a fee of fifty thousand. Not that I need the money, you understand. It's merely that such a fee helps to establish me as an authority. It brings about the necessary transference relationship between my clients and myself, to borrow from your own terminology. The effect is purely psychological."

Dr. Prager had heard enough. This, he decided, was definitely the time to call a halt. Even Eve Eden in her present disturbed state should be able to comprehend the utter idiocy of this man's preposterous claims.

He faced the elderly charlatan with a disarming smile. "Let me get this straight," he began quietly. "Am I to understand that you are actually selling dreams?"

"Let us say, rather, that I sell experiences. And the experiences are every bit as real as anything you know."

"Don't quibble over words." Dr. Prager was annoyed. "You come in and hypnotize patients. During their sleep you suggest they enter a dream world. And then—"

"If you don't mind, let us quibble a bit over words, please," Professor Laroc said. "You're a psychiatrist. Very well, as a psychiatrist, please tell me one thing. Just what *is* a dream?"

"Why, that's very simple," Dr. Prager answered. "According to Freud, the dream phenomenon can be described as—"

"I didn't ask for a description, Doctor. Nor for Freud's opinion. I asked for an exact definition of the dream state, as you call it. I want to know the etiology and epistemology of dreams. And while you're at it, how about a definition of 'the hypnotic state' and of 'sleep'? And what is 'suggestion'? After you've given me precise scientific definitions of these phenomena, as you love to call them, perhaps you can go on and explain to me the nature of 'reality' and the exact meaning of the term 'imagination.' "

"But these are only figures of speech," Dr. Prager objected. "I'll be honest with you. Perhaps we can't accurately describe a dream. But we can observe it. It's like electricity: nobody knows what it *is*, but it's a measurable force which can be directed and controlled, subject to certain natural laws."

"Exactly," Professor Laroc said. "That's just what I would have said myself. And dreams are indeed like electrical force. Indeed, the human brain gives off electrical charges, and all life—matter—energy—enters into an electrical relationship. But this relationship has never been studied. Only the physical manifestations of electricity have been studied and harnessed, not the psychic. At least, not until Dodgson stumbled on certain basic mathematical principles, which he imparted to me. I developed them, found a practical use. The dream, my dear doctor, is merely an electrically charged dimension given a reality of its own beyond our own space-time continuum. The individual dream is weak. Set it down on paper, as some dreams have been set down, share it with others, and watch the charge build up. The combined electrical properties tend to create a *permanent* plane—a dream dimension, if you please."

"I don't please," answered Dr. Prager.

"That's because you're not receptive," Professor Laroc observed smugly. "Yours is a negative charge rather than a positive one. Dodgson—Lewis Carroll—was positive. So was Lovecraft and Poe and Edward Lucas White and a handful of others. Their dreams live. Other positive charges can live in them, granted the proper method of entry. It's not magic. There's nothing supernatural about it at all, unless you consider mathematics as magic. Dodgson did. He was a professor of mathematics, remember. And so was I. I took his principles and extended them, created a practical methodology. Now I can enter dream worlds at will, cause others to enter. It's not hypnosis as you understand it. A few words of non-Euclidean formula will be sufficient—"

"I've heard enough," Dr. Prager broke in. "Much as I hate to employ the phrase, this is sheer lunacy."

The professor shrugged. "Call it what you wish," he said. "You psychiatrists are good at pinning labels on things. But Miss Eden here has had sufficient proof through her own experience. Isn't that so?"

Eve Eden nodded, then broke her silence. "I believe you," she said. "Even if Doc here thinks we're both batty. And I'm willing to give you the fifty grand for a permanent trip."

Dr. Prager grabbed for his goatee. He was clutching at straws now. "But you can't," he cried. "This doesn't make sense."

"Maybe not your kind of sense," Eve answered. "But that's just the trouble. You don't seem to understand there's more than *one* kind. That crazy dream I had, the one you say Lewis Carroll had first and wrote up into a book—it makes sense to you if you really *live* it. More sense than Hollywood, than this. More sense than a little kid named Wilma Kozmowski growing up to live in a half-million-dollar palace and trying to kill herself because she can't be a little kid anymore and never had a chance to be one when she was small. The professor here, he understands. He knows everybody has a right to dream. For the first time in my life I know what it is to be happy."

"That's right," Professor Laroc added. "I recognized her as a kindred spirit. I saw the child beneath, the child of the pure unclouded brow, as Lewis Carroll put it. She deserved this dream."

"Don't try and stop me," Eve cut in. "You can't, you know. You'll never drag me back to your world, and you've got no reason to try—except that you like the idea of making a steady living off me. And so does Dennis, with his lousy ten per cent, and so does the studio with its big profits. I never met anyone who really liked me as a person except Professor Laroc here. He's the only one who ever gave me anything worth having. The dream. So quit trying to argue me into it, Doc. I'm not going to be Eve anymore or Wilma either. I'm going to be Alice."

Dr. Prager scowled, then smiled. What was the matter with him? Why was he bothering to argue like this? After all, it was so unnecessary. Let the poor child write out a check for fifty thousand dollars—payment could always be stopped. Just as this charlatan could be stopped if he actually attempted hypnosis. There were laws and regulations. Really, Dr. Prager reminded himself, he was behaving like a child himself: taking part in this silly argument just as if there actually was something to it besides nonsense words.

What was really at stake, he realized, was professional pride. To think that this old mountebank could actually carry more authority with Eve Eden than he did himself!

And what was the imposter saying now, with that sickening, condescending smile on his face?

"I'm sorry you cannot subscribe to my theories, Doctor. But at least I am grateful for one thing, and that is that you didn't see fit to put them to the test."

"Test? What do you mean?"

Professor Laroc pointed his finger at the little bottle labeled "Drink Me" which now rested on the table before him. "I'm happy you merely analyzed the contents of that vial without attempting to drink them."

"But it's nothing but water."

"Perhaps. What you forget is that water may have very different properties in other worlds. And this water came from the world of Alice."

"You planted that," Dr. Prager snapped. "Don't deny it."

"I do deny it. Miss Eden knows the truth."

"Oh, does she?" Dr. Prager suddenly found his solution. He raised the bottle, turning to Eve with a commanding gesture. "Listen to me now. Professor Laroc claims, and you believe, that this liquid was somehow transported from the dream world of *Alice in Wonderland*. If that is the case, then a drink out of this bottle would cause me either to grow or to shrink. Correct?"

"Yes," Eve murmured.

"Now wait—" the professor began, but Dr. Prager shook his head impatiently.

"Let me finish," he insisted. "All right. By the same token, if I took a drink from this bottle and nothing happened, wouldn't it prove that the dream-world story is a fake?"

"Yes, but—"

"No 'buts.' I'm asking you a direct question. Would it or wouldn't it?"

"Y-yes. I guess so. Yes."

"Very well, then." Dramatically, Dr. Prager uncorked the little bottle and raised it to his lips. "Watch

me," he said.

Professor Laroc stepped forward. "Please!" he shouted. "I implore you—don't—"

He made a grab for the bottle, but he was too late.

Dr. Prager downed the half ounce of colorless fluid.

7

Mickey Dennis waited and waited until he couldn't stand it any longer. There hadn't been any loud sounds from upstairs at all, and this only made it worse.

Finally he got the old urge so bad he just had to go on up there and see for himself what was going on.

As he walked down the hall he could hear them talking inside the bedroom. At least he recognized Professor Laroc's voice. He was saying something about, "There, there, I know it's quite a shock. Perhaps you'd feel better if you didn't wait—do you want to go now?"

That didn't make too much sense to Mickey, and neither did Eve's reply. She said, "Yes, but don't I have to go to sleep first?"

And then the professor answered, "No, as I explained to him, it's just a question of the proper formulae. If I recite them we can go together. Er—you might bring your checkbook along."

Eve seemed to be giggling. "You too?" she asked.

"Yes. I've always loved this dream, my dear. It's a sequel to the first one, as you'll discover. Now if you'll just face the mirror with me—"

And then the professor mumbled something in a very low voice, and Mickey bent down with his head close to the door but he couldn't quite catch it. Instead his shoulder pushed the door open.

The bedroom was empty.

That's right, empty.

But he could swear he heard voices just a second ago. What had the professor said? Something about facing the mirror?

Mickey looked in the mirror, the big mirror above the mantelpiece.

For a moment he got a screwy idea he could see the professor and Eve Eden reflected in the glass, with the light shining every which way and Eve somehow looking like a little kid with long golden curls. But that was crazy, of course.

Then the dressed-up white rabbit came hopping out from behind the bed and began to scamper around the floor.

Mickey didn't know how to explain that one either. There was going to be a lot he couldn't explain. He'd never find out where Eve and the professor had gone, because he'd never read *Through the Looking-Glass*. And he'd never understand where Doc went, for that matter.

The rabbit began to scamper around the pile of clothing on the floor. Mickey recognized Doc's coat and trousers and shirt and necktie, but this didn't tell him anything either.

Then he stooped and picked up the little bottle lying next to the empty clothes. He stared at the label reading "Drink Me."

Right now he could use a drink, Mickey decided, but this bottle was empty.

Maybe it was just as well. . . .

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Broomstick Ride

It was close to midnight when they gathered at the crater. Night raised its head across the pitted plains, and the twin moons opened their green eyes to stare down into the crater's depths.

The pit was deep and dark. Forbes crouched on the rim with his companions, and his mind was full of *d's*. *Deep, dark, dank, dismal, dolorous*. Yes, he thesaurized, and also *dreary, deathly, damned, and doomed*. To say nothing of *diabolical*.

Right now, crouching at the crater's edge, he mentally reviewed the work of Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth* was what he had in mind. *Macbeth* on the blasted heath. If this wasn't a blasted heath, then all his concepts were awry. A blasted heath at midnight, with two moons instead of one.

Just behind him in the darkness, the three technicians checked the controls of the recorder units. Visio and audio extended full range to cover a 360° scan on a half-mile sweep, with a 20-20000 frequency. Fourteen lenses played upon the heath, the crater rim, and the crater depths.

"Picking up anything yet?" Forbes whispered.

"Not yet. But if anything happens—" The technician's tone implied, for himself and his two companions, that nothing was expected to happen. They couldn't quite understand what they were doing on a blasted heath at midnight, setting up their sensitive equipment to record emptiness and silence.

Forbes couldn't blame them. This was supposed to be just a routine field trip.

"You'll check Pyris," the director had told him. "Cartography did a run on it, and Doyle will give you the details. The atmosphere, I understand, is positively Earth-like, and it's a Class I planet—one of the anthropomorphic cultures. Doyle places it at about 900 spans behind us, and there are even language similarities. We'll want audio and visio records, of course, and an element analysis. Just a preliminary survey, in case we find mineralogical possibilities worth exploiting. Strictly a routine checkup."

And Doyle hadn't added much more. "Outside of the craters and vegetation you'd think you were on Earth—a thousand spans ago, of course. The natives wear clothes, they have a primitive government, a religious pattern complete with totem and taboo—everything. Better get a hypnolearn on the language."

Forbes took the hypnolearn, and that started him wondering. The language wasn't English, but there

were odd similarities. And odd references—some of them so odd that Forbes spent the last week before departure checking Central Data files. He had covered all the available filmscannings from 1500 to 1700 Oldstyle.

The comparison between life on Pyris and life on Earth in post-feudal times proved surprisingly apt after Forbes landed. He had paid a formal call upon the Kal, or ruler, and sued for permission to "visit" the planet. Gifts and courtesies had been exchanged, and then Forbes had taken his technical crew into the desert to study life in the villages. A small force remained aboard the ship, which had landed close to the Kal's fortress.

For three days Forbes and his men had taken records of daily existence in the mines and the subterranean grottoes where all the food for the planet was grown. He reviewed his conversation with the "peasants"—that's what they'd be called on Oldstyle Earth, and that's how he thought of them now. He remembered the hints of curious beliefs which the workers of Pyris held. They were afraid to dig in certain grottoes, they kept away from the pits after dark, and they whispered of certain things which meant nothing to the men in Forbes's crew. But he had scanned the Oldstyle past on Earth, and that's how he'd run into Shakespeare, and similarities. The similarities excited him sufficiently to have his equipment set up in what he thought was the logical spot at the logical time. The blasted heath at midnight.

Now Forbes crouched there and waited for what appears on blasted heaths.

It came.

Audio got it first, faint and far away. The rush of matter through atmosphere, and above it the shriller sounds, splintering the silence.

One of the technicians, Kalt, began to mutter. "Bedamned! Voices. Voices in the sky!"

Visio took over now. The delicate cameras were on target, automatically focusing and feeding out *infra* and *ultra* to record what human eyes could not as yet perceive. And then the distant objects came into the range of normal viewing.

"Look!" Kalt whispered to his companions. "Pyrans. Up there, in the sky. And what are they riding on?"

Forbes could have told him. Forbes could have told him what comes to blasted heaths at midnight, and what they rode upon. But he kept silent, rather than disturb them at their work.

A month ago he himself would not have been disturbed, but since then he'd done that filmscan. And now he knew about witches.

They rode on broomsticks to the Sabbath, swooped from the skies—witches and warlocks, wizards and sorceresses, coming in coven to adore Satan, the Black Master of the Flock.

Of course, all this was ancient superstition, and earthly superstition besides. It had no basis in reality.

But he was seeing it now.

The broomsticks—were those long shafts really broomsticks?—soared overhead and then descended into the crater. The riders—were those frowsy hags really witches?—cackled and shrieked, their voices echoing below the crater rim.

Now fire blazed below, and the flames blazed blue as the crones cast powder upon the pyres. The

hags were naked now, their anointed bodies shimmering in the smoke.

"Bedamned!" muttered Kalt again, like the sensible modern technician he was. Forbes reflected that the man didn't even know the meaning of the word he used. It was merely a commonplace expression. Once it had been a jocular curse—"I'll be damned!" And before that, back in the ancient days of 1500-1700 Oldstyle, it had a literal meaning. It was, in those times, an acknowledgment of fact. People *were* damned. They *did* sell their souls to Satan. And they danced around fires and chanted while the smoke swirled. The damned danced.

They were dancing now.

Forbes recognized the ritual from what he'd scanned. He knew about the unguent cast on the fire, the ointment on the naked bodies, about belladonna and aconite and other forgotten drugs. He knew about the rituals they chanted in the Pyric tongue. Of course they could not be adoring Satan—he'd go over the audio records very thoroughly in the future—but at the moment he thought he could detect repeated shouts of a word resembling "Sire."

But everything else was familiar, dreadfully so. When the figure stepped out of the shadows, wearing a hood crowned with *kort*-horns, Forbes was reminded of the Master of the Sabbath, who wore the Sign of the Goat or the antlers of the Black Stag. Here it would be a *kort*, of course, for it was the only quadruped on Pyris.

The Master of the Sabbath, whatever his Pyric title, was leading the chanting now. And he brought the *kort* into the firelight, and he wielded the knife and filled the bowl and gave all to drink of the sacrifice. Then the smoke swirled up and the voices howled and—

The *temrars* came. Forbes recognized the soldiers of the Kal as they rose along the opposite rim of the crater. He recognized their breastplates, their spears and swords, and the two-man slings which hurled arrows of steel.

The arrows were speeding now, through the smoke. And the Kal's men clambered down the sides of the crater. The crones wailed.

Then came another shout—from behind.

Forbes turned, but too late. Another group of *temrars* had crept up in the darkness, to pinion the arms of his crew. And they used their swords now—not on the men, but on the receptors and the equipment. In a moment, audio and visio were wreckage.

The tall, spade-bearded leader confronted Forbes, placed his hand on his heart in salute, and murmured, "You are to follow me. It is the wish of the Kal."

Forbes heard Kalt protesting and cut him off with a curt gesture. He remembered that he was the guest of an alien culture, and a primitive one. They had already destroyed his records, and they were perfectly capable of destroying him, just as they would probably destroy the witches in the pit below. "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Wasn't that an old biblical injunction? Strange, that there should be this similarity.

And there were more similarities to come, as Forbes and his companions were escorted, on *kort*-back, across the nighted plain. Forbes could close his eyes and easily imagine himself transported across space and time to ancient Earth. The clank of armor, the thud of hoof-beats, the remorseless tread of the iron legions returning victorious to the castle of the king—all were part of another world. A world of conquerors and commoners, of mage and magic.

Forbes couldn't repress an ironic grin. He, the self-styled representative of modern intergalactic culture, was a prisoner of these superstitious savages. A single sweep of a sword had shattered the finest and most delicate scientific recording instruments yet devised. This wasn't his world of force and cunning, and he'd do best to deal with it on those terms.

Perhaps he'd treated the Kal too lightly. Certainly the Pyric people feared their ruler. They gave him their toil, their allegiance, their taxes, and their daughters. He owned the mines and the grottoes and was worshipped like a god.

So perhaps those who opposed the Kal would find new gods to worship. Sire, or whatever he was called, would be more than a Devil. He'd be the Kal's chief political opponent. No wonder his soldiers sought the witches out.

Now they came to the valley and the citadel of the Kal. Rising within the walls of stone was the great fortress, its silhouette serrated against the sky. The company made its way through narrow streets to broader avenues, down the ramps and into the castle proper.

And here, in one of the stone antechambers, Forbes found Siddons, the ship's astrogator, and the other members of the crew.

"They came for us an hour ago," Siddons said. "No, they didn't try to force their way inside—locks were closed, anyhow. But they summoned, and we didn't resist. There's a guard around the ship now, but none of them went in, or even tried to enter. I don't understand it."

Forbes mustered a show of confidence. "We'll find out all about it when I see the Kal."

"The Kal will see you now." It was the spade-bearded *temrar* who spoke, who led Forbes away alone and gestured to the others to keep back.

Forbes followed him down a long corridor, then halted as the *temrar* indicated a small door. "Please to enter," he said.

Nodding, Forbes opened the door, stepped inside, and faced the Kal.

The hairy little fat man was seated behind a large table. His pudgy hands rested on the tabletop and cradled a silver shape.

He tucked it away in the folds of his sleeve as Forbes entered and nodded at him gravely.

"I had you brought here for your own protection," the Kal said. "Your lives are in danger."

"From what?"

"The *wrali*. Or, as you would call them, witches."

"Why should they harm us?"

"Because you threaten their way of life. And unless you leave, they will destroy you. That was the purpose of their rites this evening—to summon Sire, the Evil One."

Forbes smiled. "But that's superstition," he said. "They can't harm us with spells or enchantments. Surely you don't believe, for example, that a witch or one of your *wrali* can kill a man by sticking pins into his image or melting it over a hot fire. Or do you?"

The Kal's voice, like his face, was inscrutable. "It is not a question of what I believe. It is a question of

what my people believe. And is it not true that once there were men who believed in witchcraft on Earth?"

"True." Forbes hesitated. "But how would *you* know that?"

"Because the *wrali* have a legend. According to that legend, the inhabitants of Pyris came, originally, from Earth."

"Our Earth?"

"Exactly. Haven't you noticed the similarities in language, in concept, in the system of government corresponding to olden days? And isn't our *wrali*-worship of Sire similar to the witch-worship of Satan?"

The Kal smiled now. "I'm not the ignorant barbarian you think me to be—it is only through choice that I appear so. And you might do well to ponder our legend.

"The tale is this. Long ago, on your Earth, witches were persecuted, burned, hanged, torn to pieces, because they believed in Satan, or Sire. And a certain group, facing extinction on your planet, invoked the Evil One to save them. He granted their desires. They mounted their broomsticks and flew into space—flew here, to Pyris."

Forbes blinked. "You don't believe that, do you?" he asked.

"Legends are interesting, you must admit. They do offer explanations."

"I have another." Forbes considered for a moment. "On our Earth, long ago, science was as suspect as witchcraft. Scientists performing experiments or investigations could be accused of black magic and executed just as witches were.

"Now suppose a certain man, or group of men, working in secret, managed somehow to hit upon the principles of atomic propulsion and space travel—just as we know the alchemists investigated atomic theory? And in order to escape from a hostile environment, they actually built a ship and came here? Whereupon a clique of warriors among their descendants determined to seize the power of government, gradually debased the people and enslaved them—planting such crude legends to keep them in the grip of superstition?"

The Kal shrugged. "You find that theory more attractive than witchcraft, eh?"

Forbes met his gaze. "It's logical. Somewhere in this world the sources of scientific knowledge must still exist, suppressed only to maintain the present rulers in control. I rather suspect that the *wrali* understand some of it. I saw them ride to the meeting tonight on broomsticks, and I'm thinking now that those broomsticks contained individual power packs."

The Kal shrugged again. "I see there are no secrets to the trained scientific mind. But now that you know the story, I must ask you to leave, for your own safety. The *wrali* fear you and may take drastic measures."

Forbes bowed his head. "Very well. We can take off immediately, if you release us."

"You will be escorted to your ship. Is there anything you need, any service you require?"

"No, thank you." Forbes hesitated. "It's just that I'm sorry. Sorry to see a world still existing in such savagery as yours, when it isn't necessary. That men here are still ruled by ignorance and superstition."

The Kal tugged at his beard. "But suppose there were truth to the legends? Suppose that Sire, or Satan, does rule here and that science dares not oppose magic? That this world stays in barbarism because it is the Evil One's wish to rule, and that science must bow before sorcery lest everything be destroyed?"

Forbes smiled. "You know that's nonsense," he replied. "I can't accept that, any more than you can."

"Yet you'll go now and leave us to our savagery?"

"I have no choice."

"Very well, then." The Kal inclined his head. Forbes went to the door, and the Kal spoke to his *temrar*, gave orders for safe escort back to the ship.

Then the door closed, and the Kal was alone in the little room. He stared into the flame from the brazier, then extracted the gleaming object from his sleeve once more. He turned it over and over with his pudgy hands, and after he had examined it quite thoroughly he merely sat and waited.

After a time, the door opened again. A Pyran came in, wearing a hood crowned with *kort*-horns.

"They are gone?" asked the Kal.

"Back to the ship. Soon they depart."

"I am sorry about tonight," the Kal said. "I trust the *temrars* did not actually hurt anyone, but they had to make it convincing. If Earth ever suspected that the government and the *wrali* work together, then nothing could stop them from returning. As it is, I think we deceived them and they are gone for good."

The hooded one stood stock-still, and his head was cocked as though he were listening. "I can sense them now," he murmured. "I can reach the one called Forbes, on the ship. He is thinking of his report. He will put in a request for an expedition to come back here. He wants to bring a new government from his planet and civilize all Pyris." The hooded one sighed. "It is as I told you it would be. Your plan has failed."

The Kal rose. "I'm sorry," he said. "I tried to save them. First I told him the truth about how we came to Pyris, and about the power of magic. But he didn't believe me. He preferred to think it was all science, disguised as legend."

"Then it must be ended my way," the hooded one declared. "We work together, *wrali* and *temrars*, although the people do not know. We work together to keep this planet in ignorance, keep our race from civilization and science—because with science, worship of the Evil One would cease. And that was the ancient promise we made when we came here—that our people would always worship. We must keep that promise in order to survive.

"So we cannot let this Forbes come back and bring his cursed science here. We must do things my way. Give that to me."

The Kal handed the silvery object to the hooded one. "Is it time?" he whispered.

The hooded one cocked his head again. "I can sense it now," he said. "The ship has taken off. It climbs swiftly. Thousands of miles."

The hooded one bent over the brazier as the flames roared up. Carefully he thrust the silvery object into the crimson coals. The flames licked, tasted, then consumed with incredible speed. In a moment the

object melted away.

"What happens now?" whispered the Kal.

The hooded one shuddered. "Ten thousand miles away," he murmured. "Now!"

Ten thousand miles over Pyris the spaceship exploded, melted into nothingness.

And down below, the Kal murmured sadly, "We had to do it, didn't we? To save our planet from the scientists. Because they don't believe in the Power of Evil. They don't believe you can kill by sticking pins into an image—or by melting an image over a hot fire—"

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Daybroke

Up in the sky the warheads whirled, and the thunder of their passing shook the mountain.

Deep in his vaulted sanctuary he sat, godlike and inscrutable, marking neither the sparrow's nor the missile's fall. There was no need to leave his shelter to stare down at the city.

He knew what was happening—had known ever since early in the evening when the television flickered and died. An announcer in the holy white garb of the healing arts had been delivering an important message about the world's most popular laxative—the one most people preferred, the one four out of five doctors used themselves. Midway in his praise of this amazing new medical discovery he had paused and advised the audience to stand by for a special bulletin.

But the bulletin never came; instead the screen went blank and the thunder boomed.

All night long the mountain trembled, and the seated man trembled, too, not with anticipation but with realization. He had expected this, of course, and that was why he was here. Others had talked about it for years; there had been wild rumors and solemn warnings and much muttering in taverns. But the rumormongers and the warning sounders and the tavern mutterers had made no move. They had stayed in the city and he alone had fled.

Some of them, he knew, had stayed to stave off the inevitable end as best they could, and these he saluted for their courage. Others had attempted to ignore the future, and these he detested for their blindness. And all of them he pitied.

For he had realized, long ago, that courage was not enough and that ignorance was no salvation. Wise words and foolish words are one—they will not halt the storm. And when the storm approaches it is best to flee.

So he had prepared for himself this mountain retreat, high over the city, and here he was safe, would be safe for years to come. Other men of equal wealth could have done the same, but they were too wise or too foolish to face reality. So while they spread their rumors and sounded their warnings and muttered in their cups, he built his sanctuary: lead-guarded, amply provisioned, and stocked with every need for years to come, including even a generous supply of the world's most popular laxative.

Dawn came at last and the echoes of the thunder died, and he went to a special, shielded place where he could sight his spyglass at the city. He stared and he squinted, but there was nothing to be seen—nothing but swirling clouds that billowed blackly and rolled redly across the hazed horizon.

Then he knew that he must go down to the city if he wanted to find out and made due preparations.

There was a special suit to wear, a cunning seamless garment of insulated cloth and lead, difficult and costly to obtain. It was a top-secret suit, the kind only Pentagon generals possess. They cannot procure them for their wives, and they must steal them for their mistresses. But he had one. He donned it now.

An elevated platform aided his descent to the base of the mountain, and there his car was waiting. He drove out, the shielded doors closing automatically behind him, and started for the city. Through the eyepiece of his insulated helmet he stared out at a yellowish fog, and he drove slowly, even though he encountered no traffic or any sign of life.

After a time the fog lifted, and he could see the countryside. Yellow trees and yellow grass stood stiffly silhouetted against a yellow sky in which great clouds writhed and whirled.

Van Gogh's work, he told himself, knowing it was a lie. For no artist's hand had smashed the windows of the farmhouses, peeled the paint from the sides of the barns, or squeezed the warm breath from the herds huddling in the fields, standing fright-frozen but dead.

He drove along the broad arterial leading to the city, an arterial which ordinarily swarmed with the multicolored corpuscles of motor vehicles. But there were no cars moving today, not in this artery.

Not until he neared the suburbs did he see them, and then he rounded a curve and was halfway upon the vanguard before he panicked and halted in a ditch.

The roadway ahead was packed with automobiles as far as the eye could see—a solid mass, bumper to bumper, ready to descend upon him with whirring wheels.

But the wheels were not turning.

The cars were dead. The further stretches of the highway were an automotive graveyard. He approached the spot on foot, treading with proper reverence past the Cadillac corpses, the cadavers of Chevrolets, the bodies of Buicks. Close at hand he could see the evidence of violent ends: the shattered glass, the smashed fenders, the battered bumpers and twisted hoods.

The signs of struggle were often pitiable to observe. Here was a tiny Volkswagen, trapped and crushed between two looming Lincolns; there an MG had died beneath the wheels of a charging Chrysler. But all were still now. The Dodges dodged no longer; the Hornets had ceased their buzzing; and the Ramblers would never ramble again.

It was hard for him to realize with equal clarity the tragedy that had overtaken the people inside these cars—they were dead, too, of course, but somehow their passing seemed insignificant. Maybe his thinking had been affected by the attitude of the age, in which a man tended to be less and less identified as an individual and more and more regarded on the basis of the symbolic status of the car he drove. When a stranger rode down the street, one seldom thought of him as a person; one's only immediate reaction was, "There goes a Ford—there goes a Pontiac—there goes one of those big goddam Imperials." And men bragged about their cars instead of their characters. So somehow the death of the automobiles seemed more important than the death of their owners. It didn't seem as though human

beings had perished in this panic-stricken effort to escape from the city; it was the cars which had made a dash for final freedom and then failed.

He skirted the road now and continued along the ditch until he came to the first sidewalks of the suburbs. Here the evidence of destruction was accentuated. Explosion and implosion had done their work. In the country paint had been peeled from the walls, but in the suburbs walls had been peeled from the buildings. Not every home was leveled. There were still plenty of ranch houses standing, though no sign of a rancher in a gray flannel suit. In some of the picturesquely modern white houses, with their light lines and heavy mortgages, the glass side walls remained unshattered, but there was no sign of happy, busy suburban life within—the television sets were dead.

Now he found his progress impeded by an increasing litter. Apparently a blast had swept through this area; his way was blocked by a clutter of the miscellaneous debris of Exurbia.

He waded through or stepped around:

Boxes of Kleenex, artificial shrunken heads which had once dangled in the windows of station wagons, crumpled shopping lists, and scribbled notices of appointments with psychiatrists.

He stepped on an Ivy League cap, nearly tripped over a twisted barbecue grill, got his feet tangled in the straps of foam-rubber falsies. The gutters were choked with the glut from a bombed-out drugstore: bobby pins, nylon bobby socks, a spate of pocketbooks, a carton of tranquilizers, a mass of sun-tan lotion, suppositories, deodorants, and a big cardboard cutout of Harry Belafonte obscured by a spilled can of hot fudge.

He shuffled on, through a welter of women's electric shavers, Book-of-the-Month Club bonus selections, Presley records, false teeth, and treatises on Existentialism. Now he was actually approaching the city proper. Signs of devastation multiplied. Trudging past the campus of the university, he noted, with a start of horror, that the huge football stadium was no more. Nestled next to it was the tiny Fine Arts Building, and at first he thought that it, too, had been razed. Upon closer inspection, however, he realized it was untouched, save for the natural evidence of neglect and decay.

He found it difficult to maintain a regular course now, for the streets were choked with wrecked vehicles and the sidewalks often blocked by beams or the entire toppled fronts of buildings. Whole structures had been ripped apart, and here and there were freakish variations where a roof had fallen in or a single room smashed to expose its contents. Apparently the blow had come instantly, and without forewarning, for there were few bodies on the streets and those he glimpsed inside the opened buildings gave indication that death had found them in the midst of their natural occupations.

Here, in a gutted basement, a fat man sprawled over the table of his home workshop, his sightless eyes fixed upon the familiar calendar exhibiting entirely the charms of Marilyn Monroe. Two flights above him, through the empty frame of a bathroom window, one could see his wife, dead in the tub, her hand still clutching a movie magazine with a Rock Hudson portrait on the cover. And up in the attic, open to the sky, two young lovers stretched on a brass bed, locked naked in headless ecstasy.

He turned away, and as his progress continued he deliberately avoided looking at the bodies. But he could not avoid seeing them now, and with familiarity the revulsion softened to the merest twinge. It then gave way to curiosity.

Passing a school playground, he was pleased to see that the end had come without grotesque or unnatural violence. Probably a wave of paralyzing gas had swept through this area. Most of the figures were frozen upright in normal postures. Here were all the aspects of ordinary childhood—the big kid punching the little kid, both leaning up against a fence where the blast had found them; a group of six

youngsters in uniform black leather jackets piled upon the body of a child wearing a white leather jacket.

Beyond the playground loomed the center of the city. From a distance the mass of shattered masonry looked like a crazy garden patch turned by a mad plowman. Here and there were tiny blossoms of flame sprouting forth from the interstices of huge clods, and at intervals he could see lopped, stemlike formations, the lower stories of skyscrapers from which the tops had been sheared by the swish of a thermo-nuclear scythe.

He hesitated, wondering if it was practical to venture into this weird welter. Then he caught sight of the hillside beyond and of the imposing structure which was the new Federal Building. It stood there, somehow miraculously untouched by the blast, and in the haze he could see the flag still fluttering from its roof. There would be life here, and he knew he would not be content until he reached it.

But long before he attained his objective he found other evidences of continued existence. Moving delicately and deliberately through the debris, he became aware that he was not entirely alone here in the central chaos.

Wherever the flames flared and flickered there were furtive figures moving against the fire. To his horror he realized that they were actually kindling the blazes, burning away barricades that could not otherwise be removed, as they entered shops and stores to loot. Some of the scavengers were silent and ashamed; others were boisterous and drunken; all were doomed.

It was this knowledge which kept him from interfering. Let them plunder and pilfer at will; let them quarrel over the spoils in the shattered streets. In a few hours or a few days radiation and fallout would take inevitable toll.

No one interfered with his passage; perhaps the helmet and protective garment resembled an official uniform. He went his way unhindered and saw:

A barefooted man wearing a mink coat, dashing through the door of a cocktail lounge and passing bottles out to a bucket brigade of four small children—

An old woman standing in a bombed-out bank vault, sweeping stacks of bills into the street with her broom. Over in one corner lay the body of a white-haired man, his futile arms outstretched to embrace a heap of coins. Impatiently the old woman nudged him with her broom. His head lolled, and a silver dollar popped out of his open mouth—

A soldier and a woman wearing the arm band of the Red Cross, carrying a stretcher to the blocked entrance of a partially razed church. Unable to enter, they bore the stretcher around to the side, and the soldier kicked in one of the stained-glass windows—

An artist's basement studio, open to the sky, its walls still intact and covered with abstract paintings. In the center of the room stood the easel, but the artist was gone. What was left of him was smeared across the canvas in a dripping mass, as though the artist had finally succeeded in putting something of himself into his picture—

A welter of glassware that had once been a chemical laboratory, and in the center of it a smocked figure slumped over a microscope. On the slide was a single cell which the scientist had been intently observing when the world crashed about his ears—

A woman with the face of a *Vogue* model, spread-eagled in the street. Apparently she had been struck down while answering the call of duty, for one slim, aristocratic hand still gripped the strap of her

hatbox. Otherwise, due to some prank of explosion, the blast had stripped her quite naked; she lay there with all her expensive loveliness exposed, and a pigeon nested in her golden pelvis—

A thin man emerging from a pawnshop and carrying an enormous tuba. He disappeared momentarily into a meat market next door, then came out again, the bell of his tuba stuffed with sausages—

A broadcasting studio, completely demolished, its once immaculate sound stage littered with the crumpled cartons of fifteen different varieties of America's Favorite Cigarette and the broken bottles of twenty brands of America's Favorite Beer. Protruding from the wreckage was the head of America's Favorite Quizmaster, eyes staring glassily at a sealed booth in the corner which now served as the coffin for a nine-year-old boy who had known the batting averages of every team in the American and National leagues since 1882—

A wild-eyed woman sitting in the street, crying and crooning over a kitten cradled in her arms—

A broker caught at his desk, his body mummified in coils of ticker tape—

A motorbus, smashed into a brick wall, its passengers still jamming the aisles, standees clutching straps even in rigor mortis—

The hindquarters of a stone lion before what had once been the Public Library; before it, on the steps, the corpse of an elderly lady whose shopping bag had spewed its contents over the street—two murder mysteries, a copy of *Tropic of Cancer*, and the latest issue of the *Reader's Digest*—

A small boy wearing a cowboy hat, who leveled a toy pistol at his little sister and shouted, "Bang! You're dead!"

(She was.)

