

Flowers
from the Moon
and Other Lunacies

Robert Bloch

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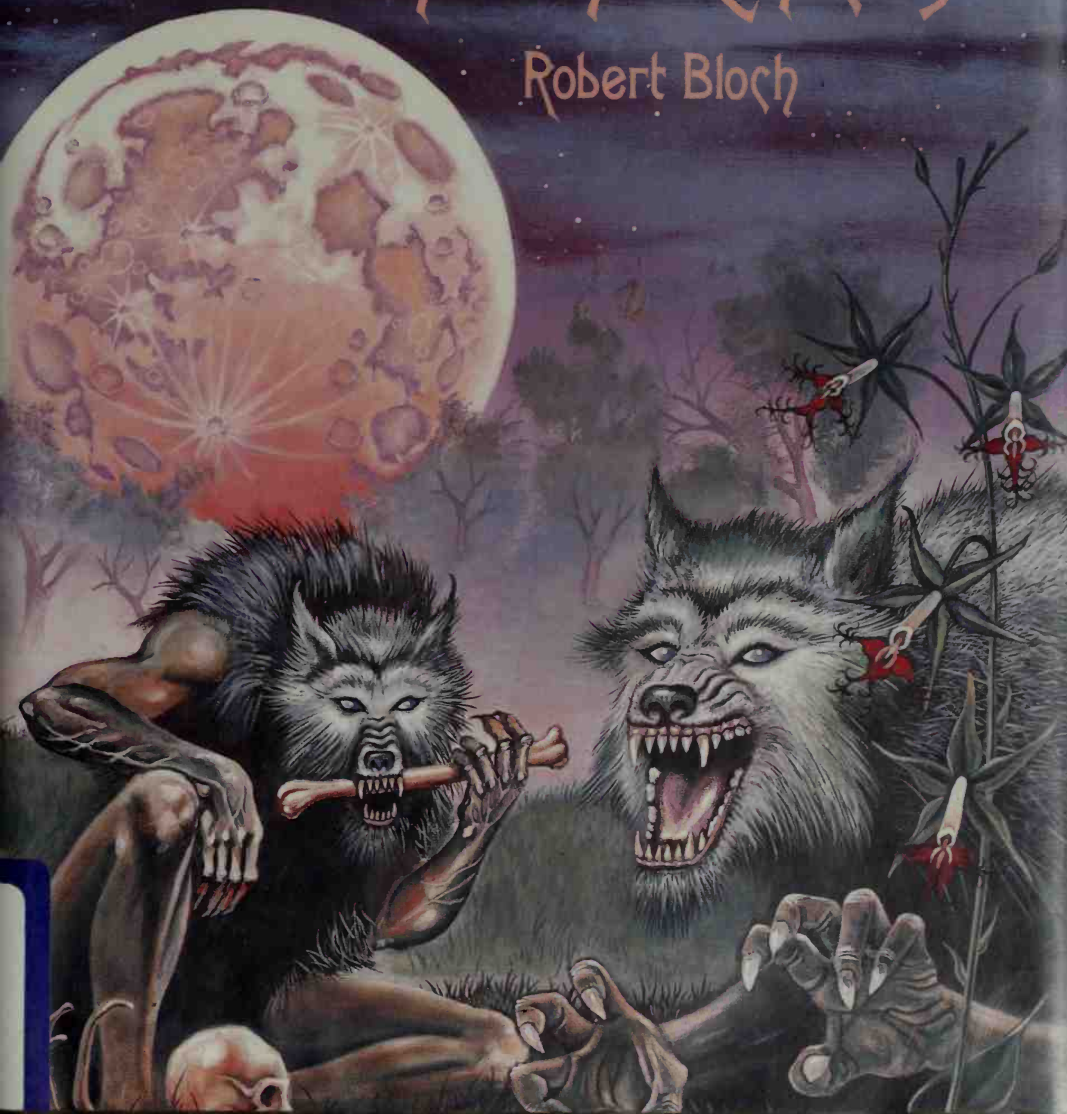
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This volume of Robert Bloch's macabre stories is an unexpected treasure for several reasons. It is the first posthumous collection since the author's death in 1994, and it brings together many of his early stories from the legendary pages of *Weird Tales* and *Strange Stories*, which have never been anthologized before.

The stories display Bloch's easy narrative command, his sparkling humor and imagination—and his unerring sense of the horrifying!

In them you will discover the dark secrets of voodoo and vampirism, pagan altars and the alter egos, shades of meaning and devouring shadows, including four stories of the Cthulhu Mythos created by H. P. Lovecraft.

From horror to heroic fantasy to science fiction, these long lost classics from Bloch's early pulp fiction writing days are guaranteed to thrill and chill you at every turn of the page.



Flowers from the Moon
and Other Lyrics



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Sauk City, Wisconsin 53583
1998

Flowers from the Moon
and Other Lunacies

by

Robert Bloch

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I am pleased to dedicate this collection to
my good and faithful friend
Chuck Garofalo,
on whom more than a little
of Robert Bloch's writing spirit rests.

BLACK BARRIERS 204

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I am pleased to dedicate this collection to my country
 my good and faithful friends
 "Black Country" and my dear friends
 on whom I have been a little
 of Robert Black's wisdom and love
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Introduction

All Robert Bloch's stories, as unconnected as they may be, are based on the fundamental fact that the word "Yuk" has two meanings. It may denote either *revulsion* or *laughter*. Apparently Bloch was absent from school, probably out chasing down a copy of *De Vermis Mysteriis*, the day they explained the difference. There is usually at least an undercurrent of black humor in even the most serious of his tales of horror and suspense, wicked irony if nothing else. Others are nothing but long and elaborate shaggy-dog (shogoth-dog?) jokes based on the most painful puns and strategic equivocations. "She's decorating the tree." Yet these are nonetheless chilling, since often the pun will be the vehicle of poetic justice, someone getting his due comeuppance.

Sometimes the gallows humor is horrifically funny in the manner of an "anti-joke" as comedians call them (and remember, Robert Bloch was himself a joke-writer and stand-up comic). An anti-joke is a joke at arm's length; it makes you laugh by just getting you to imagine what a total jerk someone would be if they did so-and-so. For instance I always get a chuckle out of an idea that occurred to me some years ago one April First. Our family happened to be together, cousins and all, at my parents' house, and my brother Byron and I were both out doing errands. I came back first, and the insane idea hit me (maybe "Enoch" whispered it in my inner ear) to rush into the kitchen and exclaim breathlessly to the assem-

bled clan, "Byron's dead! . . . April Fools!" Of course, what's funny about this is not getting them to think he was dead. That would be unforgivably malicious. What's funny is envisioning me being such an insensitive cretin as to think it was funny. (Don't worry—I didn't do it!)

Bloch was able to see the humor in, for example, Ed Gein. "Folks, get a load of a guy who sang 'I've Got You Under My Skin' as he strolled around the house wearing the tanned hides of women he had killed! Is that a case of life imitating art, or what?" And worse yet, Bloch could make *you* see the humor in the horrible, too! You don't *want* to laugh at Jeff Dahmer jokes, but what choice do you have? The reason you don't want to laugh is that it would reveal something about yourself and your precarious place in the universe that you don't want to know. Ultimately our suffering and death are slapstick comedy, as absurd as the death(s) by violence of Elmer Fudd. Of course, he gets to come back for more; we don't. What a great trick! Too bad, like Daffy Duck's "The Great Explodo" routine (where he chug-a-lugs nitroglycerin and shovels down dynamite, then shakes himself into fiery oblivion), we can only do it once!

Bloch's great mentor Lovecraft held the philosophy of "cosmicism." Bloch's was quite similar, only it economized by one letter. The fourth-century theologians Arius and Athanasius feuded over a single *iota*: was the Logos *homoiousias* ("of like nature") or *homoousias* ("of the same nature") with God? So with Lovecraft and Bloch, only it was a lousy "s" that separated them: *cosmicism* and *comicism*. If, that is, they are separate at all. Lovecraft's views are perhaps best expressed in the opening words of "The Call of Cthulhu": "The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little. But some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age." This may not sound particularly funny to you, but it did to Lovecraft. The logical implication of cosmicism, and its revelation of our humbling position in the scheme of things, is that mankind's appearance in the world is "a mistake or a *joke*." No wonder Lovecraft and Bloch found such an affinity.