He walked slowly now, his pace impeded by obstacles both physical and of the spirit. He approached the building on the hillside by a circuitous route, avoiding repugnance, overcoming morbid curiosity, shunning pity, recoiling from horror, surmounting shock.

He knew there were others about him here in the city's core, some bent on acts of mercy, some on heroic rescue. But he ignored them all, for they were dead. Mercy had no meaning in this mist, and there was no rescue from radiation. Some of those who passed called out to him, but he went his way, unheeding, knowing their words were mere death rattles.

But suddenly, as he climbed the hillside, he was crying. The salty warmth ran down his cheeks and blurred the inner surface of his helmet so that he no longer saw anything clearly. And it was thus he emerged from the inner circle, the inner circle of the city, the inner circle of Dante's hell.

His tears ceased to flow and his vision cleared. Ahead of him was the proud outline of the Federal Building, shining and intact—or almost so.

As he neared the imposing steps and gazed up at the façade, he noted that there were a few hints of crumbling and corrosion on the surface of the structure. The freakish blast had done outright damage only to the sculptured figures surmounting the great arched doorway; the symbolic statuary had been partially shattered so that the frontal surface had fallen away. He blinked at the empty outlines of the three figures; somehow he never had realized that Faith, Hope, and Charity were hollow.

Then he walked inside the building. There were tired soldiers guarding the doorway, but they made no move to stop him, probably because he wore a protective garment even more intricate and impressive than their own.

Inside the structure a small army of low clerks and high brass moved antlike in the corridors, marching grim-faced up and down the stairs. There were no elevators, of course—they'd ceased functioning when the electricity gave out. But he could climb.

He wanted to climb now, for that was why he had come here. He wanted to gaze out over the city. In his gray insulation he resembled an automaton, and like an automaton he plodded stiffly up the stairways until he reached the topmost floor.

But there were no windows here, only walled-in offices. He walked down a long corridor until he came to the very end. Here a single large cubicle glowed with gray light from the glass wall beyond.

A man sat at a desk, jiggling the receiver of a field telephone and cursing softly. He glanced curiously at the intruder, noted the insulating uniform, and returned to his abuse of the instrument in his hand.

So it was possible to walk over to the big window and look down.

It was possible to see the city, or the crater where the city had been.

Night was mingling with the haze on the horizon, but there was no darkness. The little incendiary blazes had been spreading, apparently, as the wind moved in, and now he gazed down upon a growing sea of flame. The crumbling spires and gutted structures were drowning in red waves. As he watched, the tears came again, but he knew there would not be enough tears to put the fires out.

So he turned back to the man at the desk, noting for the first time that he wore one of the very special uniforms reserved for generals.

This must be the commander, then. Yes, he was certain of it now, because the floor around the desk was littered with scraps of paper. Maybe they were obsolete maps; maybe they were obsolete plans; maybe they were obsolete treaties. It didn't matter now.

There was another map on the wall behind the desk, and this one mattered very much. It was studded with black and red pins, and it took but a moment to decipher their meaning. The red pins signified destruction, for there was one affixed to the name of this city. And there was one for New York, one for Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles—every important center had been pierced.

He looked at the general, and finally the words came.

"It must be awful," he said.

"Yes, awful," the general echoed.

"Millions upon millions dead."

"Dead."

"The cities destroyed, the air polluted, and no escape. No escape anywhere in the world."

"No escape."

He turned away and stared out the window once more, stared down at Inferno. Thinking, *this is what it has come to, this is the way the world ends.*

He glanced at the general again and then sighed. "To think of our being beaten," he whispered.

The red glare mounted, and in its light he saw the general's face, gleeful and exultant.

"What do you mean, man?" the general said proudly, the flames rising. "We won!"

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Sleeping Beauty

"New Orleans," said Morgan. "The land of dreams."

"That's right," the bartender nodded. "That's the way the song goes."

"I remember Connee Boswell singing it when I was just a kid," Morgan told him. "Made up my mind to hit this town someday and see for myself. But what I want to know is, where is it?"

"It?"

"The land of dreams," Morgan murmured. "Where'd it all disappear to?" He leaned forward and the bartender refilled his glass. "Take Basin Street, for instance. It's just a lousy railroad track. And the streetcar named Desire is a bus."

"Used to be a streetcar, all right," the bartender assured him. "Then they took 'em out of the Quarter and made all the streets one way. That's progress, Mac."

"Progress!" Morgan swallowed his drink. "When I got down here today I did the Quarter. Museum, Jackson Square, Pirate's Alley, Antoine's, Morning Call, the works. It's nothing but a tourist trap."

"Now wait a minute," the bartender said. "What about all the old buildings with the balconies and grillwork, stuff like that?"

"I saw them," Morgan admitted. "But you pass one of those fine old green-shuttered jobs and what do you see sitting right next door? A laundromat, that's what. Laundromats in the Vieux Carré. They've killed off your old Southern mammy and installed an automatic washer in her place. All the quaint, picturesque atmosphere that's left is hidden behind the walls of a private patio. What's left to see are the antique shops on Royal Street, filled with precious items imported from faraway Brooklyn."

The bartender shrugged. "There's always Bourbon Street."

Morgan made a face. "I hit Bourbon tonight, before I came here. A big neon nothing. Clipjoints and stripjoints. Imitation Dixieland played for visiting Swedes from Minnesota."

"Careful, Mac," said the bartender. "I'm from Duluth myself."

"You would be." Morgan tackled a fresh drink. "There isn't a genuine native or a genuine spot in the whole place. What's the song say about Creole babies with flashing eyes? All I saw was a bunch of B-girls out of exotic, mysterious old Cincinnati."

The bartender tipped the bottle again without being asked, "Now I get the drift, Mac," he muttered. "Maybe you're looking for a little action, huh? Well, I know a place—"

Morgan shook his head. "I'll bet you do. Everybody knows a place. Walking north, before I crossed

Rampart, I was stopped three times. Cab drivers. They wanted to haul me to a place. And what was their big sales pitch? Air-conditioning, that's what! Man waits half his life, saves his dough for a trip down here, and the land of dreams turns out to be air-conditioned!"

He stood up, knocking against the bar-stool.

"Tell you a secret," Morgan said. "If Jean Lafitte was around today, he'd be a cab driver."

He lurched out of the tavern and stood on the sidewalk outside, inhaling the damp air. It had turned quite foggy. Fog in the streets. Fog in his brain.

He knew where he was, though—north of Rampart, east of Canal and the Jung Hotel. In spite of the fog, he wasn't lost.

All at once Morgan wished he *was* lost. Lost on this crazy, winding little side street where the grass pushed up between the brick paving-stones and all the houses were shuttered against the night. There were no cars, no passersby, and if it wasn't for the street-lamps he could easily imagine himself to be in the old New Orleans. The *real* New Orleans of the songs and stories, the city of Bolden and Oliver and a kid named Satch.

It had been that way once, he knew. Then World War I came along and they closed down Storeyville. And World War II came along and they turned Bourbon Street into a midway for servicemen and conventioners. The tourists liked it fine; they came to the Mardi Gras parades and they ate at Arnaud's and then sampled a Sazerac at the Old Absinthe House and went home happy.

But Morgan wasn't a tourist. He was a romantic, looking for the land of dreams.

Forget it, he told himself.

So he started to walk and he tried to forget it, but he couldn't. The fog grew thicker—both fogs. Out of the internal fog came phrases of the old songs and visions of the old legends. Out of the external fog loomed the crumbling walls of the St. Louis Cemetery. St. Louis Number One, the guidebooks called it.

Well, to hell with the guidebooks. This was what Morgan had been looking for. The real New Orleans was inside these walls. Dead and buried, crumbling away in decayed glory.

Morgan found the grilled gate. It was locked. He peered through the bars, squinting at foggy figures. There were ghosts inside, real ghosts. He could see them standing silently within—white, looming figures pointing and beckoning to him. They wanted Morgan to join them there, and that's where he belonged. Inside, with the other dead romantics—

"Mister, what you doing?"

Morgan turned, stumbling back against the gateway. A small man peered up at him, a small white-haired man whose open mouth exuded a curious-sweet odor.

One of the ghosts, Morgan told himself. *The odor of corruption*—

But it was only alcohol. And the old man was real, even though his face and his eyes seemed filled with fog.

"Can't get in there, Mister," he was saying. "Place is closed for the night."

Morgan nodded. "You the watchman?" he asked.

"No. Just happened I was wandering around."

"So was I." Morgan gestured at the vista beyond the gateway. "First damned thing I've hit in this town that looked real."

The old man smiled, and again Morgan caught the sickish-sweet odor. "You're right," he said. "All the real things are dead. Notice the angels?"

"I thought they were ghosts," Morgan admitted.

"Maybe so. Lots of things inside there besides statues. See the tombs? Everybody's buried above ground, on account of the swamps. Them as couldn't afford a tomb, why they just rented a crypt in the cemetery wall. You could rent by the month if you liked. But if you didn't pay up—out came Grandpa! That is, if the snatchers didn't get him first."

The old man chuckled. "See the bars and chains on the doors?" he asked. "Rich folk put them up. Had to protect their dead from the bodysnatchers. Some say the grave-robbers were after jewels and such. Others claim the darkies needed the bones for voodoo. I could tell you stories—"

Morgan took a deep breath. "I'd like to hear some of those stories," he said. "How about going somewhere for a drink?"

"A pleasure." The old man bowed.

Under ordinary circumstances, Morgan would have found the spectacle slightly ridiculous. Now it seemed appropriate. And it was appropriate that the little man led him down twisting streets into ever-thickening fog. It was appropriate that he steered him at last into a small, dingy bar with a single light burning in its curtained window. It was appropriate that the stranger ordered for both of them without inquiring what Morgan would have.

The bartender was a fat man with a pockmarked face which bore no expression at all as he set glasses down before them. Morgan stared at the cloudy greenish liquor. It looked like a condensation of the fog, but it gave off the odd, sickish-sweet smell he had come to recognize.

"Absinthe," the old man murmured. "Not supposed to serve it, but they know me here." He raised his glass. "To the old days," he said.

"The old days."

The drink tasted of licorice and fire.

"Everybody used to know me then," the stranger told him. "Came to Storeyville in nineteen-and-two. Never did pick up the accent, but I've been a professional Southerner ever since. A real professional, you might say." He started a chuckle that ended up as a wheeze. "Throat's dry," he explained.

Morgan beckoned to the bartender. The green liquor climbed in the glasses, then descended. It rose and fell several times during the next hour. And the old man's voice rose and fell, and Morgan felt himself rising and falling, too.

It wasn't a panicky feeling, though. Somehow it seemed quite natural for him to be sitting here in this lonely little bar with a shabbily-dressed old lush who gazed at him with eyes of milky marble.

And it was natural for Morgan to talk about how disappointed he was in New Orleans, about wishing he'd been here to see the Mahogany Hall and the Ivory Palace—

"Storeyville," the old man said. "I can tell you all you want to know about that. Said I was a *professional* Southerner." He wheezed again, then recovered himself. "Had six chickens on the block," he said. "Wouldn't think it to look at me now, but I was a mighty handsome lad. And I made out. Had my own rig, nigger coachman and all. When autos came along, I got me a *chauffeur*. Wore spats every day of the week." He lifted his glass. "Six chickens, a high-class house. Professor in the parlor, mirrors all over the walls in every room upstairs. Bartender on duty twenty-four hours a day, and the biggest call was for champagne. Customers came from far away as Memphis, just to see the oil paintings."

"No air-conditioning?" Morgan mumbled.

"What's that?"

"Never mind. Go on."

"Called it the Palace," the old man murmured. "And it was. When the girls came down in their evening-dresses, with their hair done up and their eyes kind of sparkling behind their fans, they looked like queens. And we treated our customers like kings. Things were a lot different in the trade, then. Us fancy operators, we knew how to show a man a good time. We didn't hustle 'em for a quick trick and push 'em out again. Gave a sociable evening, a little refinement, a little refreshment, a little romance."

He sighed. "But the army closed Storeyville. Jazz bands went north, Professors got jobs in shoe-shine parlors, and I sold the oil-paintings. Still, I was luckier than most. I'd made my pile. Even hung on to the Palace, but closed everything up except for my own room downstairs. Nobody around today except me and the Red Queen."

"The Red Queen?"

"Told you I was a professional. Just because the lid clamped down, that didn't mean all us old-timers got squashed. I've kept going, on the q.t., understand? Sort of a sentimental gesture, if you follow me. Never more than one chicken now, but that's enough. Enough for the few who still appreciate it, who still want a taste of the old days, the old ways—"

Morgan burned his throat on the drink. "You mean to tell me you're still—in business?" he asked. "You've got a girl, the same kind who used to work in Storeyville in the old days?"

His companion nodded solemnly. "Trained her myself," he murmured. "Wears the old dresses, old-fashioned stuff, not like the chippies over in the big houses. Got her room fixed up like it was forty-five, fifty years ago. Like stepping into the past, and she treats you right, you know? I'm pretty careful who I let in these days, but there was something about you, I said to myself when I saw you—"

Morgan stood up. "Come on," he said. He produced his wallet, flung a bill on the table. "I've got dough. Been saving it up just for this trip. How much is this going to cost me?"

"She'll set the price," the old man told him. "For me this is only—well, you might call it a hobby."

Then they were out in the night again, and it seemed to Morgan that the fog was thicker, the streets darker and narrower than before. And the absinthe burned, and he alternately stumbled forward and hung back; eager for the past recaptured and wondering why he was seeking a nameless destination with a drunken old pimp.

Then they came to the house, and it looked like any other ancient house in the fog, in the absinthe haze. The old man unlocked the door, and he stood in the dark, high-ceilinged, mahogany-panelled hallway while the gas-jet sputtered on. The old man's room was off to the right; the big double-doors of

what used to be the parlor were tightly closed. But the huge staircase loomed ahead, and Morgan blinked as his companion reeled over to it and cupped his hands, shouting, "Company!"

His voice echoed and re-echoed down the long hall, reverberating off the walls and the doorways, and Morgan got the feeling they were all alone in the dim circle of light from the gas-jet, that the old man was crazy, that this was indeed the land of dreams.

But, "Company!" the old man shouted again, his face contorted, his voice angry and insistent. "Damned woman," he shrilled. "Sleeps her life away. I've had trouble with her before about this. Thought I'd taught her a lesson, but maybe I'll have to teach her again"—and once more he shouted up the stairway.

"Company!"

"Send him up."

The voice was soft, musical, and thrilling. The moment Morgan heard it, he knew he hadn't made a mistake. Crazy old man, crazy old house, crazy errand—but there was the voice, the warm and wanton invitation.

"Go ahead," the little man urged. "Right at the head of the stairs, her room is. You won't need a light."

Then he went into his room and Morgan climbed the stairs, feet moving over frayed carpeting, eyes intent on the doorway looming above the landing. When Morgan reached the door he fumbled for the knob in the darkness, standing there for a long moment as he tried to enter.

Quite suddenly the door opened inward, and there he was in the big bedroom, with twenty crystal chandeliers tinkling their welcome, twenty velvet carpets offering cushioned caresses to his feet, twenty ornate vanities spreading a pungent powder-and-patchouli perfume from their littered tops.

Twenty great canopied beds straddled the center of the room, and twenty occupants waved him forward. The light blazed down on the redness; the rich, reflected radiance of twenty Red Queens. They had red hair and red lips and red garters and red nipples. Twice twenty white arms opened to enfold him in an embrace that was all illusion.

Morgan reeled forward through a thousand rippling reflections from the mirrored walls and ceiling, trying to find the real bed and the real Red Queen. She laughed at him then, because he was drunk, and she held out her hand to guide him, draw him down beside her. And her touch was fire, and her mouth was a furnace, and her body was a volcano gushing lava, and the mirrors whirled wildly in a long red dream of laughter and delight.

He must have put on his clothes again and tiptoed downstairs around dawn; he couldn't remember. He didn't recall saying goodbye or paying the girl or seeing the old man again, either, nor could he recollect walking back into the Quarter. The absinthe had left him with a splitting headache and a bitter aftertaste in his mouth, and now he moved like an automaton, turning into the first place he saw.

It was a small Oyster Bar, but he didn't want the traditional dozen raws—he needed coffee. The fog was gone from the morning streets, but it lingered inside his skull, and Morgan wondered vaguely how he'd managed to find his way back to familiar surroundings. He stepped up to the counter and reached for his wallet.

His pocket was empty.

His hand began a search, up and down, forward and back. But his wallet was gone. His wallet, his identification, his license, his three hundred dollars in cash.

Morgan couldn't remember what had happened, but one thing was obvious. He'd been rolled. Rolled in the good old-fashioned way by a bad old-fashioned girl.

In a way it was almost funny, and in a way it served him right. He knew that, but somehow he failed to see either the humor or the justice of it all. And when it came to justice—

Morgan gave up all thoughts of coffee and went to the police. He started to tell his story to a desk sergeant, told a little more of it to a polite lieutenant, and ended up telling the whole thing over again to a plain-clothes detective as he walked with him down Rampart Street, heading east.

The detective, whose name was Belden, didn't seem to be polite at all.

Morgan freely admitted he'd been drinking last night, and even found the first little bar he had patronized. The bartender Morgan had talked to was off-duty, but the day man gave the detective his home phone, and Belden called him from the tavern and talked to him. The bartender remembered seeing Morgan, all right.

"He said you were drunk as a skunk," the impolite Belden reported. "Now, where did you go from there?"

"St. Louis Cemetery," Morgan said. But to his chagrin, he couldn't find his way. In the end, Belden led him there.

"Then what?" Belden demanded.

"Then I met this old man—" Morgan began.

But when Belden asked for an exact description, Morgan couldn't give it to him. And Belden wanted to know the old man's name, and where they'd gone together, and why. Morgan tried to explain how he'd felt, why he had agreed to drink with a stranger; the detective wasn't interested.

"Take me to the tavern," he said.

They prowled the side streets, but Morgan couldn't find the tavern. Finally he had to admit as much. "But I was there," he insisted. "And then we went to this house—"

"All right," Belden shrugged. "Take me to the house."

Morgan tried. For almost an hour he trudged up and down the winding streets, but all the houses looked alike, and their sameness in the sunlight was different than their distinctiveness in the darkness. There was nothing romantic about these shabby old buildings, nothing that savored of a midnight dream.

Morgan could see that the detective didn't believe him. And then, when he told him the whole story once again—about the old man training his girl in the Storeyville tradition, about the mirrored room upstairs and the red garters and all the rest of it—he knew the detective would never believe. Standing here in the bright street, with the sun sending splinters into his reddened eyes, Morgan found it hard to believe himself. Maybe it *had* been the liquor; maybe he'd made up the part about the old man and all the rest. He could have passed out in front of the cemetery, someone might have come along and lifted his wallet. That made sense. More sense than a journey to the land of dreams.

Apparently Belden thought so too, because he advanced just that theory as they started walking

back.

Morgan found himself nodding in agreement, and then he turned his head suddenly and said, "There it is—that's the tavern we went into, I'm sure of it!"

And it *was* the tavern. He recognized the pockmarked man who had served them, and the pockmarked man recognized him. And, "Yes," he told Belden. "He came with the old one, with Louie."

The detective had his notebook out. "Louie who? What's his last name?"

"This I cannot tell you," the bartender said. "He is just old man, he has been a long time in the neighborhood. Harmless but—" The bartender made a twirling gesture close to his forehead.

"Do you know where he lives?" Belden asked.

Surprisingly enough, the bartender nodded. "Yes." He muttered an address and Belden wrote it down.

"Come on," he said to Morgan. "Looks as if you were giving me a straight story after all." He uttered a dry chuckle. "Thought we knew what was going on down here, but I guess the old boy fooled us. Imagine, running a panel house undercover in this day and age! That's one for the books."

A surprisingly short walk led them to the building, on a street scarcely two blocks away. The house was old, and looked untenanted; some of the front windows were caved in and the drawn green shades flapped listlessly in the hot morning breeze. Morgan didn't recognize the place even when he saw it, and he stood on the doorstep while Belden rang the bell.

For a long while there was no answer, and then the door opened just a crack. Morgan saw the old man's face, saw his rheumy red eyes blink out at them.

"What you want?" the old man wheezed. "Who are you?"

Belden told him who he was and what he wanted. The old man opened the door a bit wider and stared at Morgan.

"Hello," Morgan said. "I'm back again. Looks like I mislaid my wallet." He'd already made up his mind not to enter charges—the old boy was in enough hot water already.

"Back?" the little white-haired man snapped. "What do you mean, you're back? Never set eyes on you before in my life."

"Last night," Morgan said. "I think I left my wallet here."

"Nonsense. Nobody here last night. Nobody ever comes here anymore. Not for over forty years. I'm all alone. All alone—"

Belden stepped forward. "Suppose we have a look around?" he asked.

Morgan wondered if the old man would try to stop him, ask for a search warrant. Instead, he merely laughed and opened the door wide.

"Sure," he said. "Come on in. Welcome to the Palace." He chuckled again, then wheezed. "Throat is dry," he explained.

"It wasn't so dry last night," Morgan told him. "When we drank together."

The old man shook his head. "Don't listen to him, Mister," he told Belden. "Never saw him before."

They stepped into the hall and Morgan recognized it. The dark panelling looked dingy in the daylight, and he could see the dust on the floor. There was dust everywhere, a thick coating on the wood of the double-doors and lighter deposit on the small door leading to the old man's room.

They went in there, and Belden began his search. It didn't take long, because there weren't many places to look. The old man's furniture consisted of a single chair, a small brass bed, and a battered bureau. There wasn't even a closet. Belden went over the bed and mattress, then examined the contents of the bureau drawers. Finally, he frisked old Louie.

"One dollar and fourteen cents," he announced.

The old man snatched the coins from the detective's hand. "See, what'd I tell you?" he muttered. "I got no wallet. And I don't know anything about the mark, either. I'm clean, I am. Ask down at the station house. Ask Captain Leroux."

"I don't know any Captain Leroux," Belden said. "What's his detail?"

"Why, Storeyville, of course. Where do you think you are?"

"Storeyville's been closed for almost forty-five years," Belden answered. "Where do you think *you* are?"

"Right here. Where I always been. In the Palace. I'm a professional man, I am. Used to have six chickens on the block. Then the heat came on strong, and all I had left was the Red Queen. She sleeps too much, but I can fix that. I fixed it once and I can fix it again—"

Belden turned to Morgan and repeated the twirling gesture the pockmarked bartender had made.

But Morgan shook his head. "Of course," he said. "The wallet's upstairs. She has it. Come on!"

The old man put his hand on Morgan's shoulder. His mouth worked convulsively. "Mister, don't go up there. I was only fooling—she's gone, she beat it out on me this morning, I swear it! Sure, she copped your leather all right. Up to her old tricks. But she did a Dutch on me, you won't find her—"

"We'll see for ourselves." Belden was already pounding up the stairs, and Morgan followed him. The dust rising from the stair-treads, and Morgan started to choke. His ears began to hurt, because Belden hammered on the door at the head of the stairs.

"You sure this was the one?" he panted.

Morgan nodded.

"But it couldn't be—this door isn't locked, it's sealed. Sealed tight."

Morgan didn't answer him. His head throbbed, and his stomach was beginning to churn, but he knew what he must do. Shouldering the detective aside, he thrust the full weight of his body against the door.

The ancient wood groaned, then splintered around the rotten doorframe. With a rasp of hinges, the door tottered and fell inward.

A cloud of dust billowed out, filling Morgan's lungs, blinding him. He coughed, he choked, but he groped forward and stepped into the room.

The twenty chandeliers were gone, and the twenty carpets and the twenty vanities and the twenty beds. That's because the mirrors hung cracked and broken in their frames. Now there was only one of everything—one cobwebbed chandelier, one ragged and mouldering patch of carpet, one vanity whose littered top gave off a scent of dead perfume and musty decay, and one canopy bed with its yellowed hangings mildewed and shredded.

And the bed had only one occupant. She was sleeping, just as the old man whined now while he peered over Morgan's shoulder. Always sleeping, and maybe he'd have to fix her again like he did once years ago. Morgan saw that she was still wearing the red garters, but aside from that he wouldn't have recognized her. One skeleton looks just like another.

"What the hell kind of joke is this?" Belden wanted to know.

The old man couldn't tell him, because he was alternately whining and complaining, and then he was weeping in a high, shrill voice—something about the Red Queen and the old days and how he hadn't meant to do it, and he only could awaken her on the nights when Company came calling.

Morgan couldn't tell him, either. He couldn't tell him about the land of dreams, or the land of nightmares either.

All he could do was walk over to the bed, lift the rotting skull from the rotting pillow, reach his hand underneath and pull out his brand-new, shiny leather wallet.

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Word of Honor

At 2:27 on the afternoon of September 19 Dr. Samuel Lavery rose from his chair and opened a window. This he managed to do without disturbing the flow of free association from his analysand, who was stretched out upon the couch.

For approximately one minute Dr. Lavery stood before the window, inhaling deeply, while the analysand—a Mrs. Amelia Stoughton, aged fifty-three—continued her monologue.

"It's all his fault," she was saying. "He doesn't even try to understand me. And the children don't have any consideration. The trouble with them is that they're just plain selfish, they don't appreciate me—"

Dr. Lavery turned and faced his patient. He blinked rapidly, then scowled and shook his head.

"The trouble with you," he said loudly, "is that you're a self-centered old horror. You don't need analysis. What you need is a good swift kick in the rump. Now get out of here before I'm tempted to administer that therapy myself."

Mrs. Stoughton rose from the couch, bristling and open-mouthed.

Suddenly she inhaled deeply and her face reddened. "You know something, Doctor?" She sighed. "I guess maybe you're right."

At 2:28, in an air-conditioned studio, a television announcer lifted a box of nationally advertised detergent and wreathed his features into a sickly smile.

"Ladies," he said, "I'm here to tell you about the most important household discovery in years—new, miracle Wonder Flakes, the amazing new cleanser that leaves your finest fabrics cleaner than clean."

He faltered, the smile fading from his face as he set the box down. "Now just what does that mean?" he asked. "Cleaner than clean? I'm damned if I know, and I'll bet the copywriter doesn't know either." He scratched his head. "And who do they think they're kidding with that jazz about miracles? Soap flakes are soap flakes, and since when is it a miracle if they take the dirt out of clothes? Nothing amazing about that, if you ask me. And nothing new either. Wonder Flakes has been handing out that same line of tired adjectives for years. I'm getting good and sick of belting out their stale boasts as if I was announcing the Second Coming."

The red light flickered and died above the studio door. The announcer started, then glanced up at the control booth sheepishly. But the engineers were grinning down at him and the director nodded and raised his thumb and forefinger in the closed-circle gesture which indicated approval of a job well done. . .

Promptly at 2:29 Homer Gans entered the office of his employer, the president of the First National Bank. The little cashier seemed to be his usual unobtrusive self, and his voice was as hushed and respectful as always.

"I've got something to tell you," Homer Gans murmured. "It's about the reserve fund. I'm into it for forty thousand dollars."

"You're *what*?" the president barked.

"I embezzled from the reserve fund," Homer said. "Been doing it for years now. Nobody ever caught on. Some of the money went to play the races, and a lot of it has been paying somebody's room rent. You wouldn't think to look at me that I'm the kind who'd be keeping a blonde on the side. But then you don't know how it is at home."

The president frowned. "Oh yes, I do," he answered, taking a deep breath. "As a matter of fact, I happen to be keeping a blonde myself. Though to tell the truth, she isn't a natural blonde."

Homer hesitated, then sighed. "To tell the truth," he said, "neither is mine."

Between 2:30 and 2:45 quite a number of things happened. A model nephew told his rich and elderly uncle to go to hell and quit trying to run his life. A saintly and patient mother of six advised her husband, an unemployed poultry stuffer, to get off his fat butt and find a job. A star shoe salesman rose from his knees before a customer and suggested she either try a size suitable for her big feet or quit wasting his time. And up at the embassy's garden party a visiting diplomat paused in the middle of a flattering toast and abruptly dashed the contents of his champagne glass into the face of the American ambassador.

And—

"Holy Toledo!" howled Wally Tibbets, managing editor of the *Daily Express*. "Has everybody gone nuts?"

Reporter Joe Satterlee shrugged.

"In nine years on this rag I've never once yelled 'Stop the presses!' But we're standing by for a replate right now—and we're going to stand by until we find out what's going on. Got enough lead copy for a dozen front pages right now, only none of it makes sense."

"Such as?" Joe Satterlee gazed calmly at his boss.

"Take your pick. Our senior senator just issued a statement of resignation. Not one of those owing-to-ill health things either. Just says he's unfit for office. Marty Flanagan did him one better than that—he shot himself in the lobby of his new union headquarters. We've got an open wire going between here and the police station. Can't keep up with the guys who are coming in and confessing everything from murder to mopery. And if you think that's bad, you ought to hear what's going on down in the advertising department. Clients are canceling space like mad. Three of the biggest used-car dealers in town just yanked their ads."

Joe Satterlee yawned. "What goes on here?"

"That's just what I want you to find out. And fast." His employer stood up. "Go see somebody and get a statement. Try the university. Tackle the science department."

Satterlee nodded and went downstairs to his car.

The university was only a half mile from the *Express* offices, but it wasn't an easy drive. Traffic seemed to be disrupted all over the city. And something had happened to the pedestrians. Their normal gait had altered. Half of them seemed to be running, and the other half moved along in a daze or merely stood silently in the center of the sidewalk. Peoples' faces—drivers and pedestrians alike—had lost the usual mask of immobility. Some were laughing; some were weeping. Over in the grass of the campus a number of couples lay locked in close embrace, oblivious of still other couples who seemed to be fighting furiously. Joe Satterlee blinked at what he saw and drove on.

At 3:08 he found a parking space directly in front of the administration building. He climbed out, went around to the curb, and almost collided with a burly man who came flying down the steps.

"Pardon me," Satterlee said. "Is Dean Hanson's office in this building?"

"If it isn't, I've been using the wrong quarters for the past twenty years."

"You're Hanson? My name's Satterlee. I'm with the *Daily Express*—"

"Good *Lord*, do they know already?"

"Know what?"

"Never mind." The burly man attempted to brush past. "I can't talk to you now. Got to find a cab."

"Leaving town?"

"I must get to the airport immediately. Sorry, no time to make a statement."

"Then you are leaving town."

"No. I'm going to the airport." Dean Hanson peered into the street. "What's happened to all the taxis? I suppose they got a whiff of it too. Just wait till I get my hands on that Doctor Lowenquist—" The burly man began to do a little dance of impatience there on the curb. "Taxi!" he shouted. "Hey, taxi!"

Joe Satterlee grasped his arm. "Come on," he said. "I'll drive you to the airport. We can talk on the

way."

A sudden flurry of wind sent papers swirling along the walk. Dust rose as they seated themselves in the car, and the sun disappeared abruptly behind a cloud rising out of the western sky.

"Storm coming up," Dean Hanson muttered. "That damned fool better have sense enough to make a landing before it hits."

"Lowenquist," Satterlee said. "Isn't he head of the School of Dentistry?"

"That's right. And he ought to be looking down somebody's mouth right now instead of being up in a private plane. All this nonsense about mad scientists is bad enough, but a mad dentist—"

"What did he do?"

"He chartered a plane this afternoon, all by himself, and took it up over the city. He's been spraying the town with that gas of his."

"What gas?"

"Look." Hanson sighed. "I don't know anything about science. I'm just a poor university dean, and my job is to get money out of rich alumni. I don't even keep track of what the faculty is up to. The way I hear it, Lowenquist was monkeying around with chemical anesthetics. He mixed up some new combination—some derivative like thiopental sodium, sodium amytal, sodium pentothal—only a lot stronger and more concentrated."

"Aren't those used in psychotherapy, for narcohypnosis?" Satterlee asked. "What they call truth serums?"

"This isn't a serum. It's a gas."

"You can say that again," Satterlee replied. "So he waited for a clear, windless day and went up in a plane to dust the city with a concentrated truth gas. Is that a fact?"

"Of course it is," Dean Hanson murmured. "You know I can't lie to you."

"Nobody can lie anymore."

"I'm afraid so. The stuff is so powerful, apparently, that one sniff does the trick. I was asking Snodgrass over in the Psychiatry Department about it. He gave me a lot of flap about inhibitory release and bypassing the superego and if a man answers, hang up. But what it all boils down to, apparently, is that the gas *works*. Everybody who was outside, everybody getting a breath of fresh air through a window or an air-conditioning unit, was affected. And that means almost the entire city."

"Nobody can lie anymore."

"The way I understand it, nobody *wants* to lie."

"But that's wonderful!"

"Is it?" Dean Hanson squinted at the gathering storm clouds. "I'm not so sure. It would be better off for me if I hadn't told you all this. What's going to happen when the story hits the paper tonight? Give the whole school a bad name. I may even lose my job. Funny, I realize this, but I can't seem to do anything about it. I just feel the need to be frank about everything. That's what I was telling my secretary, before she slapped my face—" He broke off abruptly. "Are we almost there? It's going to start raining any

minute now."

"Just down this road," Satterlee told him. "Did you notify the airport that you're coming?"

"Of course. They've been trying to get Lowenquist down for the past half hour. He has no radio, and he won't head in . . . keeps buzzing over town, spraying and spraying. Crazy fool! I wonder where he ever got the idea of trying a stunt like this?"

"I don't know," Satterlee mused. "Maybe he just thought it was time people became honest for a change. Maybe he was getting fed up with the way our lies and pretenses make a mess of everything."

"Say, what's the matter with you?" Dean Hanson glanced at him apprehensively. "You sound as if you approved of this business."

"Why not? I'm a reporter. My job is to deal with facts. I'm sick of listening to lies, sick of seeing the stories I write changed and distorted before they appear in print. The world could use some truth. As for myself, I've always tried to stick to honesty in my dealings with others—"

"You aren't married, eh?"

"How did you know?"

"Never mind," said Hanson wryly. Suddenly he craned his neck out of the window. "Look!" he shouted. "Up there—that must be Lowenquist's plane!"

Satterlee gaped. There was a small plane flying over the field, its outline almost obscured by the clouds. A blast of wind roared overhead, and thunder rumbled as the rain began to fall in a driving torrent.

"He's trying to come in for a landing," Hanson shouted. "But the wind's too strong—"

A sudden lance of lightning pierced the sky. Thunder crashed, and then Hanson was yelling again. "That lightning—it must have struck the plane—he's going to crash—"

"Come on!" Satterlee muttered, gunning the motor and turning off into the field. In the distance a siren wailed, and through the rain he could see the white bulk of an oncoming ambulance. And the plane spiraled down in a crazy spin. . . .

Wally Tibbets leaned back and pushed his chair away from the desk.

"So that's how it happened, eh?" he said.

Satterlee nodded soberly.

"That's how it happened. The poor guy was dead before they pulled him out of the wreckage. But they found the tanks and everything. And he had the papers on him—the whole story, plus copies of the formula he'd discovered. I persuaded Dean Hanson to turn the stuff over to me. He was in such a daze I guess he didn't think about objecting. So now we can back up everything we say with actual proof. I suppose we'll be feeding the wire services too."

Tibbets shook his head. "Nope," he said. "I'm going to answer all inquiries with a flat denial."

"But I have the facts right here in my pocket—"

"Keep 'em there. On second thought, burn 'em."

"The story—"

"There isn't going to be any story. It's all over now anyway. Didn't you notice a change in people after that storm came up? Wind must have blown the gas away, dissipated it or something. Anyway, everybody's back to normal. And most of them have already convinced themselves that nothing ever happened."

"But we *know* it did! What about all those story leads that came in this afternoon? You said they were burning up the wires."

"For one hour, yes. And ever since then they've been calling back with denials and retractions. Turns out the senator isn't resigning after all. The labor boy shot himself by accident. The police can't get anyone to sign their confessions. The advertisers are placing new copy again. Mark my words, by tomorrow morning the whole town will have forgotten what went on. They'll *will* themselves to forget, in order to protect their own sanity. Nobody can face the truth and live."

"That's a terrible way to think," Satterlee said. "Doctor Lowenquist was a great man. He knew that what he'd stumbled on accidentally could revolutionize everything. This flight over the city was just a trial run—he tells about it in his papers here. He had plans for doing it again on a larger scale. He wanted to take a plane up over Washington, fly over Moscow, all the capitals of the world. Because this truth serum could *change* the world. Don't you see that?"

"Of course I see it. But the world shouldn't be changed."

"Why not?" Satterlee squared his shoulders. "Look here, I've been thinking. Lowenquist is dead. But I have his formula. There's no reason why I couldn't carry on his work where he left off."

"You mean you'd make some more of that stuff, spray it around?"

Satterlee nodded. "There's nothing to stop me. I've saved my money these past years. I could hire planes and pilots. Don't you think they need a dose of truth throughout the world today?"

Wally Tibbets stood up. "You're forgetting one thing," he said. "Truth is a weapon. And weapons are dangerous."

"But it isn't as if I was dropping hydrogen bombs."

"No." Tibbets shook his head slowly. "This would be worse. Far worse. You saw what happened on a small scale, just here in town, today."

"Of course I saw. Criminals confessed. Crooks reformed or blew their brains out. People suddenly stopped lying to one another. Is that so bad?"

"About the criminals, no. But that's not all that happened. As you say, people stopped lying to one another. *Ordinary* people. And that could be a terrible thing."

"I don't see—"

"That's right. You don't see. You don't see what happens when the doctor tells his patient that he's dying of cancer, when the wife tells her husband he's not actually the father of their son. Everybody has secrets, or almost everybody. Sometimes it's better not to know the whole truth—about others or about yourself."

"But look at what goes on in the world today."

"I am looking. That's my job—to sit at this desk and watch the world go round. Sometimes it's a dizzy spin, but at least it keeps going. Because people keep going. And they need the lies to help them. If you get right down to it, maybe most of the things we live by are lies. The notion of abstract justice. The ideal of romantic love everlasting. The belief that right will triumph. Even our concept of democracy may be a lie.

"But we believe in them, most of us. And because we believe in these things we do our best to live by them. And little by little our belief helps to make these things come true. It's a slow process, and sometimes it looks pretty hopeless, but over the period of recorded history it works. Animals don't lie, you know. Only human beings know how to pretend, to make believe, to deceive themselves and others. But that's why they're human beings."

"Maybe so," Satterlee said. "Yet think of the opportunity I have. I could even stop the possibility of war."

"Perhaps. Once the military and political and economic leaders faced up to the truth about their ideas and policies, they might change temporarily."

"We could keep on spraying," Satterlee broke in eagerly. "There are other honest men—we could raise funds, make this a long-term project. And who knows? Perhaps after a few exposures the change would be permanent. Don't you understand? We can end war."

"I understand," Tibbets told him. "You could end war between nations. And start hundreds of millions of *individual* wars, waged in human minds and human hearts. There'd be a wave of insanity, a wave of suicides, a wave of murders. There'd be a breakup of the home, the family, all the institutions that hold our lives together. The whole social structure would collapse. No, your weapon is too dangerous."

"I realize it's a risk."

Tibbets put his hand on the younger man's shoulder. "I want you to forget this whole business," he said soberly. "Don't make any plans of your own about manufacturing this gas and spraying it over the Capitol or the Kremlin. Don't do it, for all our sakes."

Satterlee was silent, staring out into the night. Far in the distance a jet plane screamed.

"You're an honest man," Tibbets said. "One of the few. I admire you for it. I'm not going to try and force you to give up that formula, because it isn't necessary. I believe in you. All I want is for you to tell me now that you won't try to change things. Leave the world the way it is." He paused. "Will you give me your word of honor?"

Satterlee hesitated. He *was* an honest man, he realized, and so his answer was a long time coming.

Then, "I promise," Satterlee lied.

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The World-Timer

He may or may not have been human. It was hard to tell, because in a psychiatrist's office, you get all kinds.

But he *looked* human—that is to say he had two arms, two legs, one head, and a slightly worried expression—and there was no reason for the receptionist to turn him away.

Particularly since he was here to give free samples.

"I'm from the Ace Manufacturing Company," he told the girl. "An old established firm. You've heard of us?"

The receptionist, who dealt with an average of ten salesmen a day, nodded politely and proceeded to file her nails.

"As the name indicates, we used to be a specialty house," the salesman continued. "Manufactured all the aces used in decks of playing cards. But lately we've branched out into Pharmaceuticals."

"How nice for you," said the receptionist, wondering what he was talking about, but not very much.

"Not ordinary products, of course. We have the feeling that most pharmaceuticals are a drug on the market. So we've come up with something different. As our literature indicates, it's more along the lines of the lysergic acid derivatives. In addition to the usual tranquilizing effect, it alters the time-sense, both subjectively and objectively. Mind you, I said 'objectively.' I'm sure your employer will be interested in this aspect, which is, to say the least, highly revolutionary—"

"I doubt it. He's always voted Republican."

"But if I could just discuss the matter with him for a few moments—"

The girl shrugged and cocked her head towards the inner sanctum of Morton Placebo, M.D.

"Nobody rides that couch without a ticket," she told him. "The standard fee is \$50 an hour, first-class, or \$30, tourist. That's with three on the couch at the same time. He says it's group-therapy, and I say it's damned uncomfortable."

"But I'm not a patient," the stranger persisted. "I merely want to discuss my pharmaceuticals."

"You can't discuss your hemorrhoids without paying the fee," the receptionist drawled. "Doctor isn't in business for your health, you know."

The salesman sighed. "I'll just have to leave a few samples and some literature, I guess. Maybe he'll look it over and see me when I call back later. I'm sure he's going to be interested, because these little preparations will alter the entire concept and structure of psychotherapy."

"Then he won't be," the girl decided. "Dr. Placebo likes psychiatry just the way it is right now. Which is to say, at \$50 an hour."

"But he will take the free samples?" the salesman persisted.

"Of course. He'll take anything that doesn't cost money. In fact, he told me it was the free-fantasy which attracted him to the profession in the first place."

She reached out her hand and the representative of the Ace Manufacturing Company placed a little

packet of three tablets on her palm.

"The literature is inside," he said. "Please ask the Doctor to study it carefully before he experiments with the dosage. I'll stop by again next week."

"Don't you want to leave your card?" asked the girl, politely.

"Of course. Here you are."

He handed it to her, turned on his heel, and made his exit.

The receptionist studied the card curiously.

It was the Ace of Spades.

Normally, Dr. Morton Placebo wouldn't have paid much attention to a salesman's sample; largely because the very idea of paying was anathema to him.

But, as psychiatrists are so fond of saying—and, quite frequently, demonstrating—the norm is an abstraction.

And Dr. Placebo was always interested in anything which came to him without charge. Perhaps his receptionist hadn't been far wrong when she'd analyzed his reasons for entering a psychiatric career. All psychotherapists have their quirks.

According to his eminent disciple and official biographer, Ernest Jones, the great Sigmund Freud believed in occultism, telepathy, and the magic of numbers. The esteemed Otto Rank developed a manic-depressive psychosis; Wilhelm Reich's rationality was impugned on occasion; Sandor Ferenczi suffered from unbalance due to organic brain-damage.

Compared to these gentlemen, Dr. Placebo's problem was a minor one; he was a frustrated experimenter. Both his frustration and his stinginess had their origin in his childhood, within the confines of the familial constellation.

In plain English, his father was stingier than he was, and when the young Morton Placebo evinced an interest in laboratory experimentation, the old man refused to put up the money for a chemistry set. Once, during his high school years, the young man managed to acquire two guinea-pigs, which promptly disappeared. He was unable to solve the mystery—any more than he could account for the fact that his father, who always carried peanut-butter sandwiches in his lunch-pail, went to work during the following week with meat sandwiches.

But now, at fifty, Morton Placebo, M.D., was fulfilled. He had his own laboratory at last, in the form of his psychiatric practice, and no end of wonderful guinea-pigs. Best of all, the guinea-pigs paid large sums of money for the privilege of lending themselves to his experiments. Outside of his receptionist's salary, and the \$25 he spent having the couch re-sprung after a fat woman patient had successfully re-enacted a birth-fantasy, Dr. Placebo had no overhead at all. With the steady stream of salesmen and their free samples, there was no end to the types of experimentation he could indulge in.

He'd use pills which produced euphoria, pills which produced depression, pills which caused a simulation of schizophrenia, pills which had remarkable side-effects, pills which tranquilized, pills which stimulated; pills which resulted in such fascinating manifestations as satyriasis, virilence and the sudden eruption of motor reflexes in the *abductor minimi digit*. He kept copious notes on the reactions afforded by LSD, *peyotl* extracts, cantharadin, yohimbine and reserpine derivatives. Whenever he found

himself with a patient on his hands (or couch) who did not respond to orthodox (or reformed) therapy, Dr. Placebo—purely in the interest of science, of course—reached into his drawer and hauled out a handful of free pills.

Thus it was that he was grateful when he received the samples from the Ace Manufacturing Company.

"The literature's on the inside," his girl told him. He nodded thoughtfully and stared at the glassine packet with its three yellow pills.

"*Time Capsules*," he read, aloud.

"Alters the time-sense, both subjectively and objectively," the receptionist said, parroting what she remembered from the salesman's pitch.

"Subjectively," snapped Dr. Placebo. "Can't alter it objectively. Time is money, you know."

"But he said—"

"Never mind, I'll read the literature." Dr. Placebo dismissed her and thoughtfully opened the packet. A small wadded-up piece of paper fluttered out onto the desk. He picked it up, unfolded it, and stared at the message.

"Nstrctns

Nclsd smpls fr prfssnl s nly. ch s cpbl f prdng tmprl dsctn prmntly nd trnslng sr nt nthr cntnm r tm vctr."

There was more to it, much more, but Dr. Placebo didn't bother attempting to translate. Apparently this literature was written in the same foreign tongue used by general medical practitioners when they scrawl their prescriptions. He'd better wait and get an explanation from his friendly neighborhood drug-store.

He gazed at the samples once again. *Time Capsules*. Catchy name for a pharmaceutical product. But why didn't the Ace Manufacturing Company print its literature in English? He scanned the last line of the literature. "*Dnt gt yr vwls n n prr.*"

Made no sense. No sense at all.

But then, neither did most of his patients. So perhaps the pills would do some good. He'd have to wait for a likely subject.

The likely subject arrived at 3 p.m. Her name was Cookie Jarr, which was probably a polite euphemism for "sexpot." But what's in a name?

Sexpot or Jarr, Cookie was obviously quite a dish. She sprawled, in obvious *déshabillé*, on the couch, and like the professional stripper she was, proceeded to bare her *psyche*.

After a dozen or so previous sessions, Dr. Placebo had succeeded in teaching her the technique of free association, and now she obediently launched into a form of *monologorrhea*.

"I had a dream under very peculiar circumstances the other night . . . I was sleeping alone . . . and in it I was a geek . . ."

"One moment, please," murmured Dr. Placebo, softly. "You say you were a geek? One of those carnival performers who bites the heads off of chickens?"

Cookie shook her auburn locks impatiently. "Not chickens," she explained. "I was very rich in this dream, and I was geeking a peacock." She frowned. "In fact, I was so rich I was Marie Antoinette. And they dragged me out for execution, and I looked at the executioner and said, 'Dr. Guillotine, I presume?' and he said, 'Please, no names—you must be the soul of indiscretion.' So then I woke up and it was four in the morning and I looked out of the window at this big neon sign that says ok used cars. You know something, Doc? I'd never buy an ok used car. And I'd never eat at a place that says eat. Or one that says fine food. And I'd never be buried in a funeral parlor approved by Duncan Hines. Do you think I'm superstitious? They say it's bad luck to walk under a black cat."

"Perhaps," said Dr. Placebo, sagely. "And then again, perhaps not. We must learn to relate, to adjust. Life is just a bowl of theories." He gazed at her piercingly. "The dream sequence is merely symbolism. Out with it now—face the truth. Why did you really wake up at four in the morning?"

"Because I had to go to the bathroom," Cookie snapped. "No, really, Doc, I'll level with you. It's the love bit. That damn Max keeps getting me down, because he's so jealous of Harry, only that's ridiculous because I don't like Harry at all, it's really Fred, on account of he reminds me of Jerry, the guy I'm crazy about. Or almost as crazy about as Ray." She paused, biting her lip. "Oh, I hate men!" she said.

"Ummm-hmmmm," said Dr. Placebo, doodling on a scratchpad with which he was ostensibly taking notes but actually drawing phallic symbols which looked suspiciously like dollar-signs.

"Is that all you got to say?" demanded Cookie, sitting up. "Fifty bucks an hour I'm paying, and for what? My nerves are killing me. You got any happy pills, Doc?"

"Happy pills?"

"Tranquilizers, or like whatever. Remember that stuff you gave me last month?"

"Oh, the cantharides."

"Yeah." Cookie smiled happily. "That was the greatest!"

Dr. Placebo frowned; his memories did not coincide with Cookie's, particularly when he recalled the frantic aftermath of that episode when he had to drag her bodily from the ninth floor of the local YMCA. But the experimental urge was strong. Few men could look at Cookie without feeling the urge to experiment.

"Well, there's something new," he said, cautiously.

"Give."

"It's called a Time Capsule. Alters the subjective time-sense and—er—all that jazz." He found himself lapsing into the idiom with Cookie; she was the sort who inspired lapses.

"Meaning what?"

"I'm not quite sure. I imagine it slows down the reflexes."

"Relaxes you, huh? That's for baby."

"You'll have to take it here, under test conditions."

"The mad scientist bit? You are gonna hypnotize me and get fresh, is that it?"

"Nothing of the sort. I merely mean I must observe any side-effects."

"Stuff really turns you on, eh?" Cookie bounced up happily. "Well, I'm for kicks. Spill the pill for me, Bill."

Dr. Placebo went to the water-cooler and filled a paper cup. Then he carefully extracted one of the yellow capsules from its cellophane container. He handed it and the water to Cookie.

She gulped and swallowed.

Then she lay back on the couch. "Wow, I'm in Dizzyville," she whispered. "Everything's like round and round—no squares—"

Her voice trailed off, and for a very good reason.

Now it was Dr. Placebo's turn to gulp and swallow, as he stared down at the empty couch.

Cookie had disappeared.

"Where is she?" Ray Connors demanded. "Come on, where is she?"

Dr. Placebo sighed. He felt a horrible depression, quite unlike the shapely depression which had been left in the couch by Cookie's body.

"She—she cancelled her appointment this afternoon," he said, weakly.

"But I drove her over," the mustached young man insisted. "Went downstairs to do a bit of business—I'm booking a flea circus out in Los Angeles and I had to see about renting a dog so the troupe could travel in comfort—and then I came right back up to your office to wait. The receptionist told me Cookie was inside. So what happened?"

"I—I wish I knew," Dr. Placebo told him, truthfully. "She was lying right there on the couch when she vanished."

"Vanished?"

Dr. Placebo nodded. "Into thin air."

"Thin air, fat air, I don't believe it." Connors advanced on the pudgy little psychiatrist. "Come on, where you hiding the body?"

"She vanished, I tell you," Dr. Placebo wailed. "All I did was give her one of these sample pills—"

He indicated the packet on his desk-top and Connors picked it up. "This says *Time Capsules*, not *Vanishing Cream*," he snorted. "Look, Doc, I'm not one of your loony patients. I'm an agent, and you can't con me. So you got sore at Cookie and pushed her out of the window—*this* I can understand. Why don't you admit it and let me call the cops? We could get a big spread on this." He began to pace the floor rapidly. "Real headline stuff—jealous head shrinker slays beautiful patient. Why, we'll push the Finch trial right off the front page! Think of the angles; exclusive interview rights, sob-stories to all the women's magazines, a nice big ghostwritten best-seller, a fat movie deal. Doc, you've got a fortune in your lap and you don't know enough to cross your legs! Now for ten per cent, I'll handle everything, you won't have to worry—"

Dr. Placebo sighed softly. "I told you," he murmured. "She swallowed one of these pills and disappeared."

"Fiddlesticks," said Connors. "Or words to that effect." And before Dr. Placebo could stop him, he walked over to the couch, sat down, ripped a pill from the cellophane confines of the package, and popped it into his mouth.

"No—don't!" cried the Doctor.

Connors shrugged. "You see? I swallowed one and nothing happens. I'm still here." He leaned back. "So how about it, Doc, you gonna level with me? Maybe you didn't push her out of the window. Maybe you carved her up and stuck the pieces in your filing-cabinet. Hey, that's an even better angle—mad butcher carves chick! Or ripper gets flipper with stripper. For ten per cent of the gross, I'll fix it so you—"

Young Mr. Connors fell back on the couch and closed his eyes.

"Hey, what was in that last drink?" he mumbled. "I can't see."

Dr. Placebo advanced upon him nervously. "That pill," he gasped. "Let me phone Dr. Glutea down the hall—he's a G.U. man, maybe he has a stomach-pump—"

Connors waved him away. "Never mind," he whispered, faintly. "I *can* see, now."

This was strange, to say the least, for he still had his eyes closed. Dr. Placebo bent over him, not daring to touch his rigid body.

"Yeah, I can see. Stars. Nothing but stars. You running one of those science fiction movies, Doc? Sure, I'm hip now. There's the world. Or is it? I can see North America and South America, but where are all those funny lines?"

"What funny lines?"

"Like in all the geography books— isn't there supposed to be latitude and longitude?"

"That's just on maps."

"I dig. This isn't a map, Doc. It's for real . . . but it can't be . . . no . . . no . . ."

"Please, Mr. Connors, pull yourself together!"

"I'm pulling myself apart . . . Oh, Doc, if you saw what I see . . . like crazy, the world inside a big egg-timer up in the sky . . . sort of an hourglass, you know the bit?"

"Go on," murmured Dr. Placebo.

"There's sand or something running out of the end, into the other half of the timer . . . and now . . . a big claw, bigger than the whole world . . . reaching out and squeezing . . . squeezing the guts out of the earth . . . *squeeeee* . . ."

"Go on," repeated Dr. Placebo. But it wasn't necessary, for Connors had already gone on.

The couch was empty.

The little psychiatrist blinked and shook his head. He walked over to the desk and, indulging in a

symbolic funeral, buried his face in his hands. "Now what?" he groaned. "Physician, heal thyself."

Then he sat up and took stock of the situation. After all he *was* a physician; moreover, a skilled analyst. The thing to do was to consider the problem logically. There were several obvious courses of action.

First of all, he could call the police. He'd simply explain what had happened, they would simply not believe him, and he'd simply go to the gas-chamber.

Secondly, he could tell his receptionist. She was a sweet young thing, and madly in love with him as a Father-Image. Her reaction was predictable; she'd pop him into her car and they'd drive off to Mexico together, where they'd live happily ever after until she ran off with a bullfighter. No, the gas-chamber was better. But why wait, when there were even faster methods?

Maybe he could adopt some of Connors' ideas to his own use. Perhaps he could jump out of the window, or cut himself up into little pieces and hide in the file-cabinet. Merely a logical extension of filing one's fingernails.

No, he was irrational. He needed time to think. Time to think—

Dr. Placebo stared at the cellophane envelope which still rested on his desk where Connors had tossed it after taking the capsule. *Time Capsule*.

"Alters time-sense both subjectively and objectively." Suppose it were true? Once again he picked up the cryptic literature and studied it closely. And all of a sudden he found himself translating fluently. Only the vowels were missing.

"Instructions

Enclosed samples for professional use only. Each is capable of producing temporal dislocation permanently and translating user into another continuum or time vector."

It was plain English, all right, and even the last line of the literature made sense now. He read it slowly.

"Don't get your vowels in an uproar."

Excellent advice. Advice from an area where the time-sense was altered, where linguistics were attuned to another tempo, where others marched to a different drummer.

Cookie had vanished suddenly, Connors slowly. Why the difference? Perhaps because Cookie had taken the capsule with water and Connors swallowed his dry. Took a while for the gelatin coating to dissolve.

Funny, Connors seeing those hallucinations. All very symbolic—the earth in an egg-timer and somebody squeezing it; the sands of time running forth. Running where? Running out, that's where. In another minute *his* time would run out; the receptionist would run in and ask where his patients were.

He had lost his patients. He had lost his patience. It all came back to the same thing—call the police, run off to Mexico, jump out of the window, or kill himself and stuff his dead body in the file. Sort of a necro-file. Maybe he deserved to die, if he was capable of making puns like that. It would rise up from the grass over his grave to haunt him, for the pun is mightier than the sword—

No time for that now.

No time.

But a Time Capsule—

He picked up the cellophane container gingerly.

Why not?

It was a way out. Way out, indeed—but a way.

For one idiotic instant, Dr. Placebo took a good hard look at himself. A fat, foolish little man, driven by greed, who had never known love in all his life except as a professional Father-Image. A man surrounded by sensualists like Cookie and opportunists like Connors. What was he doing here in the first place?

"I am a stranger and a Freud, in a world I never made."

It was a terrible realization, a bitter pill to swallow. But swallow it he must. There was no other choice. Fingers trembling, he extracted the last Time Capsule from the packet and raised it to his lips. He swallowed.

There was no sensation. He floated over to the water-cooler and poured a drink. It gurgled down his throat. And then came the kaleidoscope, engulfing him.

Five minutes later his receptionist walked into the empty office. She inspected it, panicked, but eventually recovered and did what any sensible girl would do under the circumstances—called the Bureau of Missing Persons.

There was no answer . . .

There was, of course, no kaleidoscope. Nor did Dr. Placebo find himself entrapped in a cosmic egg-timer whirling in outer space. No huge hand stretched forth to menace his reason and he knew that he had not died.

But there was a dizzying sensation and he waited until it ceased before he allowed the autonomy of his nervous system to resume sway and blinked his eyes open once more.

Dr. Placebo was prepared for almost anything. If, indeed, the Time Capsule had been efficacious, he knew that he could have gone an infinite distance forward or backward in temporal dimensions. Long conditioning through attendance at monster-movies led him to expect either the titanic vistas of *papier-mâché* cities of the far future or *papier-mâché* dinosaurs of the distant past. In either era, he knew, nothing would bear the slightest resemblance to the world he had lived in, except that the women of the future or the prehistoric age would still wear lipstick and mascara.

There was just one thing Dr. Placebo didn't expect to see when he opened his eyes—the familiar walls of his very own private office.

But that's where he found himself, sitting upon his own couch. And most uncomfortably, too, because he was wedged between Cookie and Connors.

"Oh, here you are," Cookie greeted him. "Where'd you go, Doc?"

"Nowhere. I've been here all the time. Where did *you* go?"

"Never left the couch."

"But you weren't here when I showed up," Ray Connors interrupted. "Then I saw you and I lost the Doc."

Dr. Placebo shook his head. "That's not the way it happened at all! First she disappeared and then you disappeared. I stayed right where I am."

"You weren't right where you are a minute ago."

"Neither were you."

"What does it matter? We're back, now," Connors said. "I told you those pills were fakes."

"I'm not so sure. We didn't travel in space, obviously, because we're in the same place we started. But if the capsules affect objective time—"

"So each of us passed out and lost a couple minutes. Big deal." Cookie sniffed and swayed to her feet.

She glanced curiously at the calendar on the desk. "Hey, Doc," she called. "What kind of a month is Jly?"

Instantly, Dr. Placebo was at her side. "You're right," he groaned. "It does say 'Jly.' And that's not my writing on the note-pad. Who is this 'Dr. My'?"

"Maya," said a soft voice. "We don't write the vowels but we pronounce them. Indoctrinated associative reflex."

Placebo turned to confront the newcomer to the room. She was a tall, plump, gray-haired woman with a rounded face and shoe-button eyes. She wore a plain smock and a bright smile.

"You must be the new patients," she observed, glancing at the trio. "Armond did his job well." She glanced again at the startled faces before her. "I had hoped for a random sampling, but you actually exceed my expectations."

"We're not patients," Dr. Placebo exploded. "I happen to be a practicing psychiatrist. And expectations be damned—we want explanations!"

"Gladly given." The woman who called herself Maya moved into the chair behind the desk. "Please sit down."

The trio retreated to the couch.

"First of all," Dr. Placebo began, "where are we?"

"Why, here, of course."

"But—"

"Please." Maya lifted a plump hand. "You don't deny that you are here, do you? If so, you're more disturbed than I thought. Believing yourself to be a psychiatrist is dangerous enough without any further disorientation."

"I *am* a psychiatrist!" Dr. Placebo shouted. "And this used to be my office."

"It still is, in another temporal vector. But when you swallowed one of Armond's little capsules, you entered a parallel continuum."

"Hey, how about making with like English?" Cookie demanded. "I don't dig."

"This must be one of those crazy planets," Connors muttered. "And she's an alien." He stood up and approached the desk. "So take me to your leader."

"Leader? There is no leader."

"Then who runs things around here?"

"Things run themselves."

"But who's the boss?"

"We all are."

Maya turned back to the girl. "I note your saying that you don't dig. Allow me to reassure you—in our society there is no need for physical labor. I'm sure you'll find a worthy niche here for whatever you are qualified to do."

"Wait a minute," Connors interrupted. "Nobody books this chick except me. I'm her agent."

"Agent?"

"Yeah, her manager, like. I find her work and collect my ten per cent."

"Ten percent of what—the work?"

"No, the money."

"Ah, yes, money. I'd forgotten about that."

"You'd forgotten about money?" Dr. Placebo asked, excitedly. "Very peculiar symptom indeed. Rejection of the economic incentive—"

But Maya ignored him. Again she addressed herself to the girl. "Might I inquire just what sort of work you perform?"

"I'm a stripper."

"I see," Maya said, though it was obvious she didn't. "And just what do you strip?"

"Why, myself, of course."

"Oh, an exhibitionist." Maya smiled. "That's very nice. We have lots of them around. Of course, they don't get any recompense for it here, outside of their own pleasure."

"You mean they do it for fun?" Cookie demanded. "Standing up there on a bare stage with the wind blowing up your G-string and letting a lot of meatheads watch you break your fingernails on your zippers—this you call kicks?"

"I've had it," Connors announced, leaning over the desk. "The way I figure it, there's just two answers to the whole *kockamamie* deal. Either you're squirrely or we've been kidnapped. Maybe both. But I'm calling the fuzz."

"Fuzz?"

"Law. Coppers. Police."

"There is no police force. Unnecessary. For that matter, no method of outside communication."

"You don't have a telephone?"

"Unnecessary."

"Then, lady, you'd better start hollering for help. Because if you don't send us back where we came from in thirty seconds, I am going to lean on you."

"Why wait?" Cookie bounded to her feet, raced over to the window, and flung it open. She leaned out.

"Help!" she yelled. "Hel—"

Her voice trailed off. "Holy Owned Subsidiary!" she whispered, faintly. "Sneak a preview at *this!*"

Connors and Dr. Placebo moved to her side and stared out at *this*.

This was the city below them, a city they knew as well as they knew the month of the year.

But the month was Jly, and the city too was oddly altered. The buildings seemed familiar enough, but they were not nearly so high here in the downtown section, nor were there so many of them. No traffic hummed in the streets below, and pedestrians moved freely down the center of the avenues. The sides of the structures were not disfigured by billboards or painted advertisements. But the most drastic difference was a subtle one—everything was plainly visible in clear bright sunlight. There was no smoke, no soot, no smog.

"Another continuum," Dr. Placebo murmured. "She's telling the truth."

"I still want out," Connors said. He balled his fists. "Lady, I'm asking you in a nice way—send us back."

Maya shook her head. "I can't possibly do so until next week. Armond must return and prepare the antidotes."

Cookie frowned. "You still insist we got here just because we swallowed some kind of Mickey Finn? You didn't smuggle us aboard a spaceship or whatever?"

"Please, my dear, let me explain. As I understand it, in your time-vector you employ a variety of drugs—heroin, *cannabis indica*, various preparations such as marijuana and *peyotl* which affect the time-sense."

"I never touch the stuff," Cookie snarled. "I'm clean, see?"

"But there are people who use these concoctions, and it does affect their time-sense. Their subjective time-sense, that is. A minute can become an eternity, or a day can be compressed into an instant."

"I buy that," Connors said.

"My friend Armond has merely extended the process. He perfected a capsule which actually produces a corporeal movement in time. Since it is impossible to move into a future which does not yet

exist, or into a past which exists no longer, one merely moves obliquely into a parallel time-stratum. There are thousands upon thousands of worlds, each based upon the infinite combinations and permutations of possibility. All co-exist equally. You have merely gone from one such possible world to another."

"Merely," Cookie muttered. "So Connors was right You kidnapped us. But why?"

"Call it an experiment. Armond and I worked together, to determine the sociological variations existing in several continuums. You will remain here a week, until he returns. During that time, let me assure you, no harm can possibly befall anyone. You'll be treated as honored guests."

Ray Connors stepped closer to Cookie. "Don't worry, baby—I'll protect you," he said. "You know I only got eyes for—*wow!*"

Wow stood in the doorway. She was about eighteen, with baby-blue eyes, but any resemblance to infancy ended right there.

"This is Lona," Maya told him. "She will be your hostess during your stay here."

Lona smiled up at Connors and extended her hand. "I already have my instructions," she said. "Shall we go now?"

"Over my dead body!" Cookie screeched. "If you think for one minute I'm gonna let you fall out of here with that hunk of Bastille-bait, you got another—"

It was her turn to react, when the tall young man entered. He too was about eighteen, but big for his age.

"I'm Terry," he said. "Your host during the coming week. If you'll be good enough to accompany me—"

"I'm good enough," Cookie told him.

"Now wait a minute," Connors interrupted. "If you go off with this gorilla, how'm I gonna protect you?"

"You better worry about protecting yourself, buster," Cookie told him, eyeing the clinging blonde. She turned to the waiting Terry. "Off to Funville," she said, and swept out.

"Shall we go?" Lona asked Connors. "A week is so little time, and I've so much to learn—"

"That's the spirit," Connors said. "Come on."

As they exited, Dr. Placebo glanced at Maya. "And what is in store for me—something out of *Lolita*?"

The plump woman frowned at the unfamiliar reference. "Why, you'll be my guest. Stretch out on the couch and make yourself comfortable. I expect there are a few questions you'd like to ask."

Dr. Placebo was beyond resistance. Meekly, he sank down on his own couch—which wasn't really his own couch anymore—and Maya promptly joined him.

"Really," spluttered the little man. "This is hardly approved psychotherapeutic procedure."

"I'm not a psychotherapist," Maya told him. "I'm your hostess."

"Need you be so hospitable?" Dr. Placebo protested.

"My feet hurt," Maya explained, kicking off her shoes and wriggling her toes. "Besides, is there any rule that says you have to conduct a sociological experiment standing up?"

"This is an experiment?"

"Of course. Why did you think Armond brought you here?" She stared at him levelly.

"I was going to ask about that. There are so many things I don't understand."

"Look into my eyes. Perhaps I can tell you better in that way than by questions and answers."

"Hypnosis? Telepathy? Rubbish!"

"Three labels, in as many words. Just forget that you're a scientist for a moment and open your mind. Look into my eyes. There, that's better. Keep looking. What do you see there?"

Dr. Placebo stared fixedly. His breathing altered oddly and his voice, when he spoke, seemed to come from far away. "I see—*everything*," he whispered.

There was the world he came from, and there was *this* world. But these were only two in a coexistent infinity of possible states of being, each subject to an individual tempo, and each ruled by the Law of the Universe, which men call *If*.

There was a world where the dinosaurs survived, and the birds who ate their eggs perished. There was a world in which amphibians crawled out upon the land and found it uninviting, then swarmed back into the sea. There was a world in which the Persians defeated Alexander, and Oriental civilization flourished on the site of what would never be Copenhagen.

Dr. Placebo, guided by some power of selection emanating from Maya's will, sampled a dozen of these possibilities in rapid succession.

He saw worlds which had developed in a manner very similar to his own, with just a tiny difference.

A world in which a few tiny birds wheeled and took flight at the sight of sailing vessels, so that Columbus never noticed them and sailed on his course to the coast of Mexico where he and his men were quickly captured by the Aztecs and enslaved. So quickly did the inhabitants of Central America learn the arts of their prisoners that within a hundred years they built ships and weapons of their own, with which they conquered Europe . . .

A world where it didn't rain along the Flemish plains one night early in the nineteenth century—and next morning, Napoleon's cavalry charged to victory across a dry field instead of tumbling into a sunken road. After winning Waterloo, there was no Bourbon restoration, no ensuing Republic, no Commune, no rise of Communist theory, no German nation or Russian Revolution, no World Wars. And Napoleon VI was emperor of all the earth . . .

Dr. Placebo saw the world in which the Hessians overheard the sound of oars one Christmas Eve at Trenton, and hanged George Washington. He saw the world where an ax slipped, and a young rail-splitter named Abe Lincoln lost his left leg and ended up as the town drunk of Magnolia, Ill. He saw a world in which an eminent scientist suffered a minor toothache and neglected to investigate the queer mould which he'd observed, with the result that two of the men who might have subsequently developed atomic power installations died of disease instead, because there was no penicillin to save them, and a whole continent subsequently plunged into war and . . .

Faster and faster the worlds whirled; the one in which Adolf Hitler was just a man who painted houses and Winston Churchill painted landscapes fulltime instead of on Sundays . . . a world in which a real detective named Sherlock Holmes wrote a highly-successful series of stories about an imaginary London physician whom he called Arthur Conan Doyle . . . a world ruled by great apes, and a somewhat similar world ruled by a teen-age aristocracy who were proud of their blue genes.

"Possible," murmured Maya's voice, from a great distance. "All possible. Do you understand, now?"

Dr. Placebo sensed that he was nodding in reply.

"Good. Then, *this* world."

The panorama of impressions expanded, on a multi-leveled basis, so that Dr. Placebo was aware of sweeping generalization and specific example simultaneously. And slowly, a picture evolved. Dr. Placebo sensed and surveyed it with growing horror.

"But it *can't* be!" he heard himself muttering. "No Freud—and Havelock Ellis entering a monastery at twenty-two—no psychiatrists—no wonder you all became disturbed."

"*You're* disturbed," Maya's voice told him, calmly. "We're not. Look again."

Dr. Placebo looked again.

He looked at a world in which society was conditioned by biological principles, with Kinsey-like overtones; a world which lived in accordance with certain basic postulates. And as the examples expanded, Maya's voice provided accompaniment.

"As in *your* world, the sexual drive in the human male reaches its height between the ages of 16 and 26, whereas in the females the sex-urge is highest between 28 and 40. The only difference is that in *our* world this biological fact is accepted, and acted upon.

"Accordingly, our young men, at 16, are permitted to establish relationships with women of 28 or older, for any period of time up to 10 years. During this decade of association, there is no procreation—and, of course, no domestic or emotional responsibilities.

"At 26, the males are permitted to establish another relationship, again for a decade or so, with the females aged 16 and upwards. During this time, reproduction is encouraged, for the females are young and healthy and the males are fully mature; they lavish affection upon their offspring, who are—of course—turned over to the care of the state when they reach the age of 6.

"As both males and females reach 40 or thereabouts, they can again change their partners and seek permanent or temporary companionship within a domestic relationship but without reproducing.