Another source of Blochian black humor is the double potential of the *extreme*. On the one hand, gruesome, insane behavior is often a grotesque exaggeration of behavior considered normal when not heightened to such a pitch. On the other hand, extreme exaggeration is the key to caricature and parody. A cartoon caricaturing someone is a kind of deconstruction, a removal of the "break-flows" of proportion to allow the natural tendency of a face to flood through and over the sluice gates of perception. "Yeah! That's the real Lyndon Johnson or Ross Perot, not the one the cameras pick up!" With the implicit tendency thus revealed in bold strokes, one recognizes what one has been seeing but taking for granted. A caricature is the long shadow cast by the face or the form, and it is a darkness that better defines what the ordinary light obscures. Robert Bloch was a master at poking fun at certain personality types precisely by showing them veering over the edge into grotesque exaggeration.

A case in point would be Norman Bates, an archetypal Momma's Boy like Calvin T. Beck, the publisher of *Castle of Frankenstein*, who, along with Ed Gein, was the inspiration for Norman. Norman Bates is a nerdish, single, middle-aged man who has never grown up and faced the real world on his own. Like Cliff Clavin on the TV sitcom *Cheers*, he masters the world the safe way, by absorbing trivia on all aspects of it. He would prefer to show his mastery by bedding women and by athletic achievement like his friend Sam, but he isn't really up for it. So he commands paper legions, armies of factoids. In Norman's case, he has "studied" Ouspensky's metaphysics and Aztec mummification. His world is exotic, but "his solid flesh had never been away." And yet Norman is a voyager on far-flung seas. He has journeyed farther than he knows and long lost his way. For his taxidermist hobby has expanded from birds to his mom. He has given the epithet "the Old Bag" a whole new meaning. Precisely in his horrific aspect Norman is a humorous caricature of the Momma's Boy. Robert E. Howard was mother-fixated to a tragic degree. He couldn't accept her death and so died coincident with her. Norman Bates could not accept it either, but he kept living with her even though she was dead. A Mummy on deNial. Howard's fate was tragedy; Norman Bates's is black comedy.

Bloch, having the gift of humorous X-ray vision, could see the subterranean link, even identity, between the terminal climax of a horror story ("Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper") and that of a joke ("She's decorating the tree"). Both use the same narrative strategy

of deferral and misdirection, hiding clues like Easter eggs, behind plausible motives and explanations that prove to be red herrings, duping the reader via his implicit expectations of verisimilitude. Things seem to be going along fine, everything copacetic, until—*zing!* He's gotcha. I don't mean to say Robert Bloch was alone in this vision or this technique. EC Comics did it, and so did several of the Slasher flicks of the '80s.

I have always viewed Bloch's writing as having emerged, like Lao-tzu, fully mature from the womb. The gestation of his art took place off-camera. We can witness a bit of the process in Lovecraft's letters to Bloch, as the older man comments, critiques, encourages his protege on his first efforts at fiction. But virtually none of these false starts survives. Soon young Bloch had leaped into the pages of *Weird Tales* and *Strange Stories* and was turning out the horrors faster than Herbert West (or, should I say, Dr. Barsac). Bloch's earliest published efforts still work their eerie magic and do not suffer by comparison with his many later works, unlike Lin Carter, who had a similar early period of energetic creativity but soon came to the end of it and kept going anyway. When Bloch was done with his early chillers, like Ray Bradbury, he simply went on to something else. He didn't get *better*; he just got *different*. He was like Odysseus, proceeding from one odd and wondrous island to another in the course of a long journey.

This book collects for the first time a variety of Robert Bloch's early stories from *Weird Tales* and *Strange Stories*. A few have been reprinted before, mostly in anthologies now long out of print. The majority will be new to you unless you have a pretty extensive collection of the original pulp magazines. As you would expect, these stories range from whimsical and maniacal humor to dark and eldritch horrors, and as usual, you may not even be able to notice when one changes over to the other. A few stories are marginal Cthulhu Mythos tales, a favorite prize for avid collectors. A pair of these, "Black Bargain" and "Philtre Tip" (the only post-pulp tale included here), feature Bloch's grimoire *Mysteries of the Worm*, while the trilogy formed by "The Druidic Doom," "The Dark Isle," and "The Power of the Druid" have subtle links, much fun to search out, not only with one another, but with Bloch's "Notebook Found in a Deserted House" and "The Brood of Bubastis." Of these, the former has further ripples connecting it with both Arthur Machen's "The White People" and Ramsey Campbell's "The Hollow in the Woods" (in his *Ghostly Tales* collection, Cryptic Publications, 1987). And speaking of collectors, I am grateful to Stefan Dziemianowicz who supplied the texts for this volume.