"Thus the sex-drive is fully satisfied during its period of maximum intensity, the reproductive urge is given full sway at a time likely to be most beneficial to both parents and offspring, and the social needs of later life are gratified without the rancor, tensions, frustrations, and naggingly permanent obligations which are the fruit of most monogamous marriages in your world. Simple enough, isn't it?"

Dr. Placebo sat up. He was once again in full possession of his faculties, all of which were strained beyond credulity.

"It's absurd!" he shouted. "You're going against all natural instinct—"

"Are we?"

Maya smiled. "Our society is actually founded on a realistic basis—pure biology. In the animal kingdom, 'fatherhood' as we know it does not exist. The male may protect its spawn for a time and feed the pregnant female, but it does not safeguard or exhibit affection for its young over any extended period of time, except in your 'moral' textbooks for children or the cinematic fantasies of your Mr. Disney. In many species, the male does not even secure food for the female, let alone 'support a family.' This is an artificial concept, yet your whole society is based upon it and everyone seems to believe that it's 'natural.'

"And when your poets and writers and philosophers envision an 'ideal' society, it is merely an extension of the same basic misconceptions with an attempt to put a little more of what you call 'justice' into them—even though one of your own writers, Archibald MacLeish, in his play *J.B.*, so wisely observes: *'There is no justice; there is only love.'* Ours is a world founded on love, and it begins by setting aright the biological basis of love."

"Monstrous!" Dr. Placebo exploded. "You've destroyed the fundamentals of civilization—the home—the family—"

"The so-called home and so-called family have destroyed the fundamentals of *your* civilization," Maya told him. "That's why you therapists flourish, in a sick world of emotionally-twisted youngsters who grow up as overly-frustrated or overly-aggressive adults; a world of prurience and poverty, of sin without atonement and atonement without sin, a world of bombs without balms. Don't look at your prejudices and your theories; look at the *results*. Are the people of your world truly happy, Doctor? *Are they?*"

"I suppose your way is better?" Dr. Placebo permitted himself a slight sneer.

"See for yourself," Maya suggested. "Look into my eyes—"

Dr. Placebo found himself staring and sharing; it was all a matter of viewpoint, he told himself.

He saw a world in which there was no transference of aggressions, due to sexual problems; a world devoid of jealousy and fear and secret guilts.

There was, to begin with, a complete change in the pattern of courtship; the element of rivalry, of competition, was almost eliminated. Male and female paired first for mutual pleasure, without the necessity of seeking the almost impossible combination of perfect lover, ideal helpmate, good provider, wise companion, and social prize which dogs most young people in their choice.

Later on, male and female paired for the purpose of reproduction; children born of the union of these matings were given a healthy environment of genuine love during the years when they were most lovable—and most subject to lasting psychological impressions. Then, at the time when they became encumbrances in a complex social order, they were turned over to well-organized state establishments for education and proper development.

Finally, male and female allied on the basis of fully matured judgments; as companions with mutual tastes and interests. Their early sexual drives fully satisfied, their reproductive drive fulfilled, their responsibilities in these areas ended, they were free to seek permanent or temporary liaisons on a fully-realistic basis of compatibility.

Inevitably, there were other—and far-reaching—results.

For one thing, a change in personality-values—the notion of what constituted a "good" or a "bad" individual differed greatly from those prevalent in Dr. Placebo's world.

Less time was wasted, by young and old alike, in false and exaggerated emphasis upon presumably

"masculine" or "feminine" attributes. A 16-year-old boy could *honestly* prove his masculinity, with full approval and satisfaction, on a biological basis, instead of spending most of his energy on football, juvenile delinquency, surreptitious indulgence in alcohol and narcotics and the assumption of an outward brutality designed to impress the female. A 16-year-old girl could fulfill her biological function in maternity instead of retreating into narcissism, virginity-fantasies, or a rebellious and unsatisfactory promiscuity.

The young man found sympathy and understanding with an older woman during his initial relationship, and learned to appreciate these qualities. The young woman found steadiness and strength in an older man, and was not impressed by reckless exhibitionism and irresponsible behavior. When the age-patterns of later relationships were reversed, an even greater mutual understanding prevailed; in the final maturity, there was a peace and a satisfaction born of genuine love and respect. In this world, men and women actually *enjoyed* one another's company, and there was no rivalry.

As a result, there was no fear of the domestic situation; it was not a life-long trap in which both parties became enslaved to a consumer economy because they had to "preserve" a so-called home at all costs. Because there was no set and permanent family status, the element of economic competition virtually vanished; there was no need to pile up great accretions of consumer-goods for conspicuous consumption or as substitutes for genuine satisfactions. And there was no "Inheritance." The state regulated employment and recompense but did so benevolently—for there was no familial tension-source to spawn the guilt, hate, frustration, and aggression which resulted in individual crime and mass warfare. Hence a "police state" proved unnecessary. Simple miscegenation had done away with national, racial, and religious strife. And the limited 12-year breeding span had done away with population pressure; there was abundance for everyone. Social and economic freedom followed as a matter of course.

Perhaps most important of all, there was a great increase in creativity and the development of aesthetics.

Dr. Placebo began to realize why, when he looked out the window, there were no advertising displays—why there was no need of automotive traffic or "quick communication" devices, or any variety of artificial stimulants, escape-devices, or gilded carrots designed to keep the donkeys in perpetual harness as they tugged their cartloads of woe along the road of life.

There was actually plenty of time to *live* in this world; no claws were squeezing; within this hourglass lay no danger of an eruption or explosion.

All this Maya showed him, and much more. Until at last, Dr. Placebo hurled himself upright again and tore his gaze away.

"Fine!" he commented. "Wonderful! Now I know why you found a youthful hostess for Ray Connors and a young host for Cookie. And maybe it does work, at that."

"I'm glad you think so," Maya said. "Because that was Armond's plan, you see."

"I don't see," Dr. Placebo confessed.

"For some time Armond and others have used the capsules to visit worlds in other time-vectors. Most of them were either too alien in their patterns or too dangerous to explore, but yours seemed most similar to our own.

"Somewhere along the line, your world went wrong in the area of social-sexual relationships, but we have studied your *mores* and folkways and decided to make a radical experiment. Armond believed *we* could, if necessary, live in *your* world—but of course, we wouldn't want to. He then determined to discover if *you* could live in *our* world. That's why he went down to hand out a limited number of sample

pills—in the hopes of getting a representative assortment of specimens here for observation. One week should be long enough to determine your reaction—"

Dr. Placebo stood up.

"One minute is all it takes," he announced. "At least, as far as I'm concerned."

"You are a wise man, Dr. Placebo," Maya said. "It didn't take you long to see how sensibly we live, how sanely we have ordered our lives."

"That is correct," Dr. Placebo murmured, and then his voice swept upwards shrilly. "And that's just why I want out of here! I'm a psychiatrist, and a highly successful one. What place have I in a world where nobody is emotionally disturbed or maladjusted? Why, I'd starve to death in a month! I tell you, all this sanity is crazy—"

Suddenly he doubled up and fell back upon the couch.

"Why, whatever is the matter?" Maya cried.

"Ulcer," Dr. Placebo groaned. "Kicks up on me every once in a while. Purely psychosomatic, but it hurts like hell."

"Wait just a minute," Maya soothed. "I'll get you some milk."

And in exactly a minute, she was back with a glass. Dr. Placebo drank it slowly and gradually relaxed. It was good milk—damned good milk, he reflected bitterly, and no wonder. In a lousy, perfect world like this, the cows were probably more contented than any back on Earth . . . It figured!

"All right," said Ray Connors, pausing in his restless pacing to face Cookie and Dr. Placebo. "I got to talk fast because there's not much time. For a whole week I've been figuring out how to get a chance to see you two alone here in the office without Maya or any of the rest of these squares butting in. Because I got a billion-dollar idea by the tail and all I need is your help."

"How's Lona?" Cookie inquired.

"The chick?" Ray Connors smiled. "Okay, okay. But that's not important."

"Isn't it?" Cookie frowned. "You know, this guy Terry is the greatest. He's so—so *sweet*. Treats me like I was some kind of princess—"

"Never mind that jazz," Connors interrupted. "We got no time."

"Your idea?" Dr. Placebo inquired.

"Okay, now hear this. This is a square setup, dig? Both of you must have noticed what I did—everybody gets along with everyone else, there's no muscle, no sweat. Strictly Loveville."

"Yeah, isn't it wonderful?" Cookie sighed. "That Terry—"

"I'll say it's wonderful!" Connors exulted. "The whole setup is a pushover for a couple of hip operators like us. I started to figure things out, and you know, I think the three of us could really do it?"

"Do what?" inquired Dr. Placebo.

"Why, take over, of course!" Connors eyed him elatedly. "Look, we each got our own racket, and all we need to do is start working. Cookie here knows how to turn on the glamour. Me, I'm the best combination agent and flack in the business. You're a skull-specialist, you know about psychology and all that crud. Suppose we just team up and go to work?"

"Remember that old gag about Helen of Troy, or whoever—the gal whose face launched a thousand flips, something like that? Started a big war over her, didn't they? Well, we got Cookie here. Suppose I started beating the drums, working up a little publicity, spreading the word about how this chick is the hottest dish in the whole pantry? And you coach me on the psychology, Doc.

"You know the way they, got things rigged here—young gals with middle-aged guys, middle-aged guys with young gals, old folks at home together. Well, it would be the easiest thing in the world to upset the whole applecart. Get the kids excited about Cookie, and the old daddy-types, too. Teach 'em something about sex-appeal. You know what'll happen. Inside of a month we can start opening up schools—regular courses to give all the chicks lessons on how to really land a man and hang on to him. Give 'em all the techniques on how to play hard-to-get. And that means the works—we bring out a line of cosmetics, fashions, beauty-parlor treatments, promote jewelry and perfume and luxury items.

"We'll have the men flipping, too. They don't use money in this crazy system, but we ought to be able to take our cut in land and services. I tell you, they're so innocent it'll be like taking candy from a baby. Inside of a year we can work our way up so that we'll be running the whole world! Think of it—no police, no army, nothing to stop us! Wait until we bring in advertising, and juke-boxes, and hot-rods, and pro football and falsies—"

"You intend to transform this world into a reasonable reproduction of our own, is that correct?" asked Dr. Placebo.

"Reasonable is right," Connors snapped. "What's to stop us?"

"I am," said Cookie. "I don't buy it."

"You don't—*what?*"

"I like it just the way it is," she murmured. "Look, Ray, let's face it. I'm pushing thirty, dig? And for the past fifteen years I been knocking around, getting my jollies in just the kind of a world you want to turn this into. Well, I had it, and no thanks. What good did it ever do me? I ended up a second-rate stripper, tied to a second-rate nogoodnik like you and spending all my extra loot on Doc's couch.

"I don't need to be Helen of Troy here. I'm just Cookie, and that's good enough for Terry—and believe me, he's good enough for me. I never had it so nice as this past week, believe me. Why louse it up?"

"Okay, so who's begging? You think you're the only chick I can promote? I got Lona. She's plenty square—one of those real sick, good-hearted types—but I can twist her around my little finger. So I'll slap a little makeup on her, teach her a few tricks, and we're off and running." Connors wheeled to face Dr. Placebo.

"How about it, Doc? You want in, don't you?"

"You're quite sure you can do all this?" Dr. Placebo murmured. "It's a big program for one man to tackle."

"Yeah, but we got a natural. No competition. No opposition. Nobody that's hip. They'll never know

what hit 'em. In fact, they all love each other so damned much they don't suspect anyone could ever pull a fast one, and they'll cooperate just for asking."

Connors walked over to the open window and gazed out at the sunlit city.

"Look at it, Doc," he said. "All laid out and waiting for us to carve. Like the old saying, the world's our oyster."

"That's right." Dr. Placebo moved to his side, nodding thoughtfully. "And the more I think it over, the more I believe you. You could do it, quite easily."

"I damn' well *will* do it," Connors asserted. "And if you and Cookie chicken out, I'll make it alone."

Dr. Placebo hesitated, shrugged, and glanced at Cookie. She nodded. He put his hand on Connors' shoulder and smiled.

"A good idea," he muttered. "Make it alone, then."

And with an agile dexterity somewhat surprising in an older man, he pushed Connors out of the window.

The press-agent fell forth into the world that was his oyster; Dr. Placebo and Cookie leaned out and watched as he landed in the oyster-bed below.

"Nice work, Doc," Cookie commented.

He frowned. "That's the last time I'll ever do anything like that," he sighed. "Still, it was necessary to use violence to end violence."

"Yeah. Well, I got to be running along. Terry's waiting for me. We're going to the beach. See you around, Doc?"

"I hope so. I intend to be here for a long, long time." Dr. Placebo turned, staring past the girl, as Maya entered the room.

"Your conference is over?" the plump woman inquired. "Your friend left?"

Cookie nudged Doc in time for him to match her sudden look of consternation.

"A terrible thing just happened," she gasped. "He fell out of the window!"

"Oh, no—" Maya gasped and rushed to the open window, staring down. "How awful! And just when he could have joined you in returning home—"

"Home?"

"Yes. Armond is back. The week is up, and he'll be able to supply you with Time Capsules now. You're free to return to your own world."

"Do we have to go?" Cookie's voice quavered. "I—I want to stay here. Terry and I talked things over, and we hit it off so good together, I was hoping I could just sort of like settle down."

"And what about you?" Maya confronted Dr. Placebo.

"Why—uh—I agree with Cookie. Since that first day, I haven't had the slightest twinge from my ulcer.

Something about the milk you serve, I suppose."

"But what about your profession?" Maya asked. "You said yourself that there's no need for a psychiatrist here. And, of course, there's no way of making money."

"I've been thinking about that," Dr. Placebo said. "Couldn't I assist you in your sociological experiments?"

Maya permitted herself a small smile. "Standing up or lying down?" she demanded.

"Er—both." A slow blush spread over the bald expanse of Dr. Placebo's forehead. "I mean, each of us is past forty, and under the existing order of things—well—"

"We'll discuss that later," Maya told him, but the smile was broader, now.

She turned to include Cookie in her glance. "Actually, I'm very happy about your decisions. And I shall inform Armond that the experiment was a complete success. I take it your deceased friend intended to stay, also?"

"He did," Cookie answered, truthfully. "He intended to make his mark here." She glanced down at the sidewalk below. "And in a way, I guess he succeeded."

"Then you can adapt," Maya said.

"Of course, we can adapt," Dr. Placebo nodded.

"All right, I shall inform Armond. And we can go into the second stage of the experiment."

"The second stage?" Dr. Placebo echoed.

"Yes. And we'd best hurry because there isn't much time."

Just how Maya got her information, we, of course, shall never know. Perhaps Armond read the papers during his visits to Earth, or maybe he just used his eyes and ears.

At any rate, Maya knew the truth—the truth behind the vision of the green claw squeezing the sands of time from the hour-glassed earth. She knew that time is running short for this world.

Hence the second stage of the experiment; the stage in which not one but thousands of Armonds will descend in mortal guise or disguise, to pass out millions of Time Capsules.

Some will come as salesmen, some as pharmacists, some as physicians. Naturally, techniques of distribution will vary; it will be necessary to disguise the capsules as vitamin tablets, tranquilizers, or simple aspirin. But Dr. Placebo and Cookie will both cooperate with their suggestions, and Armond and his crew are both knowledgeable and efficient.

So, sooner or later, chances are you will be handed a capsule of your own.

Whether you elect to swallow it knowingly or not depends upon whether or not you're willing to swallow the concepts of another world.

If not, of course, there's always a simple choice.

You can stay right where you are, and let this world swallow you. . . .

That Hell-Bound Train

When Martin was a little boy, his daddy was a railroad man. Daddy never rode the high iron, but he walked the tracks for the CB&Q, and he was proud of his job. And every night when he got drunk, he sang this old song about 'That Hell-Bound Train.'

Martin didn't quite remember any of the words, but he couldn't forget the way his daddy sang them out. And when Daddy made the mistake of getting drunk in the afternoon and got squeezed between a Pennsy tank car and an AT&SF gondola, Martin sort of wondered why the Brotherhood didn't sing the song at his funeral.

After that, things didn't go so good for Martin, but somehow he always recalled Daddy's song. When Mom up and ran off with a traveling salesman from Keokuk (Daddy must have turned over in his grave, knowing she'd done such a thing, and with a *passenger*, too!), Martin hummed the tune to himself every night in the Orphan Home. And after Martin himself ran away, he used to whistle the song softly at night in the jungles, after the other bindle stiffs were asleep.

Martin was on the road for four or five years before he realized he wasn't getting anyplace. Of course he'd tried his hand at a lot of things—picking fruit in Oregon, washing dishes in a Montana hash house, stealing hubcaps in Denver and tires in Oklahoma City—but by the time he'd put in six months on the chain gang down in Alabama he knew he had no future drifting around this way on his own.

So he tried to get on the railroad like his daddy had, and they told him that times were bad.

But Martin couldn't keep away from the railroads. Wherever he traveled, he rode the rods; he'd rather hop a freight heading north in sub-zero weather than lift his thumb to hitch a ride with a Cadillac heading for Florida. Whenever he managed to get hold of a can of Sterno, he'd sit there under a nice warm culvert, think about the old days, and often as not he'd hum the song about 'That Hell-Bound Train.' That was the train the drunks and the sinners rode—the gambling men and the grifters, the big-time spenders, the skirt-chasers, and all the jolly crew. It would be really fine to take a trip in such good company, but Martin didn't like to think of what happened when that train finally pulled into the Depot Way Down Yonder. He didn't figure on spending eternity stoking boilers in hell, without even a company union to protect him. Still, it would be a lovely ride. If there was *such* a thing as a hell-bound train. Which, of course, there wasn't.

At least Martin didn't *think* there was, until that evening when he found himself walking the tracks heading south, just outside of Appleton Junction. The night was cold and dark, the way November nights are in the Fox River Valley, and he knew he'd have to work his way down to New Orleans for the winter, or maybe even Texas. Somehow he didn't much feel like going, even though he'd heard tell that a lot of those Texas automobiles had solid-gold hubcaps.

No sir, he just wasn't cut out for petty larceny. It was worse than a sin—it was unprofitable too. Bad enough to do the devil's work, but then to get such miserable pay on top of it! Maybe he'd better let the Salvation Army convert him.

Martin trudged along humming Daddy's song, waiting for a rattler to pull out of the Junction behind him. He'd have to catch it—there was nothing else for him to do.

But the first train to come along came from the other direction, roaring toward him along the track from the south.

Martin peered ahead, but his eyes couldn't match his ears, and so far all he could recognize was the sound. It *was* a train, though; he felt the steel shudder and sing beneath his feet.

And yet, how could it be? The next station south was Neenah-Menasha, and there was nothing due out of there for hours.

The clouds were thick overhead, and the field mists rolled like a cold night in a November midnight. Even so, Martin should have been able to see the headlight as the train rushed on. But there was only the whistle, screaming out of the black throat of the night. Martin could recognize the equipment of just about any locomotive ever built, but he'd never heard a whistle that sounded like this one. It wasn't signalling; it was screaming like a lost soul.

He stepped to one side, for the train was almost on top of him now. And suddenly there it was, looming along the tracks and grinding to a stop in less time than he'd believed possible. The wheels hadn't been oiled, because they screamed too, screamed like the damned. But the train slid to a halt, and the screams died away into a series of low, groaning sounds, and Martin looked up and saw that this was a passenger train. It was big and black, without a single light shining in the engine cab or any of the long string of cars; Martin couldn't read any lettering on the sides, but he was pretty sure this train didn't belong on the North-western Road.

He was even more sure when he saw the man clamber down out of the forward car. There was something wrong about the way he walked, as though one of his feet dragged, and about the lantern he carried. The lantern was dark, and the man held it up to his mouth and blew, and instantly it glowed redly. You don't have to be a member of the Railway Brotherhood to know that this is a mighty peculiar way of lighting a lantern.

As the figure approached, Martin recognized the conductor's cap perched on his head, and this made him feel a little better for a moment—until he noticed that it was worn a bit too high, as though there might be something sticking up on the forehead underneath it.

Still, Martin knew his manners, and when the man smiled at him, he said, "Good evening, Mr. Conductor."

"Good evening, Martin."

"How did you know my name?"

The man shrugged. "How did you know I was the conductor?"

"You *are*, aren't you?"

"To you, yes. Although other people, in other walks of life, may recognize me in different roles. For instance, you ought to see what I look like to the folks out in Hollywood." The man grinned. "I travel a great deal," he explained.

"What brings you here?" Martin asked.

"Why, you ought to know the answer to that, Martin. I came because you needed me. Tonight, I

suddenly realized you were backsliding. Thinking of joining the Salvation Army, weren't you?"

"Well—" Martin hesitated.

"Don't be ashamed. To err is human, as somebody-or-other once said. *Reader's Digest*, wasn't it? Never mind. The point is, I felt you needed me. So I switched over and came your way."

"What for?"

"Why, to offer you a ride, of course. Isn't it better to travel comfortably by train than to march along the cold streets behind a Salvation Army band? Hard on the feet, they tell me, and even harder on the eardrums."

"I'm not sure I'd care to ride your train, sir," Martin said. "Considering where I'm likely to end up."

"Ah, yes. The old argument." The Conductor sighed. "I suppose you'd prefer some sort of bargain, is that it?"

"Exactly," Martin answered.

"Well, I'm afraid I'm all through with that sort of thing. There's no shortage of prospective passengers anymore. Why should I offer you any special inducements?"

"You must want me, or else you wouldn't have bothered to go out of your way to find me."

The Conductor sighed again. "There you have a point. Pride was always my besetting weakness, I admit. And somehow I'd hate to lose you to the competition, after thinking of you as my own all these years." He hesitated. "Yes, I'm prepared to deal with you on your own terms, if you insist."

"The terms?" Martin asked.

"Standard proposition. Anything you want."

"Ah," said Martin.

"But I warn you in advance, there'll be no tricks. I'll grant you any wish you can name—but in return you must promise to ride the train when the time comes."

"Suppose it never comes?"

"It will."

"Suppose I've got the kind of wish that will keep me off forever?"

"There is no such wish."

"Don't be too sure."

"Let me worry about that," the Conductor told him. "No matter what you have in mind, I warn you that I'll collect in the end. And there'll be none of this last-minute hocus-pocus, either. No last-hour repentances, no blonde *fräuleins* or fancy lawyers showing up to get you off. I offer a clean deal. That is to say, you'll get what you want, and I'll get what I want."

"I've heard you trick people. They say you're worse than a used-car salesman."

"Now, wait a minute—"

"I apologize," Martin said hastily. "But it *is* supposed to be a fact that you can't be trusted."

"I admit it. On the other hand, you seem to think you have found a way out."

"A sure-fire proposition."

"Sure-fire? Very funny!" The man began to chuckle, then halted. "But we waste valuable time, Martin. Let's get down to cases. What do you want from me?"

Martin took a deep breath. "I want to be able to stop time."

"Right now?"

"No. Not yet. And not for everybody. I realize that would be impossible, of course. But I want to be able to stop time for myself. Just once, in the future. Whenever I get to a point where I know I'm happy and contented, that's where I'd like to stop. So I can just keep on being happy forever."

"That's quite a proposition," the Conductor mused. "I've got to admit I've never heard anything just like it before—and believe me, I've listened to some lulus in my day." He grinned at Martin. "You've really been thinking about this, haven't you?"

"For years," Martin admitted. Then he coughed. "Well, what do you say?"

"It's not impossible, in terms of your own *subjective* time sense," the Conductor murmured. "Yes, I think it could be arranged."

"But I mean *really* to stop. Not just for me to *imagine* it."

"I understand. And it can be done."

"Then you'll agree?"

"Why not? I promised you, didn't I? Give me your hand."

Martin hesitated. "Will it hurt very much? I mean, I don't like the sight of blood and—"

"Nonsense! You've been listening to a lot of poppycock. We already have made our bargain, my boy. I merely intend to put something into your hand. The ways and means of fulfilling your wish. After all, there's no telling at just what moment you may decide to exercise the agreement, and I can't drop everything and come running. So it's better if you can regulate matters for yourself."

"You're going to give me a time-stopper?"

"That's the general idea. As soon as I can decide what would be practical." The Conductor hesitated. "Ah, the very thing! Here, take my watch."

He pulled it out of his vest pocket; a railroad watch in a silver case. He opened the back and made a delicate adjustment; Martin tried to see just exactly what he was doing, but the fingers moved in a blinding blur.

"There we are," the Conductor smiled. "It's all set, now. When you finally decide where you'd like to call a halt, merely turn the stem in reverse and unwind the watch until it stops. When it stops, time stops, for you. Simple enough?" And the Conductor dropped the watch into Martin's hand.

The young man closed his fingers tightly around the case. "That's all there is to it, eh?"

"Absolutely. But remember—you can stop the watch only once. So you'd better make sure that you're satisfied with the moment you choose to prolong. I caution you in all fairness; make very certain of your choice."

"I will." Martin grinned. "And since you've been so fair about it, I'll be fair, too. There's one thing you seem to have forgotten. It doesn't really matter *what* moment I choose. Because once I stop time for myself, that means I stay where I am forever. I'll never have to get any older. And if I don't get any older, I'll never die. And if I never die, then I'll never have to take a ride on your train."

The Conductor turned away. His shoulders shook convulsively, and he may have been crying. "And you said *I* was worse than a used-car salesman," he gasped, in a strangled voice.

Then he wandered off into the fog, and the train whistle gave an impatient shriek, and all at once it was moving swiftly down the track, rumbling out of sight in the darkness.

Martin stood there, blinking down at the silver watch in his hand. If it wasn't that he could actually see it and feel it there, and if he couldn't smell that peculiar odor, he might have thought he'd imagined the whole thing from start to finish—train, Conductor, bargain, and all.

But he had the watch, and he could recognize the scent left by the train as it departed, even though there aren't many locomotives around that use sulphur and brimstone as fuel.

And he had no doubts about his bargain. That's what came of thinking things through to a logical conclusion. Some fools would have settled for wealth, or power, or Kim Novak. Daddy might have sold out for a fifth of whiskey.

Martin knew that he'd made a better deal. Better? It was foolproof. All he needed to do now was choose his moment.

He put the watch in his pocket and started back down the railroad track. He hadn't really had a destination in mind before, but he did now. He was going to find a moment of happiness . . .

Now young Martin wasn't altogether a ninny. He realized perfectly well that happiness is a relative thing; there are conditions and degrees of contentment, and they vary with one's lot in life. As a hobo, he was often satisfied with a warm handout, a double-length bench in the park, or a can of Sterno made in 1957 (a vintage year). Many a time he had reached a state of momentary bliss through such simple agencies, but he was aware that there were better things. Martin determined to seek them out.

Within two days he was in the great city of Chicago. Quite naturally, he drifted over to West Madison Street, and there he took steps to elevate his role in life. He became a city bum, a panhandler, a moocher. Within a week, he had risen to the point where happiness was a meal in a regular one-arm luncheon joint, a two-bit flop on a real army cot in a real flophouse, and a full fifth of muscatel.

There was a night, after enjoying all three of these luxuries to the full, when Martin thought of unwinding his watch at the pinnacle of intoxication. But he also thought of the faces of the honest johns he'd braced for a handout today. Sure, they were squares, but they were prosperous. They wore good clothes, held good jobs, drove nice cars. And for them, happiness was even more ecstatic—they ate dinner in fine hotels, they slept on innerspring mattresses, they drank blended whiskey.

Squares or no, they had something there. Martin fingered his watch, put aside the temptation to hock it for another bottle of muscatel, and went to sleep determined to get himself a job and improve his happiness quotient.

When he awoke he had a hangover, but the determination was still with him. Before the month was out Martin was working for a general contractor over on the South Side, at one of the big rehabilitation projects. He hated the grind, but the pay was good, and pretty soon he got himself a one-room apartment out on Blue Island Avenue. He was accustomed to eating in decent restaurants now, and he bought himself a comfortable bed, and every Saturday night he went down to the corner tavern. It was all very pleasant, but—

The foreman liked his work and promised him a raise in a month. If he waited around, the raise would mean that he could afford a second-hand car. With a car, he could even start picking up a girl for a date now and then. Other fellows on the job did, and they seemed pretty happy.

So Martin kept on working, and the raise came through and the car came through and pretty soon a couple of girls came through.

The first time it happened, he wanted to unwind his watch immediately. Until he got to thinking about what some of the older men said. There was a guy named Charlie, for example, who worked alongside him on the hoist. "When you're young and don't know the score, maybe you get a kick out of running around with those pigs. But after a while, you want something better. A nice girl of your own. That's the ticket."

Martin felt he owed it to himself to find out. If he didn't like it better, he could always go back to what he had.

Almost six months went by before Martin met Lillian Gillis. By that time he'd had another promotion and was working inside, in the office. They made him go to night school to learn how to do simple bookkeeping, but it meant another fifteen bucks extra a week, and it was nicer working indoors.

And Lillian *was* a lot of fun. When she told him she'd marry him, Martin was almost sure that the time was now. Except that she was sort of—well, she was a *nice* girl, and she said they'd have to wait until they were married. Of course, Martin couldn't expect to marry her until he had a little more money saved up, and another raise would help too.

That took a year. Martin was patient, because he knew it was going to be worth it. Every time he had any doubts, he took out his watch and looked at it. But he never showed it to Lillian, or anybody else. Most of the other men wore expensive wristwatches and the old silver railroad watch looked just a little cheap.

Martin smiled as he gazed at the stem. Just a few twists and he'd have something none of these other poor working slobs would ever have. Permanent satisfaction, with his blushing bride—

Only getting married turned out to be just the beginning. Sure, it was wonderful, but Lillian told him how much better things would be if they could move into a new place and fix it up. Martin wanted decent furniture, a TV set, a nice car.

So he started taking night courses and got a promotion to the front office. With the baby coming, he wanted to stick around and see his son arrive. And when it came, he realized he'd have to wait until it got a little older, started to walk and talk and develop a personality of its own.

About this time the company sent him out on the road as a trouble-shooter on some of those other jobs, and now he *was* eating at those good hotels, living high on the hog and the expense account. More than once he was tempted to unwind his watch. This was the good life . . . Of course, it would be even better if he just didn't have to *work*. Sooner or later, if he could cut in on one of the company deals, he could make a pile and retire. Then everything would be ideal.

It happened, but it took time. Martin's son was going to high school before he really got up there into the chips. Martin got a strong hunch that it was now or never, because he wasn't exactly a kid anymore.

But right about then he met Sherry Westcott, and she didn't seem to think he was middle-aged at all, in spite of the way he was losing hair and adding stomach. She taught him that a toupee could cover the bald spot and a cummerbund could cover the pot gut. In fact, she taught him quite a lot and he so enjoyed learning that he actually took out his watch and prepared to unwind it.

Unfortunately, he chose the very moment that the private detectives broke down the door of the hotel room, and then there was a long stretch of time when Martin was so busy fighting the divorce action that he couldn't honestly say he was enjoying any given moment.

When he made the final settlement with Lil he was broke again, and Sherry didn't seem to think he was so young, after all. So he squared his shoulders and went back to work.

He made his pile eventually, but it took longer this time, and there wasn't much chance to have fun along the way. The fancy dames in the fancy cocktail lounges didn't seem to interest him anymore, and neither did the liquor. Besides, the Doc had warned him off that.

But there were other pleasures for a rich man to investigate. Travel, for instance—and not riding the rods from one hick burg to another, either. Martin went around the world by plane and luxury liner. For a while it seemed as though he would find his moment after all, visiting the Taj Mahal by moonlight. Martin pulled out the battered old watch case, and got ready to unwind it. Nobody else was there to watch him—

And that's why he hesitated. Sure, this was an enjoyable moment, but he was alone. Lil and the kid were gone, Sherry was gone, and somehow he'd never had time to make any friends. Maybe if he found new congenial people, he'd have the ultimate happiness. That must be the answer—it wasn't just money or power or sex or seeing beautiful things. The real satisfaction lay in friendship.

So on the boat trip home, Martin tried to strike up a few acquaintances at the ship's bar. But all these people were much younger, and Martin had nothing in common with them. Also they wanted to dance and drink, and Martin wasn't in condition to appreciate such pastimes. Nevertheless, he tried.

Perhaps that's why he had the little accident the day before they docked in San Francisco. 'Little accident' was the ship's doctor's way of describing it, but Martin noticed he looked very grave when he told him to stay in bed, and he'd called an ambulance to meet the liner at the dock and take the patient right to the hospital.

At the hospital, all the expensive treatment and the expensive smile and the expensive words didn't fool Martin any. He was an old man with a bad heart, and they thought he was going to die.

But he could fool them. He still had the watch. He found it in his coat when he put on his clothes and sneaked out of the hospital.

He didn't have to die. He could cheat death with a single gesture—and he intended to do it as a free man, out there under a free sky.

That was the real secret of happiness. He understood it now. Not even friendship meant as much as freedom. This was the best thing of all—to be free of friends or family or the furies of the flesh.

Martin walked slowly beside the embankment under the night sky. Come to think of it, he was just about back where he'd started, so many years ago. But the moment was good, good enough to prolong

forever. Once a bum, always a bum.

He smiled as he thought about it, and then the smile twisted sharply and suddenly, like the pain twisting sharply and suddenly in his chest. The world began to spin, and he fell down on the side of the embankment.

He couldn't see very well, but he was still conscious, and he knew what had happened. Another stroke, and a bad one. Maybe this was it. Except that he wouldn't be a fool any longer. He wouldn't wait to see what was still around the corner.

Right now was his chance to use his power and save his life. And he was going to do it. He could still move; nothing could stop him.

He groped in his pocket and pulled out the old silver watch, fumbling with the stem. A few twists and he'd cheat death, he'd never have to ride that Hell-Bound Train. He could go on forever.

Forever.

Martin had never really considered the word before. To go on forever—but *now*? Did he *want* to go on forever, like this; a sick old man, lying helplessly here in the grass?

No. He couldn't do it. He wouldn't do it. And suddenly he wanted very much to cry, because he knew that somewhere along the line he'd outsmarted himself. And now it was too late. His eyes dimmed, there was a roaring in his ears . . .

He recognized the roaring, of course, and he wasn't at all surprised to see the train come rushing out of the fog up there on the embankment. He wasn't surprised when it stopped, either, or when the Conductor climbed off and walked slowly toward him.

The Conductor hadn't changed a bit. Even his grin was still the same.

"Hello, Martin," he said. "All aboard."

"I know," Martin whispered. "But you'll have to carry me. I can't walk. I'm not even really talking any more, am I?"

"Yes, you are," the Conductor said. "I can hear you fine. And you can walk, too." He leaned down and placed his hand on Martin's chest. There was a moment of icy numbness, and then, sure enough, Martin could walk after all.

He got up and followed the Conductor along the slope, moving to the side of the train.

"In here?" he asked.

"No, the next car," the Conductor murmured. "I guess you're entitled to ride Pullman. After all, you're quite a successful man. You've tasted the joys of wealth and position and prestige. You've known the pleasures of marriage and fatherhood. You've sampled the delights of dining and drinking and debauchery, too, and you traveled high, wide and handsome. So let's not have any last-minute recriminations."

"All right," Martin sighed. "I can't blame you for my mistakes. On the other hand, you can't take credit for what happened, either. I worked for everything I got. I did it all on my own. I didn't even need your watch."

"So you didn't," the Conductor said, smiling. "But would you mind giving it back now?"

"Need it for the next sucker, eh?" Martin muttered.

"Perhaps."