—ROBERT M. PRICE

Flowers from the Moon and Other Lunacies

The Druidic Doom

(Weird Tales April 1936)

It is written in the chronicles of olden days that the elder lore shall never die. Many savants concur in this view, and though the world may scoff, occasionally there arises some strange and dreadful proof in the shape of a mystery that cannot otherwise be explained. The ancient legends still remain, and they are still believed by the poor and the humble. These will always believe, for there will always be unusual occurrences which neither science nor religion can adequately explain and combat. I do not profess to espouse one side of the argument or another—I can but tell a story which I heard long ago in a land where the dark fables still hold sway.

THEY SAY ON THE COAST THAT WHEN SIR CHARLES HOVOCO CAME to Nedwick he was a proud and wilful man. He had trampled his way into the baronetcy as he had trampled his way in other affairs—business, political, and social. At thirty-eight this grubby, florid citizen was a “self-made” man. He was not, from the accounts I gathered, a likeable sort of person. He was too beefy, too matter-of-fact and hardheaded. In his rise from Whitechapel slums to the

pinnacle of industrial success there had been little of aesthetic endeavour and much of greed and ruthless cunning. Consequently, upon his accession to the Nedwick estates, he had made no attempts to ingratiate himself with the local citizenry, but merely ignored their presence.

This lack of tact was not overlooked by the neighbouring rustics in the village. A queer lot they were, steeped in archaic traditions, and not fond of outsiders. They disliked Sir Charles from the start, but they all seemed genuinely sorry for him when they learned of his fate. Some of them, however, seem to imply that there was an element of poetic justice in his tragic demise. If the man had not been so stupid, he would have heeded the warnings they had given him, and the tragedy might never have occurred. But Hovoco had merely laughed at their old wives' tales and blundered on upon his predetermined way. Therefore he died, because he did not understand.

When Sir Charles came to Nedwick House he found it in a lamentable state of decay; a condition he proceeded to remedy by importing a crew of artisans from Birmingham and renovating the edifice completely, both without and within. He had the left gable completely demolished, and erected a new wing jutting out from the main hall. Also he installed a heating-system and modern plumbing.

All this did not endear him to the country folk, who cherish the sacred memories of bygone days. To them this bustle of radical activity amounted to sacrilege, and insulted the Nedwickian traditions. The bland and confident way in which Sir Charles ignored their comments also met with their disfavour. He even had the temerity to order several of the more critical spectators off the premises, as these worthies stood scrutinizing the labourers' handiwork.

After that a distinct coolness manifested itself between the village and the manor. This coolness extended to the imported help as well, who were hard put to find board and lodging in the town below. Food for the new master was exorbitantly priced, and most carelessly delivered to the back door of the establishment. Sir Charles neither knew nor cared. He knew nothing of the villagers, and very little about his new estate.

Upon the completion of the restoration and the subsequent departure of the labourers, Sir Charles proceeded to remedy his ignorance concerning his recent acquisition. He took long rambles over the moor, and wandered down the narrow lanes that ran be-

tween the rocky, stunted acres of pasturage. What he saw did not altogether meet with his approval. The picturesque wildness of this rugged domain failed to please his practical eye. The gnarled trees and scrubby vistas of underbrush were merely impediments to profitable cultivation; the rocky meadows signified only the fact that the land was not suitable for grazing.

He climbed to the top of a smoke-ringed hill and surveyed his kingdom with a discontented eye. This would never do! Tangled brush and boulder-strewn fields were all very well for the fox-hunting aristocracy, but Sir Charles Hovoco was made of more rational stuff. There was simply no reason for all this fertile land going to waste; with a little clearance these broad acres would yield him quite a tidy sum of money. The fact that he already had plenty of money did not figure in his calculations. Sir Charles did not countenance waste, in any form. Even he, blind as he was, realized the possibilities of objections from the peasantry. He was familiar enough with the time-honoured customs which decreed the sacredness of the "right-of-way" through the land of a lord, and which held the violation of such privileges as nothing short of criminal. He vaguely understood how these folk were attached to the soil, and how the desecration of the familiar landmarks and alteration of the customary arrangements might lead to considerable annoyance. But this did not deter him. After all, precedent or no precedent, it was his land. He had paid a pretty price for his eminence, and would continue to render heavy tribute in the form of a sizeable tax. The peasantry could go hang! He would go ahead.

Before carrying out this somewhat rash resolution, he made several more inspection tours. It was on the third of these trips that he stumbled upon the altar.

It stood on a forest-ringed hilltop, very near to the moor. He came upon it late in the afternoon, at the conclusion of a long and arduous journey through the more adjacent portions of his property. The surrounding landscape held hints of great antiquity. The trees in the small grove were very thick, and tremendously old. The hoary stumps in the clearing were even more aged. The soil, nevertheless, was incredibly rich; seemingly it had never been tilled. The little hill on which the altar was raised seemed to be particularly fertile, though at present it was given over to a lush crop of mushrooms and toadstools.

The sight of such extravagant laxity irritated Sir Charles. He would have both trees and altar removed immediately.

He climbed the sloping mound and examined the stone that was reared upon it. It was a large boulder, smooth and very white, with a flat, tabled top. This tabled top bore some rusty stains—probably the ravages of the years; for the stone, like the surrounding glade, was very old. Why Hovoco thought so he could not say; it simply seemed to *exude* a quality of age. It was very heavy, and the base was firmly sunk into the sod, but Sir Charles soon decided that the altar was artificially placed. It seemed much too heavy a rock to be indigenous to the spot; the other glacial boulders were much smaller, and were of a distinctly limestone formation. This had obviously been a quarried block, and had probably been moved to this hilltop at some remote date. Once again Sir Charles pondered as to why he believed the altar must be old. He could arrive at no definite conclusion; nor could he assign a reason for his opinion. There was no moss upon the smooth white sides, nor any sign of an inscription. He knelt and searched for one, but in vain.

Meanwhile the sun crept away across the hills, leaving the land in the clutch of a sinister twilight. A violet haze deepened into dusk, and the shadows of the rustling trees crawled slowly across the ground. The altar, once white, glowed redly for a moment in the flames of an apocalyptic sunset, then purpled like congealing blood upon the advent of darkness. Hovoco's eyes could peer no longer through the hazy gloom. He abandoned his search for an inscription and rose to this feet. Stolidly he faced the sunset for a fleeting instant, then turned for a last look at the altar before descending and retracing his steps homeward. As he did so a shrill breeze arose and chattered mysteriously in the trees. Presently it sank to a slow, sobbing whisper, as if to mourn the dying day. In spite of himself, Hovoco was impressed. The sound was like a voice in a haunted land.

With the coming of darkness, the scene took on an unfamiliar look. The gloomy vistas seemed positively hostile to his presence, as if the entire countryside knew of Sir Charles' plans, and hated him because of what he meant to do. The doomed trees sighed, and stretched withered arms to the sky as if invoking vengeance against their enemy. The boulders loomed menacingly in the night, and the pastures beckoned him off into mystic mazes whence he would never return.

The very wind threatened him with its chill voice. Instinctively, the baronet shivered. Gloomy fancies! For a moment his eyes returned to the altar. It squatted there in the darkness, and seemed to brood like a sentient thing.

Sir Charles shrugged, then descended the hill and stalked off

into the night. Once he glanced back over his shoulder. A last tiny ray of sunset light was leering over the top of the hill. It fell directly upon the centre of the altar, and to Hovoco's startled eye it looked like a pool of blood.

Hastily Sir Charles turned away. But he walked home very briskly, and he did not look back any more. He was getting nervous.

With the coming of daylight, the new baronet recovered some of his accustomed aplomb. He spent the forenoon in the village, much to the natives' surprise. He dropped into the local tavern and had a glass of stout, leaning nonchalantly against the bar and wholly disregarding the unfriendly stares of the loungers beside him. After a pointed silence, during which he was uncomfortably scrutinized by the poker-faced barman, Sir Charles abruptly addressed that worthy, and enquired where he could procure some workmen in the village to assist him in getting his land in shape.

After an astonished bit of cogitation mine host asked him just what type of work he contemplated. Hovoco explained that he wanted to clear off his land to render it suitable for cultivation. He wanted some men to cut down the useless trees, and remove numerous stones that encumbered the fields. After that there would be rabbit-warrens to be destroyed, and birds to be killed. And, of course, there was the queer old altar off by the moorland. He would have that removed immediately.