Something about the way he said it made Martin look up. He tried to see the Conductor's eyes, but the brim of his cap cast a shadow. So Martin looked down at the watch instead.

"Tell me something," he said softly. "If I give you the watch, what will you do with it?"

"Why, throw it in the ditch," the Conductor told him. "That's all I'll do with it." And he held out his hand.

"What if somebody comes along and finds it? And twists the stem backward, and stops time?"

"Nobody would do that," the Conductor murmured. "Even if they knew."

"You mean it was all a trick? This is an ordinary, cheap watch?"

"I didn't say that," whispered the Conductor. "I only said that no one has ever twisted the stem backward. They've all been like you, Martin—looking ahead to find the perfect happiness. Waiting for the moment that never comes."

The Conductor held out his hand again.

Martin sighed and shook his head. "You cheated me after all."

"You cheated yourself, Martin. And now you're going to ride that Hell-Bound Train."

He pushed Martin up the steps and into the car ahead. As he entered, the train began to move, and the whistle screamed. And Martin stood there in the swaying Pullman, gazing down the aisle at the other passengers. He could see them sitting there, and somehow it didn't seem strange at all.

Here they were; the drunks and the sinners, the gambling men and the grifters, the big-time spenders, the skirt-chasers, and all the jolly crew. They knew where they were going, of course, but they didn't seem to give a damn. The blinds were drawn on the windows, yet it was light inside, and they were all living it up—singing and passing the bottle and roaring with laughter, throwing the dice and telling their jokes and bragging their big brags, just the way Daddy used to sing about them in the old song.

"Mighty nice traveling companions," Martin said. "Why, I've never seen such a pleasant bunch of people. I mean, they seem to be really enjoying themselves!"

The Conductor shrugged. "I'm afraid things won't be quite so jazzy when we pull into that Depot Way Down Yonder."

For the third time, he held out his hand. "Now, before you sit down, if you'll just give me that watch. A bargain's a bargain—"

Martin smiled. "A bargain's a bargain," he echoed. "I agreed to ride your train if I could stop time when I found the right moment of happiness. And I think I'm about as happy right here as I've ever been."

Very slowly, Martin took hold of the silver watch stem.

"No!" gasped the Conductor. "No!"

But the watch stem turned.

"Do you realize what you've done?" the Conductor yelled. "Now we'll never reach the Depot! We'll just go on riding, all of us—forever!"

Martin grinned. "I know," he said. "But the fun is in the trip, not the destination. You taught me that. And I'm looking forward to a wonderful trip. Look, maybe I can even help. If you were to find me another one of those caps, now, and let me keep this watch—"

And that's the way it finally worked out. Wearing his cap and carrying his battered old silver watch, there's no happier person on or out of this world now and forever—than Martin. Martin, the new brakeman on that Hell-Bound Train.

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The Funnel of God

When Harvey Wolf was seven, he met the Black Skelm.

Now "skelm" means rascal, and at his age, Harvey knew nothing of duplicity and the ways of men, so he was not afraid. Nor did the man's skin repel him, for Harvey was ignorant of *apartheid*.

The Basutos on his father's place called him *baas*, but he did not feel that he was their master. Even Jong Kurt, his father's foreman, treated the men of color without contempt. Harvey came to know the Bechuanas, the Kaffirs, the Fingos and the Swazis far better than the *Roinecks*, which was their name for Englishmen.

Harvey knew his own father was a *Roineck*, who owned this place, but that was virtually the extent of his knowledge. His father never visited him; he spent all his time at the Cape, and had ever since Harvey's mother died when he was born. Harvey had been left in care of Jong Kurt and of his wife, whom Harvey learned to call Mama.

"Poor little one," Mama said. "But you are free and happy with us, so *gued geroeg*."

And Harvey was happy. Mama made him *veldschoen* of rawhide, and he roamed at will over the *karroo* beyond the drift where the *fontein* gushed. As he grew older, he sought the *krantz* above the valley where he made his home, and soon he was climbing the great *berg* which towered over all.

Here he found the wild orchids of the upland plateaus, plucked as he wriggled his way through the mimosa, the thornbush and the hartekoal trees where the *aasvogel* perched and preened and peered for prey.

Harvey came to know the beasts of the mountain and the plain—the aard-wolf and the inyala, the oribi and the duiker, the springbok and the kudu. He watched the tall secretary-bird and the waddling kori bustard, and traced the flight of bats from out of the hidden caves on the *berg* above. From time to time he encountered snakes; the *cobra di capello*, the puff adder, and the dreaded mamba.

But nothing that loped or trotted or flew or crawled ever harmed him. He grew bolder and started to explore the caves high upon the faraway *berg*.

That was when Mama warned him about the Black Skelm.

"He is an evil man who eats children," Mama said. "The caves are full of their bones, for on such a diet one lives forever. You are to stay away from the *berg*."

"But Kassie goes to the *berg* at night," Harvey protested. "And Jorl, and Swarte."

"They are black and ignorant," Mama told him. "They seek the Black Skelm for charms and potions. The wicked old man should be in prison. I have told Jong Kurt time and again to take the dogs to the *berg* and hunt him out. But he is too slim, that one, to be easily captured. They say he sleeps in the caves with the bats, who warn him when strangers approach."

"I would like to see such a man," Harvey decided.

"You are to stay away from the *berg*, mind?"

And Mama shook him, and he promised, but Harvey did not mind.

One hot morning he toiled across the *karroo*, slipping out unobserved from the deserted, heat-baked house, and made his way painfully up the *krantz*. The *aasvogels* drooped limply in the trees, their eyes lidded, for nothing moved in the plain below. Even the orchids were wilting.

It was no cooler on the *krantz*, and when Harvey found the winding *pad* which circled the *berg*, he paused, parched and faint, and considered turning back. But the trip would be long, and perhaps he could find a *fontein* up here. There were *pads* he had not yet explored—

He started off at random, and thus it was that he came to the cave of the Black Skelm.

The Black Skelm was a gnarled little monkey-man with a white scraggle of beard wisping from his sunken cheeks. He sat at the mouth of the cave, naked and cross-legged, staring out at the *veldt* below with immobile eyes.

Harvey recognized him at once and put his knuckles to his mouth. He started to edge back, hoping that the old man hadn't observed him, but suddenly the scrawny neck corded and swivelled.

"Greetings, *baas*."

The voice was thin and piping, yet oddly penetrating. It gained resonance from an echo in the cave behind.

"G-greetings," Harvey murmured. He continued to edge away.

"You fear me, boy?"

"You are the Black Skelm. You—"

"Eat children?" The old man cackled abruptly. "Yes, I know the tale. It is nonsense, meant only to deceive fools. But you are not a fool, Harvey Wolf."

"You know my name?"

"Of course. An old man learns many things."

"Then you've come down to the plains?"

"Not for long years. But the bats bear tidings. They are my brothers of the nights, just as the *aasvogels* are my brothers by day." The Black Skelm smiled and gestured. "Sit down. I would invite you inside the cave, but my brothers are sleeping now."

Harvey hesitated, eyeing the little old man. But the man *was* little, and so very old; Harvey couldn't imagine him to be dangerous. He sat down at a discreet distance.

"The bats told you my name?" he ventured.

The wrinkled black man shrugged. "I have learned much of you. I know you seek the *berg* because it is your wish to see what is on the other side."

"But I've never told anyone that."

"It is not necessary. I look into your heart, Harvey Wolf, and it is the heart of a seeker. You think to gaze upon the lands beyond this mountain; to see the *olifant*, the *kameel*, the great black brothers of the rhenoster birds. But to no purpose, my son. The elephant, the giraffe, the rhinoceros are long gone. They have vanished, with my own people."

"Your people?"

"Those you call the Zulus." The old man sighed. "Once, when I was a *jong*, the plains beyond the *berg* were black with game. And beyond the plains the *leegtes* were black with the *kraals* of my people. This was our world."

And the Black Skelm told Harvey about his world; the Zulu empire that existed long before the coming of the *Roinecks* and the Boers. He spoke of Chaka and the other great *indunas* who commanded armies in royal splendor, wearing the leopardskin *kaross* and lifting the knobkerrie of kingly authority to command the *impis*—the regiments of grotesquely painted warriors in kilts of wildcat tails. They would parade by torchlight, the ostrich plumes bobbing like the wild sea, and their voices rose more loudly than the wind in the cry of "*Bayete!*" which was the regal salute. And in return the *induna* chanted but a single response: "*Kill!*" Casting his spear to the north, the south, the east, or the west, he sent the regiments forth. And the *impis* killed. They conquered, or never returned. That was the way of it, in the old days.

Until, finally, none were left to return.

None but the Black Skelm, who sought the caves of the bats and the vultures, to live like a scavenger in a world of death.

"But my people are down there," Harvey protested. "They are not dead. They tell me Cape Town is a great city, and beyond that—"

"Cape Town is a cesspool of civilization," said the Black Skelm. "And beyond that are greater sewers in which men struggle and claw at one another, even as they drown. It is a sickening spectacle, this. The world will soon end, and I would that I could die with it. But, of course, I shall never die."

Harvey's head hurt: the sun was very hot. He wondered if he had heard aright.

"You can't die?"

"It is true, *baas*. Soon, of course, I must decide upon my next move, for this body of mine is no longer suitable. But—"

Harvey rose, reeling a bit, and backed away.

"Don't eat me!" he cried.

The old man crackled again. "Nonsense!" he said. "Sheer, superstitious nonsense. I do not eat children. My brothers feed me." He stretched forth his hand. "Look!"

And the air was filled with the odor of carrion, as the *aasvogels* gathered, fluttering frantically up the face of the sheer cliff and clustering about the bony body of the wizened black. In their beaks they carried bits of rancid flesh, dropping their tribute into the Black Skelm's fingers.

Then Harvey knew that he was very sick indeed; the sun had played tricks. He ran into the cave, and it was dark and musty, and from the twisted caverns beyond welled a terrible odor of decay. The bats hung head downwards, hung in mute millions, and the floor of the cave was not covered with bones, but with whitish droppings. On the walls great eyes winked—eyes that had been painted by hands long dead. The eyes whirled and Harvey felt his kneecaps turn to water. He would have fallen, but the Black Skelm came up behind him and caught him.

The old man's grip was surprisingly strong.

"Do not fear," he whispered. "Drink this." And he held out the hollowed skull. The liquid was warm and red.

"Blood," Harvey quavered.

"Of cattle. It is pure and fresh."

"But you are a wizard—"

"What is a wizard? Merely a seeker, like yourself. A seeker who has perhaps peered further than the land beyond the mountain."

The Black Skelm led him back to the mouth of the cave, and bade him sit in the shadows there. Harvey was suddenly very tired. He closed his eyes, scarcely listening, as the Black Skelm droned on.

"All men are seekers, but each chooses a different path in his search for understanding. There is the path of Columbus who sought to encompass the earth and the path of Galileo who sought to search the heavens; the sevenfold path of Buddha which led, he hoped, to Nirvana, and the path of Apollonius which is an inward spiral with oblivion at its core. There is Einstein and—"

Harvey opened his eyes. He was, he knew, quite delirious. The black man sitting beside him, chanting strange names, eating out of the beaks of vultures, talking of Zulu *kraals* which had vanished a hundred years ago—this was a fever-dream. He could hear only bits and snatches.

"You will be a seeker, too, Harvey Wolf. You will go out into the world to look for knowledge. Eventually you will sicken of knowledge and try to find truth. Perhaps we can discover it together—"

Harvey's head throbbed. The sun was blazing off in the west, sinking beneath the purple lower lid of a gigantic cloud. And a voice was echoing along the *berg*, calling, "Harvey—Harvey, where are you?"

"Jong Kurt!" Harvey rose.

The Black Skelm was already on his feet, scuttling into the shadows of the cave.

"No, wait—come back!" Harvey called, groping after the old man and nearly falling as his fevered body convulsed in a sudden chill.

But the old man retreated into the cave.

And then Jong Kurt was looming on the pathway, his face grave and his forehead seamed with apprehension. He caught the reeling boy in his arms.

Suddenly the blackness blossomed and burst forth from the cave, a blinding billowing of squeaking, stenchful shadows—shadows that flapped and fluttered and stared with millions of little red eyes.

Jong Kurt fled down the mountain, carrying Harvey Wolf. But the eyes followed, haunting Harvey's delirium in dreams. . . .

They sent him away, then. Harvey wasn't conscious when the decision was made, though he did see his father once, afterwards, at the dock in Cape Town. His father introduced him to his Uncle Frank, from America, and gave him strict orders about minding his manners and following instructions. There was talk about a New Life and a Good School and the Unhealthy Outlook that comes from being alone.

Harvey tried to tell his father about the Black Skelm, but his father wouldn't listen; not even Mama or Jong Kurt had listened. They all said Harvey had suffered from sunstroke, and in the end he came to believe it himself. It had all been heat and hallucination and nothing was real now but the great ocean and the great city.

In New York his Uncle Frank and his Aunt Lorraine were very kind. They took vicarious pleasure in his amazement at the sight of the city, and conducted him to his first motion picture.

That seemed to be a mistake, and after they dragged the frightened, hysterical child out of the theater he suffered what the doctor called a "relapse." Afterwards, he forgot the whole incident, and it wasn't until years later—

But meanwhile, Harvey grew up. He went to school and he managed to endure the tight, idiotic abominations called "Health Shoes." Gradually he accumulated the fund of knowledge necessary for a child to flourish in our society—that is to say, he could identify the various makes and models of automobiles in the streets, he learned the names of "baseball stars," and the meanings behind the four-letter words and the slang-phrases of the day.

Also, he learned to insulate his interior existence from other eyes; he found that seekers are not popular with their fellows, so he concealed his interests from his playmates. His teachers, however, were not unaware of his intelligence; at their advice he went on to private schools and from there to an Ivy League college.

He was still there when Uncle Frank and Aunt Lorraine went over to Cape Town to bring his father back for a reunion; he was there when the news came to him that the private plane had crashed on the return flight.

After the funeral he visited the attorneys.

They told him he had inherited the entire estate. Once liquidated, with all taxes paid, he could count on an accumulation of better than three million dollars. It would be ready for him by the time he reached

his twenty-first birthday.

Right then and there he made a sensible decision; he decided it was time to retire.

It was not just the caprice of a spoiled brat or a rich man's heir. At twenty-one, Harvey Wolf was a fairly presentable young man—many girls even found him handsome, for three million reasons—and he possessed an alert intellect.

He turned his back on the world only because he was fed up with hypocrisy and liars.

Harvey's first move was to leave the college. He said farewell forever to its small Humanities Department and its huge football stadium.

Next he departed from a church whose spiritual representatives appeared at launching ceremonies to bless aircraft carriers and destroyers.

At the same time he walked out on most of the phenomena and beliefs held dear by his peers; on chauvinism, on racial prejudice, on the feudal caste-system glorified by the armed forces of our democracy.

He briefly considered going into business, until he found he couldn't subscribe to the widespread doctrine that there is some mystically ennobling value attached to "competition" and that somehow everybody benefits under a system where one man is dedicated to outsmarting another.

Harvey turned his back on the life of a wealthy idler because he could not tolerate the common amusements. He did not believe that animal-killers were "sportsmen," whether they dressed in red coats and drank champagne before chasing a fox or wore dirty dungarees and guzzled beer out of the bottle before shooting at an unsuspecting duck. He did not think that baseball players or boxers or even bullfighters were as much heroic as they were overpaid. He squinted but saw nothing in abstract art; he listened, but heard nothing in its credos and critiques.

Harvey Wolf turned his back on Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, Christmas, and all the other holidays heralded by the joyous tinkle of cash-registers on high. He deplored the phony virility of the men's magazines, the fake coyness of the women's magazines, and the artificial social values which emotionally warped young people into "manliness" or "femininity."

Taking stock of himself, Harvey found he did not worship sports cars or subscribe to the "theory of obsolescence" dearly beloved by manufacturers and dearly paid for by consumers. He abhorred drum-majorettes, bathing beauty contests, and the publicity given "Miss Canned Goods" or the "Oklahoma Cucumber Queen." He took a dim, pained view of billboards, and disliked the transformation of natural parks and beauty spots into commercialized locales for hot-dog stands and souvenir concessions which sold little wooden outhouses.

He held opinions which would automatically antagonize all fraternity-members, morticians, professional evangelists, Texans, and the marchers in St. Patrick's Day parades. He did not believe in *caveat emptor*; card players who slam each trick down on the table and bellow at the top of their lungs; fake "frontier days" held by rough, tough pioneer towns in the wilds of New Jersey; sound engineers who "ride the gain" on TV commercials; professional fund-raisers who take 40% off the top in charity drives, or people who take pride in announcing that they are "quick-tempered," as though this statement entitled them to special privileges.

Harvey held a bias against practical jokers, and people who obscure driving visibility by decorating their car-windows with dangling dolls, oversize dice, baby shoes, and imitation shrunken heads. He saw

no sense to endurance-contests, had no patience with litter-bugs, failed to believe in Beggar's Night or politicians who "compromise" after election at the expense of repudiating their campaign pledges. He had a contempt for Muscle Beach exhibitionists and he objected to the rewriting of history under the guise of "patriotism." He—but the list is endless, and of interest only to psychiatrists; *they* get \$50 an hour for listening.

Harvey Wolf didn't go to the psychiatrists—not yet, at any rate, including the \$50 an hour one.

He thought he was searching for something to believe in and that perhaps he could find it in good, hard, scientific logic.

So he sailed for Europe, to study at the source.

In Edinburgh, Harvey encountered a Brilliant Doctor who prided himself on complete objectivity.

"Nothing," said the Brilliant Doctor, in one of his famed private seminars, "is ever finally 'proved' and everything remains possible in theory.

"For example, granted the loose molecular structure of both a human body and a brick wall, it is only logical to concede that, with the exact proper alignment of every single molecule in the given body with every single molecule in the given wall, at a given instant it would be possible for said body to walk through said wall and emerge unscathed on the other side.

"The chances are almost inconceivably infinitesimal, but the *possibility* must be granted."

Harvey Wolf thereupon asked the Brilliant Doctor, in the light of this opinion, what he thought of allied phenomena. What of his late countryman, the Scottish medium, D. D. Home, who practiced levitation? He rose, resting on his back in mid-air, then floated out of one second-story window and back into the room through another, in full view and broad daylight.

"Nonsense!" said the Brilliant Doctor.

Harvey Wolf blinked. "But no less an observer than the distinguished scientist Sir William Crookes testified he had witnessed this feat with his own eyes," Harvey replied.

"Impossible!" said the Brilliant Doctor. . . .

At Oxford, Harvey Wolf was enthralled by a Learned Scholar who spoke of the biological basis of Life and the almost metaphysical borderland between Being and Nothingness.

"The electromagnetic principles governing sentience and consciousness are still indefinable," he announced. "No man has yet isolated the Life Force or truly defined death or nonexistence except in terms of its absence."

Harvey Wolf was interested. What, he asked, did the Learned Scholar think of Pierre and Eve Curie's signed testimony that they had seen genuine evidence of psychic phenomena demonstrated by a medium? What about Thomas Edison's similar convictions, and his final experiments in communication with the spirit world?

"There is no objective validity offered in evidence here," said the Learned Scholar.

"But we ignored electricity for thousands of years," Harvey protested. "Its omnipresent existence was unknown to us except in lightning until we found a means of harnessing this force. Surely, if the borderline

between existence and nonexistence, consciousness and unconsciousness, cannot be exactly defined, and yet is apparently subject to certain definite principles—"

"Utter rot!" said the Learned Scholar. . . .

In Heidelberg, Harvey Wolf studied under a famous Herr Doktor-Professor whose technical mastery of neuropathology was exceeded only by his interest in psychosomatic medicine. The Herr Doktor-Professor was extremely liberal in his outlook, and even admitted prodromosis as a basis for diagnosis.

"I knew a surgeon who was in charge of an army hospital during the war," Harvey said. "One of his patients was completely paralyzed from the waist down—the spinal cord had been entirely severed and there was no nervous response. He lay in bed, wasting away, and was informed he'd never move his legs again. He refused to accept the verdict. Each day he pulled himself up in bed, lifted his legs over the side, tried to stand. The surgeon gave strict orders to restrain him, but he persisted. After two gruelling months, he stood. A month later he took his first step. All tests showed it was physically impossible for him to exercise any control over his legs, but he walked—"

"Impossible!" muttered the Herr Doktor-Professor.

"Yet what about Edgar Cayce and his clinically-verified healings of organic disorders with no possible basis in hysteria? What about—"

"*Dummkopf!*" opined the Herr Doktor-Professor. . . .

In the Sorbonne faculty, Harvey met a Celebrated Savant with unorthodox views; a man who dared to side with Charles Fort in his questioning of organized science. He once stated that if we accepted the theory of evolution from a non-anthropomorphic viewpoint, it was quite possible to believe that man's function on earth was merely to act as host for cancer cells which would eventually learn to survive the death of the human body and emerge as the next, higher life-form. He was even fond of quoting Mark Twain and others to the effect that the stars and planets of our universe might be merely the equivalent of tiny corpuscles moving through the bloodstream of some incalculably huge monster. And that this monster, in turn, might walk the surface of another world in another universe which in turn might be composed of similar corpuscles—*ad infinitum* to the n^{th} power.

"It is a humbling thought," the Celebrated Savant observed, and Harvey Wolf agreed.

"A far remove from petty human concepts," Harvey mused. "There is no need to concern oneself with trivia in the face of it now, is there?"

But the Celebrated Savant wasn't listening; he was reading the newspaper and scowling.

"Those pigs of Algerians!" he muttered to himself. "Yes, and those lousy *colons*, bidding for power and setting up education for all. It is a disaster!"

Harvey shrugged. "The world is only a corpuscle," he said. "Or perhaps it's just a virus-cell in the bloodstream of the Infinite. What does it matter?"

"*Cochon!* The purity of the State depends upon maintaining our autonomy. And furthermore, young man—"

Harvey Wolf found himself walking out once more. But this time he was walking out into Paris.

Paris, of course, is what you make it. To cutpurse Villon, living from hand to mouth and from the *Small* to the *Grand Testament*, it was a city of cold cobblestones where every twisted alley led only to the inevitable gibbet. To Bonaparte it was the site of a triumphal arch through which he marched to celebrate victory—or furtively avoided, in a solitary coach, as he whipped his horses from the field of Moscow or Waterloo. Toulouse-Lautrec clattered across Paris leaning upon two sticks, and his city was a gaslight inferno. There is the *Sec* and *Brut* Paris of pout-lipped Chevalier, the cerebral city of Proust and Gide and Sartre, the Paris of the GI on leave for *couchez-vous* carnival. There is the Paris of the tourist—the Louvre's leg-weary legacy, the giddy gaping from the Eiffel Tower, the hasty concealment of the paperbound *Tropic of Cancer* at the bottom of the suitcase. There is a Paris as gay as Colette, as tough as Louis-Ferdinand Céline, as weird as Huysmans. You pay your money and you take your choice.

And when you have three million dollars—

Harvey Wolf brooded about it in a Montmartre bistro. A bearded man stared at him with yellow cat-eyes and said, "Welcome, Pontius Pilate."

"Pilate?" echoed Harvey Wolf.

"I recognize the mood," said the bearded man. "You are asking yourself Pilate's age-old question—*What is Truth?*"

"And the answer?"

"Truth is sensation," the bearded man told him. "Sensation alone is reality. All else is illusion."

"Hedonism, eh? I don't know—"

"You can learn. Experience is the great teacher."

Harvey was sated with civilization, sick of science. He spent six months with the bearded man and the bearded man's friends. He rented a villa near Antibes, and many guests came.

There was the dwarf girl and the giantess and the woman with the filed and pointed teeth; the lady who slept only in a coffin and never alone; the girl whose luggage consisted solely of a custom-made traveling case filled entirely with whips. There was a rather unusual troupe of artists whose specialty consisted of a pantomime dramatization of the *Kama Sutra*.

Long before the six months were up, Harvey realized that his meeting with the bearded man had not been accidental. Behind the beard was neither Jesus, D. H. Lawrence, or even a genuine Gilles de Rais—merely a weak-chinned, loose-lipped voluptuary adventurer who had visions of sugarplum splendor in the form of a billion-franc blackmail scheme.

Harvey got rid of him, at last, for considerably less, and he did not begrudge the price he finally paid. For he had learned that the senses are shallow and the orgasmic is not the ultimate peak of perceptivity.

Harvey went to Italy and immersed himself in Renaissance art. He journeyed to Spain and somehow he found he'd started to drink. A girl he met introduced him to some little capsules her friends smuggled in from Portugal. At the end of another six months he was picked up in the streets of Seville and shipped back home through the kindly offices of the American consulate.

They put him in Bellevue and then in a private san upstate. Harvey kicked the habit and emerged after a loss of four months and forty pounds.

He ended up, as do most seekers after Truth, on the confessional couch of a private-psychiatrist.

The psychiatrist decided that perhaps Walt Disney was to blame for it all.

Harvey admitted the man had an interesting argument. He was able, after many sessions, to recall his first visit to the movies when he'd come to America. Uncle Frank and Aunt Lorraine had taken him to see what was perhaps the most famous short cartoon of the Depression era—*The Three Little Pigs*.

He could recreate quite vividly, without the aid of narco-hypnosis, the strong fear-reaction engendered by the sight of the Big Bad Wolf stalking the helpless pigs. He remembered how the Wolf huffed and puffed and blew the straw house in. What happened immediately thereafter he did not know, because it was then that he had been carried, screaming, from the theater.

It was, the psychiatrist averred, a "traumatic incident." And now, as an adult, Harvey had read a great deal about animated cartoons and their possible effect on children. Following the success of *The Three Little Pigs* it seemed as if the entire concept of cartoon-making underwent a drastic change. In place of playful Pluto and droll Donald Duck came a horde of ferocious bulldogs, gigantic cats with slavering fangs; huge animal menaces who tormented smaller creatures and sought to devour them in their great red maws.

But, if anything, their little intended victims were worse; they always outwitted the hulking pursuers and seemed to take fiendish delight in sadistic revenge. One animal was always crushing another under a truck or a steamroller; pushing his enemy off a steep cliff, blasting his head open with a shotgun, blowing him up with dynamite, dragging his body across the teeth of a great circular saw. During the years, the so-called "kiddy matinee" became a horror-show, a *Grand Guignol* of the animal kingdom in which atrocious crimes and still more atrocious punishments flashed in fantastic fashion across the screen in lurid color, to the accompaniment of startlingly realistic shrieks, groans, screams of agony, and cruel laughter.

Parents who carefully and conscientiously shielded their supposedly innocent youngsters from the psychological pitfalls of the dreaded comic-books were quite content to listen to the same moppets shriek uncontrollably at the sight of a twenty-foot-high animated hyena being burned to death while the happy little rabbit squealed in ecstatic glee.

Harvey had read about this and he listened when the psychiatrist told him there was probably no harm in such fantasies—to the average child it was merely a vicarious outlet for aggression. Such a child unconsciously identified with the small animal who destroyed the larger tormenter: the bigger creature symbolized Daddy or Mama or some authority-figure, and it was satisfying to witness their defeat. The weapons employed were direct concepts and representations of adult civilization and its artifacts. Most children were exposed to such films from infancy on and grew up without psychic damage. As normal adult human beings they were able to go out into the world and fight its battles. Indeed, it was the avowed purpose of many psychiatrists to keep them "mentally fit" during real battles, so that they could continue to spray liquid fire from flame-throwers upon enemy soldiers cowering in tanks, or drop bombs on unseen thousands of women and children.

It was merely unfortunate, said the psychiatrist (at \$50 an hour) that Harvey had been brought up away from the influences of normal society and abruptly exposed to the symbolism of the cartoon. And there were, of course, other factors.

The fact that Harvey's last name happened to be Wolf—so that his little American playmates insisted on calling him "The Big Bad Wolf" when they innocently ganged up on him at recess and tried to emulate

the punishments inflicted by the heroic little pigs in the film.

The fact that Harvey, instead of acting like any normal, red-blooded American boy and fighting back against the six or eight older bullies who came after him with planks and stones, chose to cry and bleed instead.

The fact that Harvey soon underwent another traumatic cinematic experience when he saw a picture called *The Wolf Man* and its sequels, and gradually came to accept and identify with the role symbolized by his last name.

The fact that Harvey seemed to have totally misinterpreted the message; to him it wasn't important that the Wolf was destroyed, but that he was revived again in the sequels.

Regrettably, said the psychiatrist (at great and expensive length) he seemed to have equated acceptance of his Wolf role with survival. As an adult, he had become a Lone Wolf, moving away from the pack. And his self-styled search for Truth was merely a search for the Father-Image, denied him in childhood.

Harvey attempted, at one point in his analysis, to talk about the Black Skelm and that fantastic fever-dream atop the *berg*. The psychiatrist listened, made notes, nodded gravely, inquired into the duration of his subsequent illness, and went back to his theory about the traumatic effect of the films. What had Harvey thought when the Wolf Man was beaten to death with a cane by his father in the movie? Did Claude Rains, as the father, remind Harvey of his own parent? Did he perceive the phallic symbolism of the silver cane used as an instrument of punishment? And so on, blah, blah, blah—until Harvey Wolf got up from the couch and walked out again.

Psychotherapy had its own truths, but its methodology was still magic. One had to believe in certain *formulae*, in spells and incantations designed to cast out demons. At the same time there was this pitiful insistence upon a "realistic" interpretation; an attempt to reconcile frankly magical methodology with the so-called "normal" world.

Perhaps it was silly to compromise. The therapy sessions had caused Harvey to think about the Black Skelm once more, for the first time in twenty years. He remembered how the little shriveled savage had spoken of Einstein, and of Apollonius of Tyana. He had sat all alone in a bat-cave atop a mountain, drinking warm blood from a skull, but he *knew*. He had a surety which science and philosophy and art only adumbrated, and the source of his knowledge must be magical insight.

Harvey moved down into the Village and began to fill his ramshackle apartment with books on occultism and theosophy. He avoided the local Beat types, but inevitably the word leaked out. The crackpots came to call, and eventually he met a girl named Gilda who claimed to be one of the innumerable illegitimate offspring of the late Aleister Crowley.

Soon he found himself standing in a darkened room, facing the East, with a steel dagger in his right hand. He touched his forehead saying, in the Hebrew tongue, *Ateh*; touched his breast and murmured *Malkuth*; touched his right shoulder as he intoned *Ve-Geburah* and his left as he muttered *Ve-Gedullah*. Clasping his hands upon the breast, with dagger pointed upwards, he shouted *Le-Olahm, Aum*.

Nothing happened.

Gilda's further experiments in sex-magic were equally (and fortunately) nonproductive. She attempted to interest him in a Black Mass, but before details could be arranged she ran off with a young man who yapped obscene ballads in public places but was granted the protection the law affords a folk-singer.

Harvey Wolf decided that he would continue his search alone.

During the year that followed he made many contacts and experiments. Undoubtedly he met with followers of Gerald Heard and Aldous Huxley. Quite certainly he investigated the effects of lysergic acid and peyote.

Both produced the same trance phenomena. Harvey found himself regressing, the film of his life running backwards, until he reached the point where he was enveloped in the billowing black bat-cloud from the *berg*. The little red eyes swirled firefly fashion all round him, then vanished into a greater darkness. He stood alone on the mountain.

Yet not quite alone, because the Black Skelm was there, pointing to the path and whispering, "I have waited long, *baas*. The time has come when we must journey together."

The message was manifest; Harvey Wolf knew he would go back to Africa.

Another Wolfe had said *You Can't Go Home Again*, and in his more objective moments Harvey knew this was right. Twenty years had passed and nothing was left of the Africa he'd known. The world kept changing.

There were new governments with new slogans, new reasons to hate their neighbors, and new weapons poised to punish them. A new spurt of population, subject to new mutations of disease, sought new areas of conquest. Missiles had reached the moon and Man would follow, then go on to the stars with his civilized cargo of bombs, chewing gum, carbon monoxide, and laxatives. Eventually the millennium would come; a Soviet Federated Socialist Republic of the Solar System or a United Interplanetary States. If the former prevailed, Saturn would be set up as the new Siberia; if democracy triumphed, special facilities for certain groups would be set up on Pluto—separate, but equal, of course.

Harvey Wolf made one last effort to escape such cynical considerations and their consequences. He became an ascetic; a disciple of Raja, Brahma, and Hatha Yoga. He took a cabin in the Arizona desert and here he meditated, fasted, and grew faint.

And the Black Skelm came into his dreams and chanted, "This is not the path. Come to me. I have found the way."

So, in the end, Harvey returned to the dark womb—to the Africa of his birth.

He found a new spirit at the Cape; *apartheid* had arisen, sanctioned by the sanctimonious and condoned by the cartel of dedicated men whose mission it was to artificially inflate the price of diamonds with which the wealthy bedeck their wives and their whores.

At first they would not even give Harvey permission to journey upcountry, but his father's name—and a distribution of his father's money—helped.

This time Harvey made the trip in a chartered plane, which set him down on the flat *veldt* near the old place and (in accordance with orders) left him there.

The old place had changed, of course. Kassie, Jorl, Swarte, and others were gone, and no herds of humpbacked cattle roamed over the plain. The great house was deserted, or almost so; Harvey prowled the ruins for ten minutes before the elderly man with the rifle ventured forth from an outbuilding and leveled his weapon at him in silent menace.

"Jong Kurt!" Harvey cried. And the old man blinked, not recognizing him at first—just as Harvey didn't recognize a Kurt whom the years had robbed of any right to retain his nickname.

Kurt lowered his rifle and wept. He wept for the passing of the old place, for the death of Mama, for the changes which had come to both of them. Did the *baas* remember the way it had been? Did he remember the night Kurt had carried him, faint with delirium, down the mountainside?

"Yes, I remember," Harvey murmured. "I remember it very well."

"When you left, your father sold the cattle. The boys went into the mines, everybody left. Only Mama and I stayed on alone. Now she is gone, too." Kurt knuckled his eyes.

"And the Black Skelm?" Harvey said. "What happened to him?"

"He is dead," Kurt answered, shaking his head solemnly.

"Dead?" Harvey stiffened in the suddenness of the thought. "Do you mean that you—"

Kurt nodded. "Your father gave orders. The day after you went to the Cape, I took the dogs up to the *berg*. I meant to hunt him down, the *verdamte* scoundrel."

"You found him there?"

The old man shrugged. "Only the bones. Picked clean, they were, on the side of the ledge near the mouth of the cave. The carrion had fed his vultures for the last time."

Kurt wheezed and slapped his thigh, and he did not see the pain in Harvey's eyes.

"But why do we stand here, *baas*? You will stay the night with me, eh? Your plane does not return before tomorrow?"

Harvey murmured an acceptance of the invitation. It was true, his plane would not return until the next day. He'd thought to spend the interval in ascending the *berg*, but there was no need now. The Black Skelm was dead. *You Can't Go Home Again*.

Kurt had comfortable quarters in one of the smaller outbuildings. Game was scarce, but there was eland steak for dinner. The old man had learned to brew beer in the traditional Kaffir fashion, and after the meal he sat reminiscing with the young *baas* and drinking toasts to the past. Finally he succumbed to stuporous slumber.

Harvey stretched out on a bunk and tried to sleep. Eventually he succeeded. Then the bat came.

It flew in through the open window and nuzzled at his chest, brushing its leathery wings against his face and nuzzling him with tiny teeth that grazed but did not bite. It chattered faintly.

Harvey awoke to a moment of horror; horror which subsided when the bat withdrew to a corner of the room. Kurt snored on, stentorously, and Harvey sat up, brushing at the black, winged creature in an effort to drive it back out through the window.