The barman gazed at him for a moment in apoplectic silence. Then he bluntly informed the baronet that no man in the village would think of doing such things. They would not assist in the destruction of the old landmarks, and they most certainly would not go near the altar under any circumstances. Being a newcomer, Sir Charles would not know, but the altar was generally regarded as something to shun. It had an unhealthy reputation in these parts, and had always been looked upon as a blight and a curse. No one knew how long it had stood in those woods, nor how many had died in the old days when the drums had sounded from the hill. Wise folk said that the pagans had their dances there, and there was still talk of the old rites being celebrated on May Eve, and certain autumn nights. Bullocks had been led up that slope and given to Those who were worshipped, and some folk said that they still were. There always were a lot of farm people absent from their homes on special evenings, and without any excuses to offer the next day to the rest of the people, who had sense enough to stay indoors when the fire burned up on the hill. No, the altar was a good thing to stay away from. The grandsires could tell some wild

stories on winter nights about disappearances and deaths that had never been rightly explained. They didn't generally say much before outsiders, but even the Reverend Dobson, the clergyman, knew about the hill. What he probably was not aware of was the fact that some of his most loyal parishioners attended the furtive conclaves around the altar on the special nights, and carried secret charms that were handed down within their families from the days when the pagan folk ruled in the land. Therefore, the barman was of the earnest opinion that Sir Charles should keep his hands off, and carefully avoid even the mention of the altar or hilltop, and that under no circumstances should he foolishly attempt to destroy it. There would be trouble if he did.

At the conclusion of the innkeeper's advice, Sir Charles left the tavern, without saying a word. He was obstinate in his conviction, and he would not be baulked by the ignorant chatter of these yokels. Their silly superstitious prattle disgusted him, and their obvious unfriendly attitude wounded his city-bred pride. He would show them! He marched up to the local post-office and put through a telephone call to Birmingham. Here he engaged two workmen to come out immediately and assist him in clearing his property. This settled, he walked calmly out into the street. Tomorrow they would be here, and then he would give these country clods something to gabble about.

Meanwhile he was still human enough to entertain a keen curiosity concerning the details of the fantastic legendry which clustered about the altar on the hill. Accordingly he directed his footsteps towards the modest rectory where dwelt the local parson, the aforementioned Reverend Dobson.

He found that gentleman in his study, and introduced himself. The Reverend was a tall, wiry sort of man, with a shrewd face that was curiously counterbalanced by keen and sensitive eyes. Looking at his features, one thought of a successful broker, but a glimpse of his eyes betrayed the dreamer and the saint. The Reverend also proved to be a courteous gentleman. He so pleasantly engaged the new baronet in conversation that Sir Charles nearly forgot his errand. It was suppertime when he brought the matter around to his problem, and the clergyman hospitably urged him to stay. Hovoco consented, and they passed a pleasant time in the dining-room, served by the housekeeper in a style befitting the rank of the honoured guest. Afterwards the gentlemen adjourned once more to the study, and indulged in a glass of sherry.

The courtesies of this reception salved the baronet's wounded ego, and in consequence he was very tactful in the way he broached

the subject of the altar. He got it out at last, and managed to make his query seem merely the prompting of a curious interest he took in his estate.

The Reverend was very willing to help. He had spent a good deal of time in looking up local customs and bits of wayside llegendry, and a little archaeological research coupled with this knowledge had given him a good deal of the altar's history. This he would gladly impart to his guest.

The altar, he informed his visitor, was extremely ancient. While no exact date could be discovered, the time of its erection could probably be determined correctly enough by the chronology of the legends concerning it. The first tales were of pre-Celtic antiquity. When the local migratory streams had converged and set up a village upon the land, the altar was already placed. The stories had been handed down almost directly from this very remote time to the present, in a steady stream. Early myths spoke of the altar as being the gathering-place of an extremely repulsive barbarian race—short, swarthy savages, whose dwarfed priests sacrificed to the moon. They had many ceremonials, and in their warfare with the Celtic invaders they used their captives for these sanguinary rites. Eventually, through tracing the stories a bit further, one finds the primitive dark people dying out and retiring to the hills. Eventually they abandoned their claims altogether, and disappeared. For a long while following, the altar stood deserted. Then came a curious survival.