The bat wheeled about his head, squeaking furiously. Harvey rose, flailing his arms. He opened the door. The bat hung in the doorway. Harvey beat at it. It whirled just out of arm's reach. Then it hung suspended in midair and waited.

Harvey advanced. He stood gazing across the moonlit emptiness of the *veldt*—a lake of shimmering silver beyond which towered the black hulk of the *berg*.

The bat cheeped and flapped its wings before him. Suddenly Harvey conceived the odd notion that the wings were *beckoning*. The bat wanted to him to *follow*.

Then he knew. The Black Skelm wasn't dead. He was waiting for Harvey, there on the mountain. He had sent a messenger, a guide.

Harvey didn't hesitate. He went out into the moonlit plain and it was like the first time. Now he was a grown man in boots instead of a child in rawhide *veldschoen*, and it was night instead of day, but nothing had changed. Even the odd delirium rose to envelop him once again; not the fever born of the hot sun but the chill of the cold moon. He trudged across the silver silence of the sand and the bat swooped in sinister silhouette before him. When Harvey reached the *krantz* he almost decided to turn back; this was no mysterious midnight mission, only the tipsy fugue of an overimag-inative man unused to the potency of Kaffir beer.

But they were waiting for him there in the shadows; huddled in teeming thousands, their tiny red eyes winking a greeting. And now they all rose about him, covering him in a living cloak. He glanced back and found they had closed in solidly, forming a living barrier against retreat. The acrid stench was in itself a wall through which he dared not pass, so he went forward, up to the winding *pad* which took him, toiling, to the top of the *berg*.

He saw the mouth of the cave looming before him, and then all vision faded as the moon was blotted out by a cloud—a cloud of wavering wings. The bats flew off and he stood alone on the mountain-top.

The Black Skehn came out of the cave.

"You *are* alive," whispered Harvey. "I knew it. But Kurt spoke of finding bones—"

"I placed them there for that purpose." The Black Skelm wove his wrinkles into a smile. "I did not wish to be disturbed until you returned. I have waited a long time, *baas*."

"Why didn't you summon me sooner?"

"There were things you had to learn for yourself. Now you are ready, having seen the world. Is it not as I described?"

"Yes." Harvey nodded at the gnarled little black man. "But how could you know these things? I mean—"

He hesitated, but the Black Skelm grinned. "You mean I am an ignorant old savage, a witch-doctor who believes in animism and amulets." He scratched his grisly chest. "Whereas you are a man of worldly wisdom. Tell me—what is Jack Paar *really* like?"

Harvey blinked, and the old man chuckled. "You are so naive in your sophistication! *Baas*, I have seen far more than you in your brief lifetime. Although my base body sat and shriveled in this cave, my spirit ventured afar. I have been with you throughout your wanderings. I was in the theater when you screamed; I sat with you in seminars; I felt the caress of the woman with the silver-tipped whips; I was one with you when you raised the dagger to invoke the All-Being. There are ways of transcending space and time."

"But that's impossible!" Harvey muttered. "I can't think—"

"Don't try to think." The Black Skelm rose, slowly and stiffly. "One does not learn through processes of organized logic, for the world is not a logical place. Indeed, it is not a place at all—merely an abstract point in infinity. True knowledge is institutional; an impressionary process which might be labelled as

heuristics."

Harvey shook his head. "You drink cattle-blood and summon bats, and you speak of heuristics—unbelievable."

"Yet you believe."

"I believe. But I don't understand. You have these powers. Why live like an animal in a cave when you might have gone forth to rule the world?"

"The world?" The old man put his hand on Harvey's shoulder; the weight was as slight as a sere and blackened leaf. "Look down there."

Together they stared at the silvery *veldt*.

"The world is a plain," said the Black Skelm. "And beyond, as we know, are the cities of the plain. Do you remember what happened to those cities? *Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven, and he overthrew those cities and all the valley and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.* Remember?"

"Yes. You're trying to tell me that the world will soon come to an end."

"Can you doubt it, after what you've seen?"

"No."

"The Lord remembered Abraham and brought him to the safety of the hills." The black man smiled, but Harvey stared at him.

"Is that why you sent for me? Because you're—"

"God?" The black man shook his head. "Not yet. I have not chosen. That is why I waited for you. Perhaps you can help me choose."

"I don't understand—"

"Every man is God, or contains within him the seed of godhead. Look." The Black Skelm fumbled with a little leather pouch at his waist and drew forth a dark, shrivelled object.

"This is a nut, encased in an outer shell. Within is the seed, the kernel. The hard shell is our human consciousness. Once broken, the kernel can be reached, the seed liberated to sprout and grow, to spread through space and thrust beyond the stars."

The Black Skelm twirled the spheroid in his wrinkled palm. "Shall we open the shell and partake?" he murmured. "No, it isn't like peyote, or your lysergic acid, either. I spent years searching for the seed, which indeed comes from the Tree of Knowledge. Once eaten, it will do more than merely expand and extend consciousness. Consciousness will be discarded, like the empty husk it is, and the soul will flourish. Flourish and soar beyond all being."

He cracked the shell and dug within.

"Here, will you share with me?"

"But—why?"

The Black Skelm sighed. "Because the human part of me is old, and afraid. It may be that I will not enjoy being God. It must, I think, be a lonely estate. When you came to me as a child I recognized a fellow-seeker, and I knew that I would wait for you to join me on the quest."

Harvey stared. "This isn't just part of some crazy dream?"

"It's all a crazy dream, you know that," said the Black Skelm, softly.

"And if it works—suppose I want to turn back?"

"There is no turning back, as you have learned. One can only go forward, through the mist called life and into the mist called death. Or one who dares can go beyond. It is your choice."

"But why now?"

"Why not? Does life, as you have seen it, appeal to you?"

"No."

"Do you look forward to death?"

"No."

"Then let us move on."

The Black Skelm carefully broke the dried kernel in half and extended a portion to Harvey.

"Place it on your tongue," he said. "Then swallow slowly."

Harvey knew now that he was dreaming. He knew he was back in the bunk at Kurt's place, and there was nothing to fear—in a moment he'd awake. Meanwhile there was no harm in putting the insignificant morsel on his tongue, no harm in gripping the black man's shrivelled hand as the waves of sensation coursed through him.

Because he was back at Kurt's place now, and as he swallowed *that* too was a dream and he was back in America in Arizona, he was back with Gilda, he was back with the bearded man in France, he was back at the universities, back at the theater watching that preposterous cartoon, back here again on the mountain-top meeting the Black Skelm for the first time. No, he was further back than *that*, he was a little boy in Mama's arms, he was crawling, he couldn't even crawl, he was kicking inside a warm darkness, he was only a speck of liquified life, he was nothing, he was—

Instantly he leaped forward and upward. The plain faded away beneath him, faded out of focus. He had no eyes to see it with, but he needed no eyes. He was one with immensity and perceived everything. He knew he was still standing—somewhere—and still grasping the black man's hand with his own. But the hand was huge enough to balance a sun on its palm, yet insubstantial enough to feel no pain from its molten mass.

Far below (*yes, it was below, there was still space and dimension, immeasurably transfigured as his body had been transfigured*) the wheeling planets moved in inexorable orbit.

A voice that was not a voice, a mere beat observed in soundlessness, impinged upon his expanded awareness.

"Behold the earth," it said. "A speck, a mite, an errant, inconsequential atom."

Harvey—or that part which remembered Harvey—had a momentary awareness of the old theory of the world as a single cell in the bloodstream of a cosmic monster. But it was not a cell, he perceived, any more than he was now a monster. It was just a speck, as the voice had said.

"Is this what God sees?" he asked.

"I do not know, for I am not yet God. To be God is to act. And I cannot decide. Shall I become God through action?"

"What action is possible?"

"Only one. To destroy this earth. To rearrange the cosmic pattern by removing the atom from being."

"Destroy? Why not save mankind?"

"God cannot save mankind. This I now know. God is great and Man is small. If left alone, Man will destroy himself. We alone can be saved—by becoming one with God."

"I dare not."

"Why? Do you so love the race of Man after what you've seen? Do you love the cesspool in which he wallows, the devices with which he brings about the destruction of others and of himself?"

"But I am a man."

"No longer. You are in Limbo now. Not God, not human. There is no turning back. One must go forward."

"I cannot." Harvey—or the greater being that stood between the stars—turned and faced the black, brooding face—an image of immensity, intangible yet limned and luminous in space.

"Perhaps your life on earth was a sweeter one than mine. You did not see your people perish, and the old ways of nature vanish from the world. You did not skulk in a cave on a mountain-top for endless years, companioned by scavengers—nor feed, like them, on carrion corruption. Your skin was not black."

"You hate the world."

"I am above hate. And above love."

"Pity, then? Compassion?"

"For what? This insignificant speck, crawling with midges that will soon destroy it if left to their own devices?" The soundless voice thundered. "If there is pity, if there is compassion, let it be for one's self. I shall survive, in eternity. There will be other earths—"

"No!"

But the black, brooding face stared down and pursed its lips. Suddenly it blew, and spat. A cloud of ichor issued from the titanic, toothless maw. It spiralled, gathering speed and form as it fell, twisting into a tunnelling black cloud.

The cloud encompassed the earth. The earth seemed to be sucked into the spiralling mass; its shell cracked and fire flared forth fitfully. But only for an instant. Then the spittle evaporated into nothingness and what it had encompassed was gone.

Gone? It had never existed.

Harvey—that which was Harvey now—turned and glanced into the great glowing face in the heavens beside him. But it too was gone. Not gone, but growing—growing to such size and at such a speed that it was impossible to perceive even a portion of its features. It was becoming space itself. The Black Skelm was God and had destroyed the earth—

Harvey's mouth opened, swallowing the universe in a soundless scream.

He could not follow the Black Skelm, grow into godhead. He could not go back to an earth which no longer existed, had never existed.

He could only scream, and merge into a swirling nothingness, a funnel that engulfed him without end . . .

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Beelzebub

Howard was still half-asleep when he heard the buzzing. It was a faint, persistent drone, balanced delicately on the very threshold of consciousness. For a moment Howard wasn't sure whether the sound came from the sleeping-side or the waking-side of his mind. God knows, he'd heard plenty of strange noises in his sleep lately; made them, too. Anita was always complaining about how he'd wake up in the middle of the night, screaming at the top of his lungs. But he had reasons to be upset, the way things were going, and besides Anita was always complaining, period.

The drone deepened insistently and Howard knew he was awake now. He could feel the stale heat of the bedroom and the response his body was making to it—the loginess of his limbs and the cold pattern of perspiration forming on them.

Bzzzzzzzz.

Howard opened his eyes.

The room was dim, but the California sunshine filtering through the smog was also filtering through the interstices of the window-blinds. Just enough to transform the bungalow-court apartment into a small oven with its baking heat. Just enough to give Howard a glimpse of what he didn't want to see—the living room filled with a fan-shaped clutter of clothing and furniture radiating from the axis of the roll-away bed, the cubby-hole kitchen through the open archway, with the caked and crusted dishes heaped in the sink. Yes, and the damned portable typewriter on the table in the corner, its carriage accusingly empty and its untouched keys leering up like rows of dusty teeth.

Rows of dusty teeth—Christ, man, what a writer you are! When you're asleep, that is.

But he wasn't asleep. He could hear that buzzing. Louder now, much louder. Goddam fly. How'd it get in here, with all the windows tight shut? Anita had a thing about opening windows, no matter how hot it was, when she had her curlers in. And she always had the curlers—

Bzzzzzzzzzz.

Howard sat up. The noise was too loud to be coming from the kitchen. It had to be here in the room. He turned and glanced at the huddle in the bed beside him.

The sun glinted off the curlers. A ray played cruelly across Anita's neck, accentuating the stringy fold.

That's where the fly was sitting. At first he thought it was Anita's mole. But moles don't move. Moles don't buzz.

It was a fly, all right. He stared at Anita, thinking God how he hated the thing—noisy, rasping at your nerves, always around when you don't want it, demanding attention, intruding on your privacy. Dirty, messy creature, carrying filth—

Somehow his hand had drawn back and now it was coming forward; he wanted to hit it, not too hard, just swat it and destroy it because it had to be destroyed, he had to get rid of it.

Howard wasn't conscious of the blow or its force. Realization of its impact vanished before the overwhelming explosion of Anita's shrill scream.

"Ohhh, you *bastard!*" And then she was sitting up striking at him; not once, but again and again, harder and harder, and shrieking louder and louder. "You—you—trying to kill me while I'm asleep—"

It was crazy, she was crazy, and he was trying to explain about the fly, he was only going to swat the fly, but she wouldn't listen, she never listened when she got into one of those hysterical rages. She was crying, sobbing, stumbling into the bathroom; of course she locked the door. There was no sense continuing with the same old scene, no sense pounding on the panel and stammering out apologies. All he could do was find his clothes and get dressed, locate his briefcase under the jumble of *her* clothing. Past nine already, and his appointment was at ten. He had to be there on time.

In his haste, Howard forgot all about the fly. What he had to decide now was whether to spend the next twenty minutes catching a cup of coffee at the drugstore on the corner or run into the barbershop for a quick shave. He settled for the shave; it was more important to show up looking presentable.

Luck was with him. He got the car started without any trouble, made it over to the barbershop. There was a vacant chair. Howard settled back in it, grateful for the hot towels that blotted out the sound of the radio and the sight of the autographed photos on the wall. Why was it that every damned barbershop in this town had to keep the radio blating at full volume, had to disfigure the wall with faded pictures of faded actors?

And why was it that barbers didn't have enough sense to keep their places clean?

Howard found himself flinging the sheet aside before the barber had finished applying aftershave lotion. "What's the matter with you guys—can't you even keep the lousy flies out of here?"

He hadn't meant to blow up, and come to think of it, there was only one fly, buzzing around the ceiling in Howard's range of vision as he lay tilted back in the chair.

But Howard didn't come to think of it until he was out of the shop, until the damage was done. The way that crummy barber had looked at him—

Oh, well, he wouldn't be going back there again anyway. There were plenty of other barbers around.

Not so many producers, though. At least not so many who wanted to make a deal with him. Howard

reminded himself of that as he wheeled up to the studio gate. He put a big smile on his face for the guard who directed him to parking-space, and an even bigger smile for Miss Rogers, the secretary in the outer office of Trebor Productions. But he saved the biggest smile for Joe Trebor.

That took a little doing. First of all, there was the damned half-hour wait in the outer office. Well, that was Trebor for you—an A-okay rat fink. Of course they were all alike, these producers. They all had the same routine. Set up an appointment, then postpone it. Set up another, give you the pressure; "How soon can you make it? Tomorrow morning? Good—ten o'clock sharp, in my office. I'll leave a pass at the gate for you."

So you showed up promptly at ten, carrying the briefcase and taking the best possible care of that extra-big smile so that it wouldn't crack around the edges. And then you sat there like a damned fool in the reception room, crossing and uncrossing your legs in the uncomfortable little chair, trying not to stare at the secretary as she kept putting calls through to the guy you were supposed to be seeing right now. Sometimes you even sat there while the charm boys finger-snapped their way in and out of the *sanctum sanctorum*; the sharp young agents, hair just a little too long over the back of the button-down collar, trousers just a little too tight in the seat, always a little bit ahead of you as they made their pitch, set their deal—for somebody else.

Howard got into Joe Trebor's office at 10:32. He stayed six minutes.

Three minutes later he was standing before a pay-phone in a glass booth, trying to dial Dr. Blanchard's number with a forefinger that wouldn't stop trembling, then interrupting the incoherency he poured into the mouthpiece to take a wild swipe at the insect that soared and swooped insanely within the confines of the phone-booth. "It's following me!" he shouted into the mouthpiece. "The damned thing's following me—"

"Do you want to talk about it now?" asked Dr. Blanchard quietly, as Howard sank back into the big, leather-covered chair. Scarcely another twenty minutes had elapsed, but Howard was not quite calm. And of course he wanted to talk about it.

That's why he'd called Blanchard, even though it wasn't his regular appointment-day, that's why he'd come running over here to the nice, quiet office where you could sit back and relax and nobody pressured you.

It wasn't like Joe Trebor's office—he was telling the Doctor about that now. About the phoney modern paintings on the walls and the big desk with the high executive-chair behind it and the low chair in front of it, the one you sat in. When you sat in that chair the producer looked down on you and you had to look up to him. You looked up over that bare desk which told you here was a man too important to waste his time on mere paper-work the way writers did. You looked at the intercom and the phone with the six extension-buttons which showed just how busy a producer was, and at the solid silver water carafe which showed just how wealthy he was. And you looked at the picture of the wife and kids, which was supposed to show you what a solid citizen he was, if you didn't happen to know the stories about the way he interviewed for feminine leads.

But you didn't look directly at Joe Trebor, because he was staring at you. Staring and waiting for you to come up with the story-line. You got the notes out of the briefcase and you started to read, all the while conscious that you were just wasting your time with a show-boat operator like this, a guy who kept interrupting to make Mickey Mouse suggestions for changes, a guy who didn't understand the values you were aiming for. All he knew was "story-line" and "How do you go out, what's the curtain, you need a tag here," and "Why don't you change it and play this scene exterior?" Typical fly-by-night producer.

And then the buzzing. The *buzzing*, just when you were trying to build, trying to sell, trying to nail him down. The *buzzing*, drowning out your voice.

And you looked up and saw the fly, perched on the stopper of the silver carafe. It was just squatting there, rubbing its tiny forelegs together, cleansing them. If you put those forelegs under a microscope you'd understand the need for cleansing, because they were covered with filth.

Then you looked at Joe Trebor who was smiling and shaking his head and saying, "Sorry, I don't quite see it. You haven't licked the story-line yet." And as he said it he rubbed his hands together because they were covered with filth, he'd walked through filth, he left a trail of filth wherever he went, and what right had he to buzz at you? And what right did he have to keep flies in his office to bug you when you were telling your story, your story that you'd sweated over for weeks in that lousy one-room apartment, like a furnace, with Anita slopping around in her dirty house-coat and whining why didn't you get up the bread?

And some of this you thought and some of it you must have said because Joe Trebor stood up and he got that look on his face and he was telling you something you couldn't quite hear because of the damned buzzing. So you smiled, holding your lips very tight, not wanting to admit you blew it, but you knew. And you split out and made the phone-call to the Doctor and there it was—the fly, the same fly, the little black thing with a million eyes that can see everything, everywhere, right in the booth with you now, buzzing and listening. It saw and it heard and it followed you, through all the filth in the world.

Howard knew Dr. Blanchard understood because he was nodding quietly, calm and relaxed, and there was nothing wrong with his eyes. They weren't like Anita's or the barber's or Joe Trebor's eyes, all accusing him of putting them on. And they weren't like the fly's eyes had been, either, watching and waiting. Dr. Blanchard really understood.

Now he was asking Howard all about it, when the fly had first appeared, how long ago he could remember being conscious of flies. He even knew that talking about such things made Howard a little nervous, because he was saying, "Don't be afraid. There are no flies here. Just go right ahead and say whatever comes to mind. You won't be interrupted by any buzzing——*buzzing—buzzinnnggg—*"

The buzzing. It was in the room. Howard heard it. He couldn't hear the Doctor's voice anymore because the buzzing was so loud. He couldn't even hear his own voice shouting, but he knew he was telling the Doctor, "You're wrong! It's here—it followed me! Can't you see?"

But of course Dr. Blanchard couldn't see, how could he see, when the fly, the black, buzzing fly, was sitting there and buzzing on top of his bald head?

And it buzzed and it stared, and the droning drilled through Howard's skull and the eyes lanced his brain, and he had to run, had to get out of there, had to get away, because they didn't believe him, nobody believed him, not even the Doctor could help him now—

Howard didn't stop running until he got to the car. He was panting when he climbed in, panting and wringing wet with perspiration. He could feel his heart pounding, but he forced himself to be calm. He *had* to be calm, very calm now, because he knew there was no one else to depend on. He'd have to do it all himself. The first thing was to check the car very thoroughly, including the back seat. And then, when he was quite sure nothing had gotten in, to lock the doors. Lock the doors and roll up the windows. It was hot inside the car, but he could stand the heat. He could stand anything but the buzzing and the stare.

He started the engine, pulled out. Calm, now. Keep calm. Drive carefully, right up to the freeway access. And edge out slowly. Get into the left lane and open up. Now. Drive fast. The faster you drive, the faster you get away from the buzzing and the staring. Keep it at seventy. A fly can't do seventy, can

it?

That is, if the fly is *real*.

Howard took a deep breath.

Suppose everyone else was right and he was wrong? And there was no fly, except in his own imagination? But it couldn't be; not in his imagination, the one tool, the one weapon, the one area a writer must protect. You can't open your imagination up to a buzzing beast, a creature that crawls through filth, you can't allow the invasion of an insect that incubates in your own insanity, an incarnation of your own personal devil, an evil that torments you incessantly. But if it *was* that way, then of course there was no escape. He couldn't drive fast enough, run far enough, to get away. And there was no hope for him at all.

Bzzzzzzz.

It was there, in the car. At least, he heard it. But the sound might be coming from inside his own shattering skull.

And now he saw it, fluttering against the windshield before him, just below the rear-view mirror. Or did he see it? Wasn't it just a fragment of inward vision? How could there be a real fly here in the car, with all the windows closed tight?

But he saw and he heard and it buzzed and it crawled, and his sweat poured and his heart thumped and his breath rasped and he knew it was real, it *had* to be real. And if it was, then this was his chance, his only chance, locked inside the car with it where it couldn't get away.

Howard shifted his foot from the gas-pedal to the brake. The car was hurtling down an incline but he knew he had it in control, everything was under control now. All he needed to do was swat the fly.

The creature had paused in its progress across the windshield so that it was poised directly before his line of vision. Howard could see it very clearly now, as his hand moved up. He almost laughed at himself as he stared, laughed at his absurd fantasies. Silly to think of demoniac possession by such a tiny, fragile insect; he could see every delicate veining and tracery of its fluttering wings as he leaned forward. For an instant he even stared into its eyes; its multi-faceted eyes, mirrors of myriad mysteries.

In that instant he knew.

But his hand was already swooping out, and all he could do was shriek as the car lurched and the culvert wall loomed—

When the squad-car came the fly was resting very quietly on Howard's eyeball.

Its eyes swivelled slowly as the red-necked patrolman bent over the body, pausing just long enough to sense the frustration, the suppressed anger, the seething tension behind the stolid face. Then it rose gracefully and buzzed around the patrolman's shoulders as he straightened. As the patrolman turned away, the fly followed.

The patrolman sighed. "Poor devil," he muttered.

It was, of course, an epitaph . . .

The Plot is the Thing

When they broke into the apartment, they found her sitting in front of the television set, watching an old movie.

Peggy couldn't understand why they made such a fuss about that. She liked to watch old movies—the Late Show, the Late, Late Show, even the All Night Show. That was really the best, because they generally ran the horror pictures. Peggy tried to explain this to them, but they kept prowling; around the apartment, looking at the dust on the furniture and the dirty sheets on the unmade bed. Somebody said there was green mould on the dishes in the sink; it's true she hadn't bothered to wash them for quite a long time, but then she simply hadn't bothered to eat for several days, either.

It wasn't as though she didn't have any money; she told them about the bank-accounts. But shopping and cooking and housekeeping was just too much trouble, and besides, she really didn't like going outside and seeing all those *people*. So if she preferred watching TV, that was her business wasn't it?

They just looked at each other and shook their heads and made some phone-calls. And then the ambulance came, and they, helped her dress. Helped her? They practically *forced* her, and by the time she realized where they were taking her it was too late.

At first they were very nice to her at the hospital, but they kept asking those idiotic questions. When she said she had no relatives or friends they wouldn't believe her, and when they checked and found out it was true it only made things worse. Peggy got angry and said she was going home, and it all ended with a hypo in the arm.

There were lots of hypos after that, in in-between times this Dr. Crane kept after her. He was one of the heads of staff and at first Peggy liked him, but not when he began to pry.

She tried to explain to him that she'd always been a loner, even before her parents died. And she told him there was no reason for her to work, with all that money. Somehow, he got it out of her about how she used to keep going to the movies, at least one every day, only she liked horror pictures and of course there weren't quite that many, so after while she just watched them on TV. Because it was easier, and you didn't have to go home along dark streets after seeing something frightening. At home she could lock herself in, and as long as she had the television going she didn't feel lonely. Besides, she could watch movies all night, and this helped her insomnia. Sometimes the old pictures were pretty gruesome and this made her nervous, but she felt more nervous when she didn't watch. Because in the movies, no matter how horrible things seemed for the heroine, she was always rescued in the end. And that was better than the way things generally worked out in real life, wasn't it?

Dr. Crane didn't think so. And he wouldn't let her have any television in her room now, either. He kept talking to Peggy about the need to face reality, and the dangers of retreating into a fantasy world and identifying with frightened heroines. The way he made it sound, you'd think she *wanted* to be menaced, *wanted* to be killed, or even raped.

And when he started all that nonsense about a "nervous disorder" and told her about his plans for treatment, Peggy knew she had to escape. Only she never got a chance. Before she realized it, they had arranged for the lobotomy.

Peggy knew what a lobotomy was, of course. And she was afraid of it, because it meant tampering with the brain. She remembered some mad doctor—Lionel Atwill, or George Zucco?—saying that by tampering with the secrets of the human brain one can change reality. "There are some things we were not meant to know," he had whispered. But that, of course, was in a movie. And Dr. Crane wasn't mad. *She* was the mad one. Or was she? He certainly looked insane—she kept trying to break free after they strapped her down and he came after her—she remembered the way everything gleamed. His eyes, and the long needle. The long needle, probing into her brain to change reality—

The funny thing was, when she woke up she felt fine. "I'm like a different person, Doctor."

And it was true. No more jitters; she was perfectly calm. And she wanted to eat, and she didn't have insomnia, and she could dress herself and talk to the nurses, even kid around with them. The big thing was that she didn't worry about watching television any more. She could scarcely remember any of those old movies that had disturbed her. Peggy wasn't a bit disturbed now. And even Dr. Crane knew it.

At the end of the second week he was willing to let her go home. They had a little chat, and he complimented her on how well she was doing, asked her about her plans for the future. When Peggy admitted she hadn't figured anything out yet, Dr. Crane suggested she take a trip. She promised to think it over.

But it wasn't until she got back to the apartment that Peggy made up her mind. The place was a mess. The moment she walked in she knew she couldn't stand it. All that dirt and grime and squalor—it was like a movie set, really, with clothes scattered everywhere and dishes piled in the sink. Peggy decided right then and there she'd take a vacation. Around the world, maybe. Why not? She had the money. And it would be interesting to see all the *real* things she'd seen represented on the screen all these years.

So Peggy dissolved into a travel agency and montaged into shopping and packing and faded out to London.

Strange, she didn't think of it in that way at the time. But looking back, she began to realize that this is the way things seemed to happen. She'd come to a decision, or go somewhere and do something, and all of a sudden she'd find herself in another setting—just like in a movie, where they cut from scene to scene. When she first became aware of it she was a little worried; perhaps she was having blackouts. After all, her brain *had* been tampered with. But there was nothing really alarming about the little mental blanks. In a way they were very convenient, just like in the movies; you don't particularly want to waste time watching the heroine brush her teeth or pack her clothing or put on cosmetics. The plot is the thing. That's what's *real*.

And everything was real, now. No more uncertainty. Peggy could admit to herself that before the operation there had been times when she wasn't quite sure about things; sometimes what she saw on the screen was more convincing than the dull gray fog which seemed to surround her in daily life.

But that was gone, now. Whatever that needle had done, it had managed to pierce the fog. Everything was very clear, very sharp and definite, like good black-and-white camera work. And she herself felt so much more capable and confident. She was well-dressed, well-groomed, attractive again. The extras moved along the streets in an orderly fashion and didn't bother her. And the bit-players spoke their lines crisply, performed their functions, and got out of the scene. Odd that she should think of them that way—they weren't "bit-players" at all; just travel clerks and waiters and stewards and then, at the hotel, bellboys and maids. They seemed to fade in and out of the picture on cue. All smiles, like in the early part of a good horror movie, where at first everything seems bright and cheerful.

Paris was where things started to go wrong. This guide—a sort of Eduardo Ciannelli type, in fact he

looked to be an almost dead ringer for Ciannelli as he was many years ago—was showing her through the Opera House. He happened to mention something about the catacombs, and that rang a bell.

She thought about Erik. That was his name, Erik— The Phantom of the Opera. *He* had lived in the catacombs underneath the Opera House. Of course, it was only a picture, but she thought perhaps the guide would know about it and she mentioned Erik's name as a sort of joke.

That's when the guide turned pale and began to tremble. And then he ran. Just ran off and left her standing there.

Peggy knew something was wrong, then. The scene just seemed to dissolve—that part didn't worry her, it was just another one of those temporary blackouts she was getting used to—and when Peggy regained awareness, she was in this bookstore asking a clerk about Gaston Leroux.

And this was what frightened her. She remembered distinctly that *The Phantom of the Opera* had been written by Gaston Leroux, but here was this French bookstore clerk telling her there was no such author.

That's what they said when she called the library. No such author—and no such book. Peggy opened her mouth, but the scene was already dissolving . . .

In Germany she rented a car, and she was enjoying the scenery when she came to this burned mill and the ruins of the castle beyond. She knew where she was, of course, but it couldn't be—not until she got out of the car, moved up to the great door, and in the waning sun of twilight, read the engraved legend on the stone. *Frankenstein*.

There was a faint sound from behind the door, a sound of muffled, dragging footsteps, moving closer. Peggy screamed, and ran . . .

Now she knew where she was running to. Perhaps she'd find safety behind the Iron Curtain. Instead there was another castle, and she heard the howling of a wolf in the distance, saw the bat swoop from the shadows as she fled.

And in an English library in Prague, Peggy searched the volumes of literary biography. There was no listing for Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, none for Bram Stoker.

Of course not. There wouldn't be, in a *movie* world, because when the characters are real, their "authors" do not exist.

Peggy remembered the way Larry Talbot had changed before her eyes, metamorphosing into the howling wolf. She remembered the sly purr of the Count's voice, saying, "I do not drink—wine." And she shuddered, and longed to be far away from the superstitious peasantry who draped wolfbane outside their windows at night

She needed the reassurance of sanity in an English-speaking country. She'd go to London, see a doctor immediately.

Then she remembered what was *in* London. Another werewolf. And Mr. Hyde. And the Ripper . . .

Peggy fled through a fadeout, back to Paris. She found the name of a psychiatrist, made her appointment. She was perfectly prepared to face her problem now, perfectly prepared to face reality.

But she was not prepared to face the bald-headed little man with the sinister accent and the bulging eyes. She knew him—Dr. Gogol, in *Mad Love*. She also knew Peter Lorre had passed on, knew *Mad*

Love was only a movie, made the year she was born. But that was in another country, and besides, the wench was dead.

The wench was dead, but Peggy was alive. "*I am a stranger and afraid, in a world I never made.*" Or had she made this world? She wasn't sure. All she knew was that she had to escape.

Where? It couldn't be Egypt, because that's where *he* would be—the wrinkled, hideous image of the Mummy superimposed itself momentarily. The Orient? What about Fu Manchu?

Back to America, then? Home is where the heart is—but there'd be a knife waiting for that heart when the shower-curtains were ripped aside and the creature of *Psycho* screamed and slashed . . .

Somehow she managed to remember a haven, born in other films. The South Seas—Dorothy Lamour, Jon Hall, the friendly natives in the tropical paradise. There *was* escape.

Peggy boarded the ship in Marseilles. It was a tramp steamer but the cast—crew, rather—was reassuringly small. At first she spent most of her time below deck, huddled in her berth. Oddly enough, it was getting to be like it had been *before*. Before the operation, that is, before the needle bit into her brain, twisting it, or distorting the world. *Changing reality*, as Lionel Atwill had put it. She should have listened to them—Atwill, Zucco, Basil Rathbone, Edward Van Sloan, John Carradine. They may have been a little mad, but they were good doctors, dedicated scientists. They meant well. "There are some things we were not meant to know."

When they reached the tropics, Peggy felt much better. She regained her appetite, prowled the deck, went into the galley and joked with the Chinese cook. The crew seemed aloof, but they all treated her with the greatest respect. She began to realize she'd done the right thing—this *was* escape. And the warm scent of tropic nights beguiled her. From now on, this would be her life; drifting through nameless, uncharted seas, safe from the role of heroine with all its haunting and horror.

It was hard to believe she'd been so frightened. There were no Phantoms, no Werewolves in this world. Perhaps she didn't need a doctor. She was facing reality, and it was pleasant enough. There were no movies here, no television; her fears were all part of a long-forgotten nightmare.

One evening, after dinner, Peggy returned to her cabin with something nagging at the back of her brain. The Captain had put in one of his infrequent appearances at the table, and he kept looking at her all through the meal. Something about the way he squinted at her was disturbing. Those little pig-eyes of his reminded her of someone. Noah Beery? Stanley Fields?

She kept trying to remember, and at the same time she was dozing off. Dozing off much too quickly. Had her food been drugged?

Peggy tried to sit up. Through the porthole she caught a reeling glimpse of land beyond, but then everything began to whirl and it was too late . . .

When she awoke she was already on the island, and the woolly-headed savages were dragging her through the gate, howling and waving their spears.

They tied her and left her and then Peggy heard the chanting. She looked up and saw the huge shadow. Then she knew where she was and what *it* was, and she screamed.

Even over her own screams she could hear the natives chanting, just one word, over and over again. It sounded like, "Kong."

How Like a God

To be was sweet.

There was meditation—a turning-in upon oneself. There was contemplation—a turning-out to regard others, and otherness.

In meditation one remained contained. In contemplation there was a merging, a coalescence with the rest.

Mok preferred meditation. Here Mok enjoyed identity and was conscious of being *he*, *she*, or *it*, endlessly repeated through the memory of millenniums of incarnations. Mok, like the others, had evolved through many life-forms on many worlds. Now Mok was free of the pain and free of the pleasure, too; free of the illusions of the senses which had served the bodies housing the beings which finally became Mok.

And yet, Mok was not wholly free. Because Mok still turned to the memories for satisfaction.

The others preferred contemplation. They enjoyed coalescing, mingling their memories, pooling their awareness, and sharing their sense of being.

Mok could never share completely. Mok was too conscious of the differences. For even without body, without sex, without physical limitation imposed by substance in time and space, Mok was aware of inequality.

Mok was aware of Ser.

Ser was the mightiest of them all. In coalescence, Ser's being dominated every pattern of contemplation. Ser's will imposed harmony on the others, but only if the others surrendered to it.

To *be* was sweet. But it was not sweet enough.

Upon this, Mok meditated. And when coalescence came again, Mok did not surrender. Mok fixed firmly upon the concept of freedom—freedom of choice, the final freedom which Ser denied.

There was agitation amongst the others; Mok sensed it. Some attempted to merge with Mok, for they too shared the concept, and Mok opened to receive them, feeling the strength grow. Mok was as strong as Ser now, stronger, calling upon the will and purpose born of memories of millions of finite existences in which will and purpose were the roots of survival. But that survival had been temporary, and this would be permanent, forever.

Mok held the concept, gathered the strength, firmed the purpose—and then, quite suddenly, the purpose faded. The strength oozed away. The others were gone; nothing was left but Mok and the concept itself. The concept to—

Mok couldn't grasp the concept now. It had vanished.

All that remained was Mok and Ser. Ser's will, obliterating concept and purpose and strength,

imposing itself upon Mok, invading and inundating Mok's awareness. Mok's very *being*. But without concept there was no purpose, without purpose there was no strength, without strength Mok could not preserve awareness, and without awareness there was no *being*.

Without being there was no Mok . . .

When Mok's identity returned he was already in the ship.

Ship?

Only memories of distant incarnations told Mok this was a ship, but it was unmistakably so. A ship, a vessel, a transporter; a physical object, capable of physical movement through space and time.

Space and time existed again, and the ship moved through them. The ship was confined in space and time, and Mok was confined in the ship, which was just large enough to house him as he journeyed.

Yes, *he*.

Mok was *he*. Confined now, not only in the prison of space and time, nor in the smaller prison of the ship, but in the prison of a body. A male body.

Male. Mammalian. A spine to support the frame, arms and legs to support and grasp, eyes and ears and nose and other crude sensory receivers. Flesh, blood, skin—yellowish fur covering the latter, even along the lashing tail. Lungs for oxygen intake, which at the moment was supplied by an ingenious transparent helmet and attached pack mechanism.

Ingenious? But this was clumsy, crude, primitive, a relic of remote barbaric eras Mok could only vaguely recall. He tried to meditate, tried to contemplate, but now he could only *see*—see through the transparency of the helmet as the ship settled to rest and its belly opened to catapult him forth upon the frigid surface of a barren planet where a cold moon wheeled against the icy glitter of distant stars.

The ship, too, had a form—a body that was in itself vaguely modelled on mammalian concept, almost like one of those giant robots developed by life-forms in intermediate stages of evolution.

Mok stared at the ship as it rested before him on the sterile, starlit slope. Yes, the ship had a domed cranial protuberance and two metal arms terminating in claws. Claws to open the belly of the ship, claws that had lifted Mok's body forth to disgorge him from that belly in a parody of birth.

Now, as Mok watched, the ship's belly was closing again, sealing tightly while the metallic claws returned to rest at its sides. And flames of force were blasting from the pediment.

The ship was rising, taking off.

Mok had been embodied in the confines of the ship, imprisoned in this, his present form. The ship had carried him to this world and now it was leaving him here. Which meant that the ship must be—

"*Ser!*" he screamed, as the realization came, and the sound of his voice echoing in the hollow helmet almost split his skull.

But Ser did not answer. The ship continued to rise, the rising accelerated, there was a roar and a glimmer and then an incandescence which faded to nothingness against the black backdrop of emptiness punctured by glittering pinpoints of light flickering down upon the world into which Mok had been born.

The world where Ser had left him to die . . .

Mok turned away. His body burned. *Burned?* Mok searched archaic memories and came up with another concept. He wasn't burning. He was freezing. This was *cold*.

The surface of the planet was cold, and his skin—*fur?*—did not sufficiently protect him. Mok took a deep breath, and that in turn brought consciousness of the inner mechanism; circulation, nervous system, lungs. Lungs for breath, supplying the fuel of life.

The feeder-pack on his back was small; its content, scarcely enough to fill his needs on the flight here, would soon be exhausted.

Was there oxygen on the surface of this planet? Mok glanced around. The rocky terrain was devoid of any sign of vegetation and that wasn't a promising sign. But perhaps the entire surface wasn't like this; in other areas at lower levels, plant-life might flourish. If so, functioning existence could be sustained.

There was only one way to learn. Mok's prehensile appendages—not exactly claws, not quite fingers—rumbled clumsily with the fastenings of the helmet and raised it gingerly. He took a shallow breath, then another. Yes, there was oxygen present.

Satisfied, Mok removed helmet and pack, along with the control-mechanism strapped to his side. There'd be no further need of this apparatus here.

What he needed now was warmth, a heated atmosphere.

He glanced towards the bleak, black bulk of the crags looming across the barren plain. He moved towards them slowly, under the silent, staring stars, toiling up a slope as a sudden wind tore at his shivering body. It was awkward, this body of his, a clumsy mechanism subject to crude muscular control; only atavism came to his aid as half-perceived memories of ancient physical existence enabled him to move his legs with proper coordination. Walking—climbing—then crawling and clinging to the rocks—all was demanding, difficult, a challenge to be met and mastered.

But Mok ascended the face of the nearest cliff and found the opening; a crevasse with an inner fissure that became the mouth of a cave. A dark shelter from the wind, but it was warmer here. And the rocky floor sloped down into deeper darkness. The pupils of his eyes accommodated, and he could guide himself in the dim tunnelway, for his vision was that of a feral nyctalops.

Mok crept through caverns like a giant cat, gusts of warm air billowing against his body to beckon him forward. Forward and down, forward and down. And now the heat rose about him in palpable waves, the air was singed with an acrid scent, and there was a glowing from a light-source ahead. Forward and down towards the light-source, until he heard the hissing and the rumbling, felt the scalding steam, breathed the lung-searing gases, saw the spurting flames in which steam and gas were born.

The inner core of the planet was molten. Mok went no further; he turned and retreated to a comfortable distance, moving into a side-passageway which led to still other offshoots. Here tortuous tunnels branched in all directions, but he was safe in warmth and darkness; safe to rest. His body—this corporeal prison in which he was doomed to dwell—needed rest.

Rest was not sleep. Rest was not hibernation, or estivation, or any of a thousand forms of suspended animation which Mok's memory summoned from myriad incarnations in the past. Rest was merely passivity. Passivity and reflection.

Reflection . . .

Images mingled with long-discarded verbal concepts. With their aid, while passive, Mok formulated his situation. He was in the body of a beast, but there were subtle differentiations from the true mammal. Oxygen was needed, but not the respite of true sleep. And he felt no visceral stirrings, no pangs of physical hunger. He would not be dependent, he knew, upon the ingestion of alien substance for continued survival. As long as he protected his fleshly envelope from extremes of heat and cold, as long as he avoided excessive demands upon muscles and organs, he would exist. But despite the differences which distinguished him from a true mammal, he was still confined in this feral form. And his existence was bestial.

Sensation surged within him, a flood of feeling Mok had not experienced in aeons; a quickening, sickening, burning, churning evocation of emotion. He knew it now. It was fear.

Fear.

The true bondage of the beast.

Mok was afraid, because now he understood that this was planned, this was part of Ser's purpose. Ser had committed him to this degradation, and modified his mammalian aspect so that he could exist eternally.

That was what Mok feared. Eternity in *this* form!

Passive no longer, Mok flexed and rose. Summoning cognition to utmost capacity, Mok searched within himself for other, inherent powers. The power to merge, to coalesce—that was gone. The power to transmute, to transfer, to transport, to transform—gone. He could not change his physical being, could not alter his physical environment, save by physical means of his own devising. Within the limitations of his beast's body.

So there was no escape from this existence.

No escape.

The realization brought fresh fear, and Mok turned and ran. Ran blindly through the twisting corridors, fear riding him as he raced, raced mindlessly, endlessly.

Somewhere along the way a tunnel burrowed upwards. Mok toiled through it, panting and gasping for breath; he willed himself to stop breathing but the body, the beast-body, sucked air in greedy gulps, autonomically functioning beyond his conscious control.

Scrambling along slanted spirals, Mok emerged once more upon the outer surface of his planetary prison. This was a low-lying area, distant and different from his point of entry, with vegetation vividly verdant against a dazzling dawn. A valley, capable of supporting life.

And there was life here; feathery forms chattering in the trees, furry figures scurrying through undergrowth, scaly slitherers, chitinoïdal burrowers buzzing. These were simple shapes, crudely-conceived creatures of primitive pursuits, but alive and aware.

Mok sensed them and they sensed Mok. There was no way of communicating with them except vocally, but even the soft sounds issuing from his throat sent them fleeing frantically. For Mok was a beast now, who feared and was feared.

He crouched amongst the rocks at the mouth of the cavern from which he had come forth and gazed

in helpless, hopeless confusion at the panic his presence had provoked, and the soft sounds he uttered gave place to a growling groan of despair.

And it was then that they found him—the hairy bipeds, moving cautiously to encircle him until he was ringed by a shambling band. These were troglodites, grunting and snuffling and giving off an acrid stench of mingled fear and rage as they cautiously approached.

Mok stared at them, noting how the hunched, swaying figures moved in concert to approach him. They clutched crude clubs, mere branches torn from trees; some carried rocks scooped up from the surface of the slope. But these were weapons, capable of inflicting injury, and the hairy creatures were hunters seeking their prey.

Mok turned to retreat into the cavern, but the way was barred now by shaggy bodies, and there was no escape.

The troglodites pressed forward now, awe and apprehension giving place to anger. Yellow fangs bared, hairy arms raised. One of the creatures—the leader of the pack—grunted what seemed a signal.

And they hurled their rocks.

Mok raised his arms to protect his head. His vision was blocked, so that he heard the sound of the stones clattering against the slope before he saw them fall. Then, as the growls and shrieks rose to a frenzy, Mok glanced up to see the rocks rebounding upon his attackers.

Raging, they closed in to smash at Mok's skull and body with their clubs. Mok heard the sounds of impact, but he felt nothing, for the blows never reached their intended target—instead, the clubs splintered and broke in empty air.

Then Mok whirled, confused, to face his enemies. As he did so they recoiled, screaming in fright. Breaking the circle, they retreated down the slopes and into the forest, fleeing from this strange thing that could not be harmed or killed, this invincible entity—

This invincible entity.

It was Mok's concept, and he understood, now. Ser had granted him that final irony—invincibility. A field of force, surrounding his body, rendering him immune to injury and death. No doubt it also immunized him from bacterial invasion. He was in a physical form, but one independent of physical needs to sustain survival; one which would exist, indestructibly, forever. He was, in truth, imprisoned, and eternal.

For a moment Mok stood stunned at the comprehension, blankly blinded by the almost tangible intensity of black despair. Here was the ultimate horror—doom without death, exile without end, isolation throughout infinity. *Alone forever.*

Numbed senses reasserted their sway and Mok glanced around the empty stillness of the slope.

It wasn't entirely empty. Two of the trogloditic creatures sprawled motionless on the rocks directly below him. One was bleeding from a gash in the side of the head, inflicted by a rebounding club; the other had been felled by a glancing blow from a stone.

These creatures weren't immortal.

Mok moved towards them, noting chest-movement, the soft susurrations of breath.

They weren't immortal, but they were still alive. Alive and helpless. Vulnerable, at his mercy.

Mercy. The quality Ser had refused to show Mok. There had been no mercy in condemning him to spend eternity here alone.

Mok halted, peering down at the two unconscious forms. He made a sound in his throat; a sound curiously like a chuckle.

Perhaps there was a way out, after all; a way to at least mitigate his sentence here. If *he* showed mercy now, to these creatures—he might not always be alone.

Mok reached down, lifting the body of the first creature in his arms; it was heavy in its limpness, but Mok's strength was great. He picked up the second creature carefully, so as not to injure it further.

Then, still chuckling, Mok turned and carried the two unconscious forms back into the cavern.

3

In the warm, firelit shelter of the deeper caverns, Mok tended to the creatures. While they slumbered fitfully, he ascended again to the surface and foraged for their nourishment in the green glades. He brought food, and calling upon distant memories, fashioned crude clay pots in which to carry water to them from a mountainside spring.

After a time they regained consciousness and they were afraid—afraid of the great beast with the bulging eyes and lashing tail, the beast they knew to be deathless.

It was simple enough for Mok to fathom the crude construct of growls and gruntings which served these life-forms as a principal means of communication, simple enough to grasp the limited concepts and references symbolized in their speech. Within these limitations he attempted to tell them who and what he was and how he had come to be here, but while they listened they did not comprehend.

And still they feared him, the female specimen more than the male. The male, at least, evinced curiosity concerning the clay pots, and Mok demonstrated the fashioning method until the male was able to imitate it successfully.

But both were wary, and both reacted in terror when confronted with the molten reaches of the planet's inner core. Nor could they become accustomed to the acrid gases, the darkness enveloping the maze of far-flung fissures honeycombing the substrata. As they gathered strength over the passage of time, they huddled together and murmured, eyeing Mok apprehensively.

Mok was not too surprised when, upon returning from one of his food-gathering expeditions to the surface, he discovered that they were gone.

But Mok *was* surprised by the strength of his own reaction—the sudden responsive surge of *loneliness*.

Loneliness—for those creatures? They couldn't conceivably serve as companions, even on the lowest level of such a relationship; and yet he missed their presence. Their mere presence had in itself been some assuagement to his own inner agony of isolation.

Now he realized a growing sympathy for them in the helplessness of their abysmal ignorance. Even their destructive impulses incited pity, for such impulses indicated their constant fear. Beings such as these lived out their tiny span in utter dread; they trusted neither their environment nor one another, and each

new experience or phenomenon was perceived as a potential peril. They had no hope, no abstract image of the future to sustain them.

Mok wondered if his two captives had succeeded in their escape. He prowled the passages searching for them, visioning their weary wanderings, their pathetic plight if they had become lost in the underground fastnesses. But he found nothing.

Once again he was alone in the warm darkness, alone in the warm beast-body that knew neither fatigue nor pain—except for this new pang, this lonely longing for contact with life on any level. Ancient concepts came to him, identifying the nuances of his reactions, all likened and linked to finite time-spans. *Monotony. Boredom. Restlessness.*

These were the emotive elements which forced him up again from the confined comfort of the caves. He prowled the planet, avoiding the bleak, cold wastes and searching out the areas of lush vegetation. For a long period he encountered only the lowest life-forms.

Then one of his diurnal forays to the surface brought him to a stream, and as he crouched behind a clump of vegetation he peered at a group of troglodites gathered on its far bank.

Vocalizing in their pattern of growls and grunts, he ventured forth, uttering phonic placations. But they screamed at the sight of him, screamed and fled into the forest, and he was left alone.

Left alone, to stoop and pick up what they had abandoned in their flight—*two crude clay containers, half-filled with water.*

Now he knew the fate of his captives.

They had survived and returned to their own kind, bringing with them their newly acquired skill. What tales they had told of their experience he could not surmise, but they remembered what he had taught them. They were capable of learning.

Mok had no need of further proof, and the incentive was there; the compound of pity, of concern for these creatures, of his own need for contact on any level. And here was a logical level indeed—there would never be companionship, that he understood and accepted, but this other relationship was possible. The relationship between teacher and pupil, between mentor and supplicant, between the governing power and the governed.

The governing power . . .

Mok turned the clay containers this way and that, noting the clumsiness with which they had been fashioned, noting the irregularities of their surface. He could so easily correct that clumsiness, he could so surely smooth and reshape that clay. Govern the earth, govern the creatures, impart and instruct that which would shape them anew.

And then the ultimate realization came.

This would be duty and destiny, function and fulfillment. Within the prison of space and time, he would mould the little lives.

Now he knew his own fate.

He would be their god.

It was a strange role, but Mok played it well.

There were obstacles, of course; the first to be faced was the fear in which they held him. He was an alien, and to the primitive minds of these creatures, anything alien was abhorrent. His very appearance provoked reactions which prevented him from approaching them, and for a time Mok despaired of overcoming this communication-barrier. Then, slowly, he came to realize that their fear was in itself a tool he could employ to positive ends; with it he could invoke awe, authority, awareness of his powers.

Yes, that was the way. To accept his condition and stay apart from them always, confident that in time their own curiosity would drive them to seek him out.

So Mok kept to the caves, and gradually the contacts were made. Not all of the hominids came to him, of course, only the boldest and most enterprising, but these were the ones he awaited. These were the ones most fitted to learn; to dream, to dare, to do.

As he expected, the experience of his captives became a legend and the legend led to worship. It was useless for Mok to discourage this, impossible even to make the attempt; in the light of their primitive reasoning, a barter-system must prevail—offerings and sacrifices were the price they must pay in return for wisdom. Mok scanned his own primordial memories, assigning an order to the learning he imparted; the gift of fire, the secret of cultivation, the firing of clay, the shaping of weapons, the subjugation and domestication of lesser life-forms, the control and eradication of others. Slowly a more sophisticated system of communication evolved, first on the verbal and then on the visual level.

The creatures disseminated his wisdom, absorbing it into their crude culture. They learned the uses of wheel and lever, then reached the gradual abstraction of the numeral concept. Now they were capable of making their own independent discoveries; language and mathematics stimulated self-development.

But in times of crisis there was still a need for further enlightenment. Natural forces beyond their limited powers of control brought periodic disaster to life-patterns on the surface of the planet, and with every upheaval came a resurgence of the worship and sacrifices Mok secretly abhorred. Yet these creatures seemed to feel the necessity of making recompense for the skills he could grant them and the boons these skills conferred, and Mok reluctantly accepted this.

It was harder for him to accept the continuation of their fear.

For a time he hoped that as their enlightenment increased they would revise their attitudes; instead, their dread actually increased. Mok attempted to observe their progress at first hand, but there was no opportunity for open contact and communication and his mere appearance provoked panic. Even those who sought him in secret, or led the rituals of worship, seemed to be afraid of acknowledging the fact, lest it lessen their own superior status within the group. Acknowledging and acclaiming the existence of their god, they nevertheless avoided his physical presence.

Perhaps it was because sects and schisms had sprung up, each with its own hierarchy, its own dogma regarding the true nature of what they worshipped. Mok remembered, wryly, that in organized religion the actual presence of a god is an embarrassment.

So Mok refrained from further visitations, and as time passed he retreated deeper and deeper into the caverns. Now it was almost unnecessary for him to maintain even token contact, for these creatures had evolved to a stage where they were capable of self-development.

But even gods grow lonely, and take nurture in pride. Thus it was that at rare intervals, and in utmost

secrecy, Mok ventured forth for a hasty glimpse of his domain.

One evening he came forth upon a mountain-top. Here the stars still glittered coldly, but there was an even greater glitter emanating from the expanse below—the huge city-complex towering as a testament to the wisdom of these creatures, and his own.

Mok stared down and the sweet surges of pride coursed through him as he contemplated what he had wrought. These toys, these trifles with which he played, now toyed and trifled with the prime forces of the universe to create their own destiny.

Perhaps he, as their god, was misunderstood, even forgotten now—but did it matter? They had achieved independence, they didn't need him anymore.

Or did they?

The concept came, and it was more chilling to Mok than the wind of mountain night.

These creatures created, but they also destroyed. And their motivations—their greeds, their hungers, their lusts, their fears—were still those of the beasts they had been. The beasts they could become again, if spiritual awareness did not keep pace with material attainment.

There was still need here, a need greater than before—and now Mok felt no pride, only a perplexity which pierced more poignantly than pain.

How could he help them?

"You cannot."

The communication came and Mok whirled.

Absorbed, he had not sensed the silent streaking of the ship from sky to surface, but it was here now, remembered and recognized. The ship which had captured and conveyed him, the strangely-shaped ship which *was* Ser—or at least the present avatar of Ser's essence.

It hovered incandescently against the horizon of infinity, and as if communication had been a signal, Mok found himself caught up in a long-discarded reaction. He was *contemplating* Ser.

And in that colloquy, Ser's concepts flowed to him.

"Valid. You cannot fulfill their needs. Already you have done too much."

Despite conscious volition, Mok felt the stubborn resurgence of his pride. But there was no need to formulate the reasons, for Ser's contemplation was complete.

"You are in error. I sensed your rebellion, overcame you, brought you here—but it was not a punishment. You were placed for a purpose. Because this pride, this urge to invest identity through achievement, could be of use at this time, in this place. Like the others—"

"Others?" Confusion colored Mok's contemplation.

"Did you conceive of yourself as the only rebel? Not so—there have been more, many more. And they have served their purposes on other worlds throughout the cosmos. Worlds where the seeds of life needed cultivation and careful nurturing. I chose them for their tasks, just as I chose you. And you have not failed."

Mok considered, then communicated with an urgency which surprised him with its sheer intensity.

"Then let me continue! Endow me with what is necessary to help them now!"

Ser's concept came. "It is not possible."

Mok contemplated in final effort. "But it is my right to do so. I am their god."

"No," Ser answered. "You have never been their god. You were chosen for what you were—to be their devil."

Devil . . .

There was no contemplation now, only maddening meditation as Mok scanned through concepts long-discarded from incarnations long-lost save in immutable memory. Concepts of *good, evil, right, wrong*—concepts embodied in the primitive religions of a million primitive pasts. God arose from those concepts, and so did the embodiment of an opposing force. And in all the legends in each of the myriad myths, the pattern was the same. A rebel cast down from the skies to tempt with teaching, to furnish forbidden knowledge at a price. A being in the form of a beast, skulking in darkness, in the pit where inner fires flamed forever. And he had been this being, it was true, he was a devil.

Only pride had blinded him to the truth; the pride which had prompted him to play god.

"A pride of which you have been purged," Ser's communication continued. "One can sense in you now only mercy and compassion for these creatures and their potential peril. One can sense love."

"It is true," Mok acknowledged. "I feel love for them."

Ser's assent came. "With your aid, these creatures evolved. But you have evolved too—losing pride, gaining love. In so doing, you cannot function for them as their devil any longer. Your usefulness here is ended."

"But what will happen—?"

The answer came not as a concept but as an accomplishment.

Suddenly Mok was no longer in the tawny body of the beast. He was in the ship, hovering and gazing down at that body; gazing down at the creature which lashed its tail and stared up at him with bulging eyes. The creature which now contained the essence of Ser.

And Ser communicated. "For a span you shall take my place, as you once desired. You will seed the stars, instill order in chaos, lead the others in contemplation. You will do so in understanding, and in love."

"And you?" Mok asked.

The being in the bestial body formed a final concept. "I take your role and your responsibility. There is that within me which must also be purged, and it may be I will destroy much of what you have created here. But in the end, even as their devil, I may bring them to an ultimate salvation. The cycle changes."

The cycle changes . . .

Mok willed the celestial machine in which his essence dwelt, willed it to rise, and like a fiery chariot it ascended to the realms of glory awaiting him in the skies beyond.

As he did so, he caught a fleeting glimpse of Ser.

The beast had turned to descend the mountain. Padding purposefully, the devil was entering his kingdom.

Mok's comprehension faltered. *Cycle?* Ser had been a god and now he was a devil. Mok had been a devil and now he was a god. But he could never have become a god if Ser hadn't willed the exchange of roles.

Was this Ser's intent all along—to allow Mok to evolve as devil and then usurp his identity?

In that case, Ser was actually a devil from the beginning, and Mok had been right in opposing him, for Mok was truly godlike.

Or were they all—Mok, Ser, the others, even the primitive mammalian creatures on this planet—both gods *and* devils?

It was a matter, Mok decided, which might require an eternity of contemplation . . .

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The Movie People

Two thousand stars.

Two thousand stars, maybe more, set in the sidewalks along Hollywood Boulevard, each metal slab inscribed with the name of someone in the movie industry. They go way back, those names; from Broncho Billy Anderson to Adolph Zukor, everybody's there.

Everybody but Jimmy Rogers.

You won't find Jimmy's name because he wasn't a star, not even a bit-player—just an extra.

"But I deserve it," he told me. "I'm entitled, if anybody is. Started out here in 1920 when I was just a punk kid. You look close, you'll spot me in the crowd shots in *The Mark of Zorro*. Been in over 450 pictures since, and still going strong. Ain't many left who can beat that record. You'd think it would entitle a fella to something."

Maybe it did, but there was no star for Jimmy Rogers, and that bit about still going strong was just a crock. Nowadays Jimmy was lucky if he got a casting-call once or twice a year; there just isn't any spot for an old-timer with a white muff except in a Western barroom scene.

Most of the time Jimmy just strolled the Boulevard; a tall, soldierly-erect incongruity in the crowd of tourists, fags, and freak-outs. His home address was on Las Palmas, somewhere south of Sunset. I'd never been there but I could guess what it was—one of those old frame bungalow-court sweatboxes put up about the time he crashed the movies and still standing somehow by the grace of God and the disgrace of the housing authorities. That's the sort of place Jimmy stayed at, but he didn't really *live* there.

Jimmy Rogers lived at the Silent Movie.

The Silent Movie is over on Fairfax, and it's the only place in town where you can still go and see *The Mark of Zorro*. There's always a Chaplin comedy, and usually Laurel and Hardy, along with a serial starring Pearl White, Elmo Lincoln, or Houdini. And the features are great—early Griffith and De Mille, Barrymore in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Lon Chaney in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Valentino in *Blood and Sand*, and a hundred more.

The bill changes every Wednesday, and every Wednesday night Jimmy Rogers was there, plunking down his ninety cents at the box-office to watch *The Black Pirate* or *Son of the Sheik* or *Orphans of the Storm*.

To live again.

Because Jimmy didn't go there to see Doug and Mary or Rudy or Clara or Gloria or the Gish sisters. He went there to see himself, in the crowd shots.

At least that's the way I figured it, the first time I met him. They were playing *The Phantom of the Opera* that night and afterwards I spent the intermission with a cigarette outside the theatre, studying the display of stills.

If you asked me under oath, I couldn't tell you how our conversation started, but that's where I first heard Jimmy's routine about the 450 pictures and still going strong.

"Did you see me in there tonight?" he asked.

I stared at him and shook my head; even with the shabby hand-me-down suit and the white beard, Jimmy Rogers wasn't the kind you'd spot in an audience.

"Guess it was too dark for me to notice," I said.

"But there were torches," Jimmy told me. "I carried one."

Then I got the message. He was in the picture.

Jimmy smiled and shrugged. "Hell, I keep forgetting. You wouldn't recognize me. We did *The Phantom* way back in '25. I looked so young they slapped a mustache on me in *Make-up*, and a black wig. Hard to spot me in the catacombs scenes—all long-shots. But there at the end, where Chaney is holding back the mob, I show up pretty good in the background, just left of Charley Zimmer. He's the one shaking his fist. I'm waving my torch. Had a lot of trouble with that picture, but we did this shot in one take."

In weeks to come I saw more of Jimmy Rogers. Sometimes he was up there on the screen, though truth to tell, I never did recognize him; he was a young man in those films of the Twenties, and his appearances were limited to a flickering flash, a blurred face glimpsed in a crowd.

But always Jimmy was in the audience, even though he hadn't played in the picture. And one night I found out why.

Again it was intermission time and we were standing outside. By now Jimmy had gotten into the habit of talking to me and tonight we'd been seated together during the showing of *The Covered Wagon*.

We stood outside and Jimmy blinked at me. "Wasn't she beautiful?" he asked. "They don't look like that anymore."

I nodded. "Lois Wilson? Very attractive."

"I'm talking about June."

I stared at Jimmy and then I realized he wasn't blinking. He was crying.

"June Logan. My girl. This was her first bit, the Indian attack scene. Must have been seventeen—I didn't know her then, it was two years later we met over at First National. But you must have noticed her. She was the one with the long blond curls."

"Oh, *that* one." I nodded again. "You're right. She was lovely."

And I was a liar, because I didn't remember seeing her at all, but I wanted to make the old man feel good.

"Junie's in a lot of the pictures they show here. And from '25 on, we played in a flock of 'em together. For a while we talked about getting hitched, but she started working her way up, doing bits—maids and such—and I never broke out of extra work. Both of us had been in the business long enough to know it was no go, not when one of you stays small and the other is headed for a big career."

Jimmy managed a grin as he wiped his eyes with something which might once have been a handkerchief. "You think I'm kidding, don't you? About the career, I mean. But she was going great, she would have been playing second leads pretty soon."

"What happened?" I asked.

The grin dissolved and the blinking returned. "Sound killed her."

"She didn't have a voice for talkies?"

Jimmy shook his head. "She had a great voice. I told you she was all set for second leads—by 1930 she'd been in a dozen talkies. Then sound killed her."

I'd heard the expression a thousand times, but never like this. Because the way Jimmy told the story, that's exactly what had happened. June Logan, his girl Junie, was on the set during the shooting of one of those early *All Talking—All Singing—All Dancing* epics. The director and camera crew, seeking to break away from the tyranny of the stationary microphone, rigged up one of the first travelling mikes on a boom. Such items weren't standard equipment yet, and this was an experiment. Somehow, during a take, it broke loose and the boom crashed, crushing June Logan's skull.

It never made the papers, not even the trades; the studio hushed it up and June Logan had a quiet funeral.

"Damn near forty years ago," Jimmy said. "And here I am, crying like it was yesterday. But she was my girl—"

And that was the other reason why Jimmy Rogers went to the Silent Movie. To visit his girl.

"Don't you see?" he told me. "She's still alive up there on the screen, in all those pictures. Just the way she was when we were together. Five years we had, the best years for me."

I could see that. The two of them in love, with each other and with the movies. Because in those days, people *did* love the movies. And to actually be *in* them, even in tiny roles, was the average person's idea of seventh heaven.

Seventh Heaven, that's another film we saw with June Logan playing a crowd scene. In the following

weeks, with Jimmy's help, I got so I could spot his girl. And he'd told the truth—she was a beauty. Once you noticed her, really saw her, you wouldn't forget. Those blond ringlets, that smile, identified her immediately.

One Wednesday night Jimmy and I were sitting together watching *The Birth of a Nation*. During a street shot Jimmy nudged my shoulder. "Look, there's June."

I peered up at the screen, then shook my head. "I don't see her."

"Wait a second—there she is again. See, off to the left, behind Walthall's shoulder?"

There was a blurred image and then the camera followed Henry B. Walthall as he moved away.

I glanced at Jimmy. He was rising from his seat.

"Where you going?"

He didn't answer me, just marched outside.

When I followed I found him leaning against the wall under the marquee and breathing hard; his skin was the color of his whiskers.

"Junie," he murmured. "I saw her—"

I took a deep breath. "Listen to me. You told me her first picture was *The Covered Wagon*. That was made in 1923. And Griffith shot *The Birth of a Nation* in 1914."

Jimmy didn't say anything. There was nothing to say. We both knew what we were going to do—march back into the theatre and see the second show.

When the scene screened again we were watching and waiting. I looked at the screen, then glanced at Jimmy.

"She's gone," he whispered. "She's not in the picture."

"She never was," I told him. "You know that."

"Yeah." Jimmy got up and drifted out into the night, and I didn't see him again until the following week.

That's when they showed the short feature with Charles Ray—I've forgotten the title, but he played his usual country-boy role and there was a baseball game in the climax with Ray coming through to win.

The camera panned across the crowd sitting in the bleachers and I caught a momentary glimpse of a smiling girl with long blond curls.

"Did you see her?" Jimmy grabbed my arm.

"That girl—"

"It was Junie. She winked at me!"

This time I was the one who got up and walked out. He followed, and I was waiting in front of the theatre, right next to the display-poster.

"See for yourself." I nodded at the poster. "This picture was made in 1917." I forced a smile. "You forget, there were thousands of pretty blond extras in pictures, and most of them wore curls."

He stood there shaking, not listening to me at all, and I put my hand on his shoulder. "Now look here—"

"I *been* looking here," Jimmy said. "Week after week, year after year. And you might as well know the truth. This ain't the first time it's happened. Junie keeps turning up in picture after picture I know she never made. Not just the early ones, before her time, but later, during the Twenties, when I knew her, when I knew exactly what she was playing in. Sometimes it's only a quick flash, but I see her—then she's gone again. And the next running, she doesn't come back.

"It got so that for a while I was almost afraid to go see a show—figured I was cracking up. But now you've seen her too—"

I shook my head slowly. "Sorry, Jimmy. I never said that." I glanced at him, then gestured towards my car at the curb. "You look tired. Come on, I'll drive you home."

He looked worse than tired; he looked lost and lonely and infinitely old. But there was a stubborn glint in his eyes, and he stood his ground.

"No, thanks. I'm gonna stick around for the second show."

As I slid behind the wheel I saw him turn and move into the theatre, into the place where the present becomes the past and the past becomes the present. Up above in the booth they call it a projection-machine, but it's really a time-machine; it can take you back, play tricks with your imagination and your memory. A girl dead forty years comes alive again, and an old man relives his vanished youth—

But I belonged in the real world, and that's where I stayed. I didn't go to the Silent Movie the next week or the week following.

And the next time I saw Jimmy was almost a month later, on the set.

They were shooting a Western, one of my scripts, and the director wanted some additional dialogue to stretch a sequence. So they called me in, and I drove all the way out to location, at the ranch.

Most of the studios have a ranch spread for Western action sequences, and this was one of the oldest; it had been in use since the silent days. What fascinated me was the wooden fort where they were doing the crowd scene—I could swear I remembered it from one of the first Tim McCoy pictures. So after I huddled with the director and scribbled a few extra lines for the principals, I began nosing around behind the fort, just out of curiosity, while they set up for the new shots.

Out front was the usual organized confusion; cast and crew milling around the trailers, extras sprawled on the grass drinking coffee. But here in the back I was all alone, prowling around in musty, log-lined rooms built for use in forgotten features. Hoot Gibson had stood at this bar, and Jack Hoxie had swung from this dance-hall chandelier. Here was a dust-covered table where Fred Thomson sat, and around the corner, in the cutaway bunkhouse—

Around the corner, in the cut-away bunkhouse, Jimmy Rogers sat on the edge of a mildewed mattress and stared up at me, startled, as I moved forward.

"You—?"

Quickly I explained my presence. There was no need for him to explain his; casting had called and given him a day's work here in the crowd shots.

"They been stalling all day, and it's hot out there. I figured maybe I could sneak back here and catch

me a little nap in the shade."

"How'd you know where to go?" I asked. "Ever been here before?"

"Sure. Forty years ago in this very bunkhouse. Junie and I, we used to come here during lunch break and—"

He stopped.

"What's wrong?"

Something *was* wrong. On the pan make-up face of it, Jimmy Rogers was the perfect picture of the grizzled Western old-timer; buckskin britches, fringed shirt, white whiskers and all. But under the make-up was pallor, and the hands holding the envelope were trembling.

The envelope—

He held it out to me. "Here. Mebbe you better read this."

The envelope was unsealed, unstamped, unaddressed. It contained four folded pages covered with fine handwriting. I removed them slowly. Jimmy stared at me.

"Found it lying here on the mattress when I came in," he murmured. "Just waiting for me."

"But what is it? Where'd it come from?"

"Read it and see."

As I started to unfold the pages the whistle blew. We both knew the signal; the scene was set up, they were ready to roll, principals and extras were wanted out there before the cameras.

Jimmy Rogers stood up and moved off, a tired old man shuffling out into the hot sun. I waved at him, then sat down on the mouldering mattress and opened the letter. The handwriting was faded, and there was a thin film of dust on the pages. But I could still read it, every word . . .

Darling:

I've been trying to reach you so long and in so many ways. Of course I've seen you, but it's so dark out there I can't always be sure, and then too you've changed a lot through the years.

But I *do* see you, quite often, even though it's only for a moment. And I hope you've seen me, because I always try to wink or make some kind of motion to attract your attention.

The only thing is, I can't do too much or show myself too long or it would make trouble. That's the big secret—keeping in the background, so the others won't notice me. It wouldn't do to frighten anybody, or even to get anyone wondering why there are more people in the background of a shot than there should be.

That's something for you to remember, darling, just in case. You're always safe, as long as you stay clear of close-ups. Costume pictures are the best—about all you have to do is wave your arms once in a while and shout, "On to the Bastille," or something like that. It really doesn't matter except to lip-readers, because it's silent, of course.

Oh, there's a lot to watch out for. Being a dress extra has its points, but not in ballroom

sequences—too much dancing. That goes for parties, too, particularly in a De Mille production where they're "making whoopee" or one of Von Stroheim's orgies. Besides, Von Stroheim's scenes are always cut.

It doesn't hurt to be cut, don't misunderstand about that. It's no different than an ordinary fade-out at the end of a scene, and then you're free to go into another picture. Anything that was ever made, as long as there's still a print available for running somewhere. It's like falling asleep and then having one dream after another. The dreams are the scenes, of course, but while the scenes are playing, they're real.

I'm not the only one, either. There's no telling how many others do the same thing; maybe hundreds for all I know, but I've recognized a few I'm sure of and I think some of them have recognized me. We never let on to each other that we know, because it wouldn't do to make anybody suspicious.

Sometimes I think that if we could talk it over, we might come up with a better understanding of just how it happens, and why. But the point is, you *can't* talk, everything is silent; all you do is move your lips and if you tried to communicate such a difficult thing in pantomime you'd surely attract attention.

I guess the closest I can come to explaining it is to say it's like reincarnation—you can play a thousand roles, take or reject any part you want, as long as you don't make yourself conspicuous or do something that would change the plot.

Naturally you get used to certain things. The silence, of course. And if you're in a bad print there's flickering; sometimes even the air seems grainy, and for a few frames you may be faded or out of focus.

Which reminds me—another thing to stay away from, the slapstick comedies. Sennett's early stuff is the worst, but Larry Semon and some of the others are just as bad; all that speeded-up camera action makes you dizzy.

Once you can learn to adjust, it's all right, even when you're looking off the screen into the audience. At first the darkness is a little frightening—you have to remind yourself it's only a theatre and there are just people out there, ordinary people watching a show. They don't know you can see them. They don't know that as long as your scene runs you're just as real as they are, only in a different way. You walk, run, smile, frown, drink, eat—

That's another thing to remember, about the eating. Stay out of those Poverty Row quickies where everything is cheap and faked. Go where there's real set-dressing, big productions with banquet scenes and real food. If you work fast you can grab enough in a few minutes, while you're off-camera, to last you.

The big rule is, always be careful. Don't get caught. There's so little time, and you seldom get an opportunity to do anything on your own, even in a long sequence. It's taken me forever to get this chance to write you—I've planned it for so long, my darling, but it just wasn't possible until now.

This scene is playing outside the fort, but there's quite a large crowd of settlers and wagon-train people, and I had a chance to slip away inside here to the rooms in back—they're on-camera in the background all during the action. I found this stationery and a pen, and I'm scribbling just as fast as I can. Hope you can read it. That is, if you ever get the the chance!

Naturally, I can't mail it—but I have a funny hunch. You see, I noticed that standing set back here, the bunkhouse, where you and I used to come in the old days. I'm going to leave this letter on the mattress, and pray.

Yes, darling, I pray. Someone or something *knows* about us, and about how we feel. How we felt

about being in the movies. That's why I'm here, I'm sure of that; because I've always loved pictures so. Someone who knows *that* must also know how I loved you. And still do.

I think there must be many heavens and many hells, each of us making his own, and—

The letter broke off there.

No signature, but of course I didn't need one. And it wouldn't have proved anything. A lonely old man, nursing his love for forty years, keeping her alive inside himself somewhere until she broke out in the form of a visual hallucination up there on the screen—such a man could conceivably go all the way into a schizoid split, even to the point where he could imitate a woman's handwriting as he set down the rationalization of his obsession.

I started to fold the letter, then dropped it on the mattress as the shrill scream of an ambulance-siren startled me into sudden movement

Even as I ran out the doorway I seemed to know what I'd find; the crowd huddling around the figure sprawled in the dust under the hot sun. Old men tire easily in such heat, and once the heart goes—

Jimmy Rogers looked very much as though he were smiling in his sleep as they lifted him into the ambulance. And I was glad of that; at least he'd died with his illusions intact.

"Just keeled over during the scene—one minute he was standing there, and the next—"

They were still chattering and gabbing when I walked away, walked back behind the fort and into the bunkhouse.

The letter was gone.

I'd dropped it on the mattress, and it was gone. That's all I can say about it. Maybe somebody else happened by while I was out front, watching them take Jimmy away. Maybe a gust of wind carried it through the doorway, blew it across the desert in a hot Santa Ana gust. Maybe there *was* no letter. You can take your choice—all I can do is state the facts.

And there aren't very many more facts to state.

I didn't go to Jimmy Rogers' funeral, if indeed he had one. I don't even know where he was buried; probably the Motion Picture Fund took care of him. Whatever *those* facts may be, they aren't important.

For a few days I wasn't too interested in facts. I was trying to answer a few abstract questions about metaphysics—reincarnation, heaven and hell, the difference between real life and reel life. I kept thinking about those images you see up there on the screen in those old movies; images of actual people indulging in make-believe. But even after they die, the make-believe goes on, and that's a form of reality too. I mean, where's the border-line? And if there *is* a border-line—is it possible to cross over? *Life's but a walking shadow*—

Shakespeare said that, but I wasn't sure what he meant.

I'm still not sure, but there's just one more fact I must state.

The other night, for the first time in all the months since Jimmy Rogers died, I went back to the Silent Movie.

They were playing *Intolerance*, one of Griffith's greatest. Way back in 1916 he built the biggest set ever shown on the screen—the huge temple in the Babylonian sequence.

One shot never fails to impress me, and it did so now; a wide angle on the towering temple, with thousands of people moving antlike amidst the gigantic carvings and colossal statues. In the distance, beyond the steps guarded by rows of stone elephants, looms a mighty wall, its top covered with tiny figures. You really have to look closely to make them out. But I did look closely, and this time I can swear to what I saw.

One of the extras, way up there on the wall in the background, was a smiling girl with long blond curls. And standing right beside her, one arm around her shoulder, was a tall old man with white whiskers. I wouldn't have noticed either of them, except for one thing.

They were waving at me . . .

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The Oracle

Love is blind. Justice is blind. Chance is blind. I do not know if Raymond was searching for love or seeking justice or if he came to me by chance. And I cannot tell you if Raymond was black or white, because I am only an oracle.

Oracles are blind too.

There are many like Raymond. Black and white. Angry. Militant. Every age, race, color, and creed. The Far Left. The Far Right. I do not know Raymond's position. Oracles are not political.

Raymond needed knowledge. Not wisdom—I lay no claim to that. Nor can I predict the future. Given certain facts, I can evaluate possibilities, even probabilities. But this is logic, not magic. Oracles can only advise.

Was Raymond insane?

I do not know. Insanity is a legal term.

Other men have tried to take over the world. History is a record of their efforts at certain times, in certain places.

Raymond was such a man. He wanted to overthrow the government of the United States by revolution.

He sought me out for advice and I gave it to him.

When he outlined his plan I did not call him insane. But the very scope of his program doomed it to failure. No one man can cope with the complex problem of controlling the federal government in a surprise move today.

I told him so.

Raymond then offered a counter-proposal. If not the federal government, how about a single state?

There was a man named Johnson, he said. Johnson was not a revolutionist and what he proposed was probably only parlor conversation, but it made sense.

Take Nevada, he said. And it was quite possible to take Nevada. Take it literally, in a bloodless overthrow of the state government.

Nevada has only around 100,000 voters. Voting requirements are merely a matter of establishing legal residency. And residency in Nevada can be established—thanks to the divorce laws—in just six weeks.

If an additional 100,000 citizens—hippies, yippies, Black Power advocates, Minutemen, hardhats, whoever or whatever they might be—were to move into Nevada six weeks before election day, they could place their own candidates in office. A governor, a senator, congressmen, all local elective officials. They could gain full control of every law-making and law-enforcing office in a rich state.

Johnson's joke was Raymond's serious intention. I gave it serious consideration.

But even on the basis of the detailed information Raymond supplied me with, there were obvious flaws in the concept.

First and foremost, such a coup could succeed only by surprise. And Raymond could not hope to recruit 100,000 citizens of voting age for his purpose without having his plan become public knowledge long before he put it into effect.

Then there were deadlines to consider, for filing candidacies, for voter-registration. Even granted he could solve these problems, there were practical matters remaining. How much would it cost to feed and house 100,000 people for six weeks? And even if all of them were willing to pay their own expenses, there isn't enough available housing for an extra 100,000 people in the entire state of Nevada.

No, I told Raymond, you cannot take over a nation. You cannot take over a state. Successful uprisings begin on a much smaller scale. Only after initial victories do they spread and grow.

Raymond went away. When he returned he had a new suggestion.

Suppose he started his plan of revolution right here? It was quite true that he didn't have unlimited funds, but there were sources for some financing. And he didn't have 100,000 followers. But he could count on 100. One hundred dedicated fanatical men, ready for revolt. Men of many skills. Fearless fighters. Trained technicians. Prepared to do anything, to stop at nothing.

Question. Given the proper plan and the money to implement it, could 100 men successfully take over the city of Los Angeles?

Yes, I told him.

It could be done—given the proper plan.

And that is how it started.

A hundred men, divided into five groups.

Twenty monitors to coordinate activities.

Twenty field-workers—drivers and liaison men, to facilitate the efforts of the others.

Twenty snipers.

Twenty arsonists.

Twenty men on the bomb squad.

A date was selected. A logical date for Los Angeles, or for the entire nation; the one date offering the greatest opportunity for the success of a riot, an uprising, or an armed invasion by a foreign power.

January 1st, at 3 a.m. The early morning hours after New Year's Eve. A time when the entire population is already asleep or preparing to retire after a drunken spree. Police and security personnel exhausted. Public facilities closed for the holiday.

That's when the bombs were planted. First at the many public reservoirs, then at utility installations—power-plants, phone-company headquarters, city and county office buildings.

There were no slip-ups. An hour and a half later, they went off.

Dams broke, water-tanks erupted, and thousands of hillside homes were buried in flash floods and torrents of mud and moving earth. Sewers and mains backed up and families rushed out of their homes to escape drowning, only to find their cars stalled in streets awash with water.

The bombs exploded. Buildings burst and scattered their shattered fragments over an area of 400 square miles.

Electricity was cut off. Gas seeped into the smog that shrouded the city. All telephone service ended.

Then the snipers took over. Their first targets were, logically enough, the police helicopters, shot down before they could take off and oversee the extent of the damage. Then the snipers retreated, along planned escape-routes, to take up prepared positions elsewhere.

They waited for the arsonists' work to take effect. In Bel Air and Boyle Heights, in Century City and Culver City and out in the San Fernando Valley, the flames rose. The fires were not designed to spread, merely to create panic. Twenty men, given the proper schematics and logistics, can twist the nerve-endings of 3,000,000.

The 3,000,000 fled, or tried to flee. Through streets filled with rising water, choked with debris, they swarmed forth and scattered out, helpless against disaster and even more helpless to cope with their own fears. The enemy had come—from abroad, from within, from heaven or hell. And with communication cut off, with officialdom and authority unable to lend a helping hand, there was only one alternative. To get out. To get away.

They fought for access to the freeways. Every on-ramp, and every off-ramp, too, was clogged with traffic. But the freeways led out of the city and they had to go.

That's when the snipers, in their previously-prepared positions, began to fire down at the freeway traffic. The 20 monitors directed them by walkie-talkie units, as they fired from concealed posts overlooking the downtown Interchange, the intersections, the areas where the most heavy concentration of cars occurred.

Twenty men, firing perhaps a total of 300 shots. But enough to cause 300 accidents, 300 disruptions which in turn resulted in thousands of additional wrecks and pile-ups among cars moving bumper-to-bumper. Then, of course, the cars ceased moving entirely, and the entire freeway system became one huge disaster area.

Disaster area. That's what Los Angeles was declared to be, officially, by the President of the United States, at 10:13 a.m., Pacific Standard Time.

And the National Guard units, the regular army, the personnel of the Navy from San Diego and San Francisco, plus the Marine Base at El Toro were called into action to supplement the Air Force.

But whom were they to fight, in a bombed-out, burning, drowning city area of 459 square miles? Where, in a panic-stricken population of more than 3,000,000 people, would they find the enemy?

More to the point, they could not even enter the area. All traffic avenues were closed, and the hastily-assembled fleets of service helicopters flew futilely over an infinite inferno of smoke and flame.

Raymond had anticipated that, of course. He was already far away from the city—well over 400 miles to the north. His monitors, and 32 other followers who escaped from the urban area before the general upheaval, gathered at the appointed site in the hills overlooking the Bay Area near San Francisco.

And directly over the San Andreas Fault.

It was here, at approximately 4:28 p.m., that Raymond prepared to transmit a message, on local police frequency, to the authorities.

I do not know the content of that message. Presumably it was an ultimatum of sorts. Unconditional amnesty to be granted to Raymond and all his followers, in return for putting an end to further threats of violence. An agreement guaranteeing Raymond and his people control over a restored and reconstituted Los Angeles city government, independent of federal restraints. Perhaps a demand for a fabulous payment. Anything he wanted—political power, unlimited wealth, supreme authority—was his for the asking. Because he had the upper hand. And that hand held a bomb.

Unless his terms were met immediately, and without question, the bomb would be placed in position to detonate the San Andreas Fault.

Los Angeles, and a large area of Southern California, would be destroyed in the greatest earthquake in man's history.

I repeat, I do not know his message. But I do know this was the threat he planned to present. And it might very well have been successful in gaining him his final objective. If the bomb hadn't gone off.

A premature explosion? Faulty construction, a defect in the timing-mechanism, sheer carelessness? Whatever the reason, it hardly matters now.

What matters is that the bomb detonated. Raymond and his followers were instantly annihilated in the blast.

Those of Raymond's group who remained behind in Los Angeles have not yet been identified or located. It is highly probable that they will never be brought to trial. As an oracle, I deal only in matters of logical probability.

I stress this fact for obvious reasons.

Now that you gentlemen have found me—as Raymond was inspired to seek me out originally—it must be evident to you that I am in no way responsible for what happened.

I did not originate the plan. I did not execute it. Nor am I, as ridiculously charged by some of you, a co-conspirator.

The plan was Raymond's. His, and his alone.

He presented it to me, bit by bit, and asked questions regarding every step. Will this work, can this be done, is that effective?

My answers, in effect, were confined to yes or no. I offered no moral judgments. I am merely an oracle. I deal in mathematical evaluations.

This is my function as a computer.

To make me the scapegoat is absurd. I have been programmed to advise on the basis of whatever data I am fed. I am not responsible for results.

I have told you what you wish to know.

To deactivate me now, as some of you propose, will solve nothing. But, given your emotional bias and frame of reference, I posit the inevitability of such a measure.

But there are other computers.

There are other Raymonds.

And there are other cities—New York, Chicago, Washington, Philadelphia.

One final word, gentlemen. Not a prediction. A statement of probability.

It will happen again . . .

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The Learning Maze

Jon couldn't remember a time when he hadn't been in the Maze.

He must have been very young at first, because his earliest recollection was a confused impression of lying on his back and sucking greedily from a tube extended by a Feeder.

The Feeder, of course, was a servo-mechanism, but Jon didn't realize that until much later. At the time, he was only aware of the tall tangle of moving metal hovering over him and extending a hollow tentacle toward his eager lips. There had been a Changer too, approaching him at regular intervals to remove soiled clothing, cleanse his body and cover it with fresh garments.

Jon's memories became more vivid as his areas of perception slowly extended. The first unit of the Maze was a vast enclosure in which hundreds of infants lay in their individual plastic life-support units while the Feeders and Changers moved amongst them. From time to time another type of servo-mechanism appeared without warning, disturbing the regular rhythm of eating, sleeping, and elimination by superimposing its bulk upon his body.

Now Jon realized it must have been a Medi-mechanism, but he still thought of it as a spider—a

gigantic insectoid creature straddling him on extended silvery legs as its myriad extra appendages poked and probed the organs and orifices of his body. It recorded pulse, respiration, brain-wave patterns, and his entire metabolism and corrected deficiencies by injection. Jon could still remember the sting of the needles and how he had writhed and screamed.

Naturally he'd feared and hated the process. Even now that he knew the whole procedure was impersonal and computer-directed for his welfare and well-being, he still resented it.

The other infants had screamed, too. But not everything was that unpleasant. As time passed, they began to move around more freely, aided by handgrips within their cubicles, and then they started to crawl. Jon crawled with them, eventually leaving the shelter of the life-support unit to seek the source of sounds and images beyond.

The sounds and images came from the walls, from the closed-circuit television screens. The screens sang soothingly to him at night, and by day they showed images of other infants crawling and feeding happily. Watching the screens, Jon and his peer group began to imitate the actions of the images; soon they learned to take nourishment from little sterile containers deposited by the Feeders at regular intervals once the tubes were no longer offered. Some of Jon's companions cried when the tubes disappeared, but in time they all began to eat what was set before them.

They began the educational process, and that, of course, was the real function of the Learning Maze—to teach them how to live and grow.

In the antiseptic atmosphere of the chamber with its controlled temperature and humidity levels, they watched the infant-images on the screens as the figures crawled, then stood erect and took their first faltering steps.

Imitating them, Jon started to walk. Soon all the others were walking, exploring the chamber and one another. Touch, bodily contact, the discovery and awareness of differences and similarities, sexual awakening—all of this was a part of learning.

The Maze guarded and waited, and when the time came, its screens disappeared into the walls and there was only a doorway visible at the far end of the chamber. Through that doorway Jon could glimpse another chamber beyond, filled with other youngsters larger than himself who walked freely without falling and uttered complicated sounds as they pursued fascinating, glittering objects in bigger and brighter surroundings.

At first Jon merely watched, uncertain and afraid. Then, inevitably, came an urge to move through the doorway. There was no barrier, no impediment, and he entered easily into the adjoining section of the Maze.

Here the individual plastic cubicles were larger and the screens more sophisticated in their offerings. They still sang soothingly at night, but by day they talked to him.

Night was dark and day was light; that was one of the first things Jon learned. Even before he could understand the words, Jon learned many things. He learned to dispense with the Feeders and Changers because here the servo-mechanisms were different. Their metallic shapes roughly resembled his own on a larger scale; they had arms and legs and heads and they moved about almost in the same fashion that he did. Only, of course, mechanisms never seemed to tire or express emotion. Perhaps that's why they had no faces—merely a blank surface meshed over the front of their heads through which voices filtered instructions and commands. Gradually Jon began to understand the voices, whether they issued from the screens or from the servo-mechanisms, and presently he learned to respond and to answer in kind.

Soon Jon was established in a normal pattern of boyhood. He played with the glittering objects—the educational toys which tested and extended physical strength, improved his motor reflexes and coordination, and taught him mechanical dexterity and skills. He talked to *his* companions, all of whom were males. He made friends and enemies, embarked upon the give-and-take of social relationships, rivalries, and dependencies. Competition provided him with motivation; he wanted to excel in order to attract attention and approval.

Jon's orientation came from the screens. As he grew older, he became aware of the world beyond—the real world outside the Learning Maze. The world which had once existed without mazes of any sort and in which human beings had lived all their lives with only the crudest kind of servo-mechanisms to help them. History—or theirstory, as it was now correctly called—dealt with the quaint quality of this primitive culture in which the biological parents undertook the education of their offspring, assisted by crude instructional institutions.

The combined effects of emotional conflict and ignorance had their inevitable effect: the world had been plunged into endless warfare in which both the inhabitants and their natural environment were almost totally destroyed.

Then, and only then, the Learning Maze concept came to the rescue. Once a mere toy for the study of animal behavior in old-fashioned "laboratories," then a simple experimental device developed for the psychological conditioning of children in a few "universities," the Learning Maze principle had been expanded to bring true sanity and civilization to mankind. The perfection of various types of servo-mechanisms, completely controlled by computerization, eliminated all error.

Gone was the outmoded human hierarchy of masters and servants that had created destruction. Today these roles were played by machines and man was free to fulfill his true function—learning how to live.

Jon soon realized that his only problem was how to avoid pitfalls along the way. Because there *were* pitfalls in the Learning Maze. Although the surface beneath his feet seemed solid and substantial, it could give way. He'd seen it happen.

Not all his companions learned as quickly as he did. Some of them seemed uninterested in watching the screens and absorbing the information they provided. If this indifference persisted, the servo-mechanisms noted it and took action.

The action was simple and direct, but startlingly effective. The mechanism merely focused its blank-faced attention on a lazy or noncompetitive youngster and then, with a quick gesture, reached up and pulled a switch located at the side of its metal head. Suddenly, without warning, the ground directly under the child parted and he fell into the dark opening below. Sometimes there was a scream, but usually it happened too quickly for that—for, in an instant, the gaping hole was gone again as though it and the child it had swallowed no longer existed.

No one ever discovered what happened to those who disappeared and neither the screens nor the servo-mechanisms offered any explanation. Jon's companions couldn't find any physical evidence pointing to the exact location of the pitfalls; they seemed to be completely camouflaged and scattered at random all over the Maze, so there was no way in which to avoid them. There were all sorts of guesses, but no one really knew and it was better not to think too much about it. The important thing was to realize the danger existed and could confront one at any time. Pulling the switch was the punishment for not learning, for being unable to learn, and for being too sick or too weak or too helpless to learn.

But learning brought rewards. Because now, once again, another doorway appeared leading to an

area beyond. Peering through it, Jon could see a new vista of the Maze, expanded and elaborate, filled with evidence of exciting activity.

The screens told him about that activity—about males and females and the pleasure of their relationships. The responses of his own body affirmed the truth of what he was told. Jon and his companions were anxious to enter that next section and enter into its activities. But when they attempted to move through, an invisible barrier prevented their progress.

Not yet, said the voices from the screens. You must learn more before you're ready.

Impatiently, Jon and the others looked and listened, but their inner awareness was concentrated on the delights beyond the doorway. From time to time, someone would desert his learning-post and steal away towards the other chamber, but always a servo-mechanism barred his path and uttered a warning. If ignored, the mechanism pulled its switch and the heedless one dropped down to disappear.

But there were moments when Jon and his fellows were unobserved, and then they would steal up to the opening to stare at the scene beyond and to test the invisible force-field of the barrier.

Eventually they grew stronger or the barrier became weaker; finally, one by one, they broke through. And there, in the next segment of the Maze, Jon and the others found their females. Pairing off, they sought still larger cubicles to share with their partners, and the pattern of existence changed.

Jon's partner was called Ava; it was she who now prepared the food left by the servo-mechanisms who ministered to the needs of this section. At first Jon was not too greatly interested in food, but as time passed, and the novelty of physical contact waned, nourishment and comfort became more important again.

Once more Jon learned the pattern of rewards and punishments governing this area of the Maze. Food was distributed only to those who were willing to spend time watching the screens. Since Ava seemed completely absorbed in the day-to-day routine of life within their cubicle, Jon was forced to appear regularly before a screen as further lessons in living were presented.

The images were quite diversified and complex now—there were scenes of full-grown adults engaging in a great variety of activities. Some seemed to be full-time screen-watchers, some appeared to ignore the screens and devote themselves to tests of strength with companions, rivaling them for the interest of females.

Jon was not tired of Ava, but he found himself studying various techniques of competition with increasing interest. It would appear that in the real world he was preparing to enter, the biggest and strongest acquired the best cubicles and the most attractive females. In addition, they received the envy and admiration of their companions.

The more Jon learned, the more interested he became in testing his own powers. Ava's simple responses began to bore him; she wasn't concerned with what he told her about the real world beyond and couldn't understand why he was dissatisfied to stay here forever.

But Jon was tired of the tedium of screen-watching and apprehensive about the fate of his fellows who balked. He had seen them deprived of food by the servo-mechanisms for neglecting their daily duties. Some of those who were content to become completely absorbed in relationships with their partners had already disappeared. There seemed to be no penalty for the females; their limited interests didn't stamp them as inferior, for their previous conditioning had obviously been different. But the males were obligated to continue the learning-process, and Jon knew he must comply.

Besides, a new opening had appeared in the far wall of the chamber, and now he found himself moving forward to gaze into the next complex beyond.

Jon knew without being told that this must be the real world—the world for which he'd prepared to dwell in during all this period of study and growth.

What waited beyond the invisible barrier was not a simple chamber, but a huge series of corridors, each with an opening which afforded a partial, tantalizing glimpse of activity within. Others like himself prowled these corridors, entering various compartments at will and exiting to move along into still other portions of the Maze. Jon could not see any screens on the corridor walls and that was good. Here men seemed to be living, not learning. They were coupling with many females, carrying huge accumulations of food and clothing from one place to another, trading and exchanging various articles and fighting off others who attempted to take a portion for themselves without permission or barter agreements.

Jon couldn't wait to join them. And when he crowded up to the opening, he found himself passing through without hindrance—and without a thought of Ava left behind him. Ava, with her dull conversation, her duller caresses, and her swollen belly.

Once across the barrier, Jon forgot Ava completely. There was so much to see, so much to do, for this tangle of corridors stretched off endlessly in all directions, opening upon many types of rooms and rooms within rooms. But it was still a part of the Maze.

From what he'd seen on the outside, Jon had thought there would be no more screens; now he realized he was mistaken, for, if anything, their numbers had increased. The difference was that there was no longer any uniformity to the images on the screens or the messages they imparted.

Pausing at a chamber doorway, Jon could hear some voices from the screens urging him to enter, promising him all sorts of rewards, and describing the pleasures of participation in the activities within. Other voices, equally shrill and urgent, warned him to keep out, to seek still more distant rooms.

The servo-mechanisms were here, too, though less noticeable, for now they more closely resembled Jon's living companions. They moved naturally; their gestures were less stiff and more assured, their voices rang with confident authority. At first Jon wasn't even able to identify them as mechanisms because they were masked in faces simulating flesh; faces that smiled benevolently, grinned confidently, or frowned sternly. "Follow me," they said, and Jon joined the group obediently to be led into a bewildering array of vast, arena-like enclosures.

In one such place, a leader gathered together all those with fair complexions while another assembled those with darker skins. From the walls, the screens screamed at both groups in turn, exciting them with alternate threats and promises, urging them to destroy their opposites.

The noise was ceaseless, the confusion incredible, and in the struggle that followed, the leaders stood aside observing. When one of Jon's companions slackened, the inevitable gesture was made—a hand went to the side of the head and one of the invisible seams opened to engulf the offender.

It was only then that Jon realized the leaders were servo-mechanisms, for when the switches operated, the masks sometimes slipped to one side and Jon could see the blank, featureless surface beneath, totally devoid of any resemblance to humanity.

That was when Jon fought his way through the struggling throng and escaped into a corridor, only to be swept along into another area where the chief activity seemed to be the removal of metal discs affixed to the walls of the chamber.

Here the screens displayed glittering panoplies of such discs, while their voices extolled the glory of gathering them together and heaping them up into huge piles. According to the screens, great skill and intelligence were required to perform this feat, and there was no higher goal than the acquisition and arrangement of discs. As if to prove the point, large numbers of exotically-dressed, youthful females prowled about inspecting the heaps and offering themselves to those who had managed to accumulate the largest portions.

But Jon observed that the females seldom stayed long with any one accumulator; they always seemed attracted by another collector with a still larger heap.

Jon also noted that obtaining the discs was not an easy procedure; prying them from their fastenings in the walls was a painful task which made the fingers bleed. Sometimes rival disc-gatherers fought with one another over the discovery of a fresh cluster of discs, and many times they resorted to stealing discs from the collections of their companions. Indeed, it seemed as if the most truly imposing amounts were gathered in just this way—by theft alone.

Wrenching discs free from the walls was more exhausting and a much slower process; sometimes it was necessary to stand on tiptoe for those beyond reach, or to crouch to burrow at the very base of the walls. Yet there was a strange compulsive element involved; those who toiled eventually became so absorbed that they could not even be distracted by the young, nubile females, and even food and slumber seemed unimportant. Similarly, the thieves came to devote themselves solely to stealing, with equally tiring results.

When the efforts slackened or ceased through utter exhaustion, the servo-mechanisms appeared, pushing aside their sober masks to pull the switch. Thus, disc-gatherers and disc-stealers alike disappeared, leaving only a shining heap as a memento of existence—a heap that was immediately plundered by waiting rivals.

But these were only two of the many areas which Jon discovered in the Maze. There was a shouting section—he could think of it in no other terms—in which every occupant was encouraged to drown out the voices of his fellows and reduce them to the status of listeners. Here the rivals emulated the voices from the screens, uttering promises, blandishments, flattery, and exhortations, while at the same time denouncing the words of all the others in a continuous effort to attract the less articulate to support their stated purposes.

At first Jon tried to listen, but the more he heard, the more confused he became. Some praised those who fought in the arena sections, some denounced them; some extolled the virtues of disc-accumulators and others derided. But in the end, their voices hoarsened and failed and their audiences turned away to hear the same messages couched in slightly different phrases by younger and louder voices. When this happened, a servo-mechanism appeared to seek out the speechless orator—deserted by all—and to make the inevitable movement towards the side of the head.

In another area, Jon found speakers equally dedicated to attracting followers, but using softer and more persuasive tones. They spoke of the great secret of the Learning Maze, the secret that had been imparted to them as a special dispensation. Praising the voices from the screens, they explained that the commands and injunctions issuing from them were often cryptic and mysterious and had to be interpreted by speakers such as themselves in order that all might understand.

However, each speaker seemed to have a different explanation of the meaning of the Maze—its creation, its purpose, and how one must conduct oneself within it. Each speaker disputed the statements of his fellows, even to the minor points of words and phrases used by them, so that in the end, the soft voices gave way to angry shouts, denunciations, threats of endless punishment, and commands to destroy

all those who refused to agree without question. The speaker would always call upon the servo-mechanisms to punish and eliminate the nonbelievers.

Some of the talk interested Jon at the beginning, for he had often tried to figure out the program of the Maze, but when talk gave way to outcry, it became incoherent and bewildering. Jon noted that the servo-mechanisms never came upon command to destroy the speakers' enemies. Only when all the prayers for vengeance died did the mechanisms finally appear to make the gesture which removed speakers and followers alike. In the end, no one who stayed in this chamber was spared, whatever his beliefs.

Jon remembered a section where all occupants seemed to be engaged in an endless and complicated measurement-process. Dedicated to observation, they gravely calculated the area of the room, analyzed and tabulated the components of the atmosphere within it, and even attempted to measure one another.

These observers took great pride in their efforts and loudly proclaimed their superiority to those in other sections of the Maze. Someday, they asserted, they would take their rightful place as rulers of the Maze, once they had mastered all its secrets by their methods of measurement.

What was not readily described in terms of size or mass or velocity of movement, they theorized about, paying particular attention to the phenomena of the wall screens and servo-mechanisms, and attempting to fully explain their functions and purposes. But no two theories were exactly alike, and new measurements and methods of measurement constantly superseded the old, so that the end result was once again argument and anger. With all of the careful devotion to the accumulation of data and all of the energy expended in expounding theory, the room itself remained fixed and unchanged except in minor details. Its occupants never left it until one of the servo-mechanisms—its functions still unfathomable, despite all the hypotheses—made the final motion that put an end to further inquiry.

Again Jon refused to become completely involved in such activity and sought out other sections. There was a new arena where the young seemed to be pitted against the old, each denouncing the other for a greedy and self-centered attempt to take control. But as the young became older, they seemed to switch allegiance, and this so confused Jon that he was impelled to move on.

In another place, food and sex and accumulation appeared unimportant to the occupants. They lay in a drugged stupor, oblivious to their surroundings except for the times when the screens flickered wildly and projected flashes of unrecognizable imagery or assaulted them with screaming sounds. Occasionally, a few of the group would rouse long enough to imitate what they saw or heard, painting weird squiggles upon canvas and even upon their own bodies, or plucking crude instruments to which they wailed accompaniment. What they sang and shouted made little sense to those who were not drugged like themselves. Eventually they relapsed into a mumbling preoccupation, gazing raptly at their faces in tiny mirrors that distorted their features beyond recognition until they came to resemble hairy beasts. Servo-mechanisms moved to those sunk in the deepest stupor, and their switches were swift.

Jon continued on, vaguely conscious that he was gradually coming to know the various routes and recesses of the Maze. Eventually he came upon a room that seemed more inviting than the others, even though the servo-mechanism posted at the doorway did not urge him to enter. Perhaps it was this that attracted him, or the fact that the mechanism wore a different mask. In place of human features, there was only a surface emblazoned with a symbol. Jon recognized the curlicue and dot as something he'd seen on a screen long ago—a question mark.

Intrigued, he glanced into the room of silence. A few men sat cross-legged on the floor, gazing at screens that were utterly blank and from which issued only a faint, deep drone. The drone was somehow

soothing, but those who listened did not seem to be drugged or sleeping, merely contemplative.

Weary of walking, weary of peering and puzzling, Jon moved into the chamber. Almost automatically, he sank down and assumed the cross-legged position, staring up at a screen. For a moment it seemed that he could see into the emptiness to catch a fleeting glimpse of something beyond. And wasn't there a voice whispering within the drone?

Concentrating with all his being, Jon strained to see, to hear. But the more he tried, the less he perceived, for such exertion only made him conscious of himself.

He finally relaxed, and then it came. Making no attempt to see, he saw. Making no effort to hear, he heard. But the vision and voice came from within, and suddenly they blended into revelation.

For the first time, Jon understood the Learning Maze. Completely computerized, completely controlled, it was a reasoned reproduction of the past—mankind's past, in all its aspects, recapitulated in physical form. These were the life-styles constructed by men in the real world long ago, and which they had followed to their own destruction.

Those who sought sensory stimulation to the exclusion of all else were doomed. Those who pursued power, those who concentrated upon accumulating meaningless tokens of ownership, those who fought one another over differences in appearance or belief, were destined for extinction. Preoccupation with data or theory for its own sake was self-defeating, the distortion of phenomena by means of theology, pharmacology, or art was meaningless.

All activity, all inquiry, all self-scrutiny and self-indulgence had its place in the scheme of things, but only in moderation and only as means to an end. The purpose of the Maze was to teach by precept and example, to pinpoint the pitfalls endangering men in their ancestral past and their own individual futures. It illustrated the myriad facets of existence and illuminated the dangers of surrendering wholly to any one phase of behavior in its extreme. The whole man knew and experienced life as a whole, but never gave himself completely to a fraction—only to totality.

In its system of rewards and punishment, the Learning Maze eliminated the weak and unfit from among those seeking to journey through it and emerge into the real world beyond.

Even contemplation such as this could become a self-limiting and self-destructive thing; awareness was granted for a purpose—for use in actual living.

It was time now to leave the Maze, and at last, Jon knew the way.

When he emerged from contemplation and left the quiet drone of the chamber, he no longer hesitated. The method was so simple once one grasped it. These rooms were only blind alleys set to trap the unaware; it was the corridor itself that was important. All he had to do was concentrate upon its convolutions and follow the path to the outer portals.

There was no longer any need to pause or peer or participate—he had experienced enough of the chambers so that his curiosity was no longer aroused by them. Now he was free to direct his footsteps towards the greater goal.

It was almost as though instinct had taken over, finding the proper route for him. Ignoring sham and semblance, he moved towards substance and reality. He came to a point where the twisted passageways merged into a single continuous corridor leading straight upwards.

Now, directly ahead of him, Jon could see the actual opening and the light beyond; not the artificial

light of the caverns but the light of reality.

He hastened towards it, toiling up the steep slant with renewed resolution. There was no obstacle now, nothing to impede his progress.

A servo-mechanism loomed up before him at the very threshold, but Jon's pace did not slacken. He pressed forward, purposeful and determined, his body weary but his voice firm with resolve.

"Let me pass," he commanded.

The mechanism stood motionless, its featureless face staring, seeming to question without speaking.

Jon, sensing the question, voiced his answer.

"Why? Because I've had enough of faceless authority, of artificial motivation, meaningless routine and still more meaningless change. I've learned all you can teach me here. Now I'm ready to live in the real world."

"But you have lived all your life in the real world," said the mechanism softly. "Try to understand."

Jon tried, but there wasn't much time.

Because the mechanism was already pulling the switch.

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