The Druids rose. Bearded vates and garlanded bards chanted their litanies to the gods of the forest. Oaks and hemlock rose beside the altar, and a crescent-shaped grotto was erected in the glade. Here dwelt the Wise Ones who knew the secrets of the hills and called strange voices out of the earth by beating upon the great drums, or scattering pungent incense before the night-fires. To the shrill pipings of lutes they did adoration to the Dark Flame, and with the hemlock they invoked the hamadryads and the nymphs of the forest. They ruled supreme, and all the countryside bowed and obeyed. Their magical rites ensured fertility, and increased the strength of their people. Rich offerings of blood were made in ever-increasing abundance, and the bleat of the faun and the shrill squeal of the centaur were heard in the land. Blood, blood, blood—ever the offering and the sacrifice—crimson drops dripping from knifeblades, dabbling the sacred robes and staining the grey beards of the elders, or trickling from the base of the altar to dye the earth with the colour of life.

The iron legions of Rome thundered their way across the land.

The gods of the forest were invoked in vain. They could not halt the legions. A garrison was stationed near by, and the Druids retired to their haunts in the moors. Roman customs were imposed, and the conquered ones began to turn from the old ways. Soon there was a gradual intermingling between the invaders and the natives, and a town sprang up around the garrison. Fresh arrivals came from Roman provinces across the sea, and they brought new gods to both the soldiers and the people. Cybele, Astarte, Aphrodite, and the Magna Mater were introduced, and the ways of their worship were explained and demonstrated.

Some of these rituals were very dreadful indeed, and there was need to hide them from over-curious official eyes. So the altar on the hill became a rendezvous once again. Here anthropomancy, hydromancy and animal-worship were carried out, and more blood tainted the night-wind from the hill. To the clashing of cymbals and the piercing ecstasy of the sacred conchs the nude worshippers danced in honour of the perverted gods that came from the orient lands. There were obscene images on the altar now, and mad orgies followed the initial sacrifice.

For a time the new faith prospered, and the followers grew still more abandoned in their lewdness. But one night there came a thunder across the hills, and the moonlight suddenly faded into a howling darkness. Then, while the worshippers frantically fled from the accursed and awful hilltop, a Voice shrieked a dreadful summons from afar, and the priests of the degraded cult screamed and died. The rest of the frightened congregation, men and women, soldiers and townsfolk alike, rushed into the forest. Here horror barred their way, for as the echo of that monstrous voice died away, the trees suddenly *came alive!* They swooped down upon the fugitives with tentacled branches, seizing the terrified debauchees and raising them up to the midnight sky; then dropped them to the earth below. A sudden gale had arisen, which effectively muffled their hysterical screams; so that it was not until a few straggling, half-insane fellows rushed into the town that the catastrophe was made known. The storm had meanwhile risen to such fury that it was impossible for any of the troops to venture forth again, and the story that the escaping worshippers had to tell did not encourage them in attempting any such expedition.

The next day dawned, and an immediate search was made, but no bodies were ever discovered. The trees were again in their proper places, and there were no indications of any violent upheaval. The altar was serene and silent, and there were no littered remnants of

the sacrifices to be seen. The torches, gongs, and other symbols had disappeared, and the sun beamed down upon a scene of pastoral tranquillity. Finally one of the searching soldiers happened to notice the top of the altar. There, squarely in the centre of the tabled surface, lay a single sprig of hemlock.

After this incident, recorded in the chronicles of local scribes, but for political reasons never relayed back to Rome, there were no furtive disturbances about the altar. The missing people never returned, and the few survivors who retained their sanity were of the belief that it was for the best. Though the affair may have been a result of sympathetic mass-hallucination, nobody could deny that the disputed supernatural happenings had brought some hideously tangible results. The altar was best left alone, and the land about it was never encroached upon.

Thereafter they had a healthy respect for the Druids, and not a little fear of them. There were many things about these dark moorland ways that could not be satisfactorily explained, and many obscure caves and hidden glens that were wisely left unexplored. Bearded oldsters in white robes occasionally appeared in some of the outlying villages, and the foreign soldiers were very cautious not to molest them, or hinder them in their comings and goings. For now the pompous conquerors knew better than to scoff at the dark ways of a land they did not understand. When reports came to them about the drums and pipes that echoed from the inaccessible forests on the moor they turned deaf ears. They did not care to hear that awful Voice, or see all nature metamorphosed into a maze of menace.

At last the legions marched away, almost as suddenly as they had come. With their departure things once more assumed their normal condition. The town still remained, but when the bearded ones trickled back from their hiding places, the old ways again held sway. The rites were resumed, and those who were sufficiently Romanized to object were mysteriously captured and burned in wicker cages upon the hills. After that the silent priestcraft reigned undisputed, and their gods did not lack for ruddy nourishment.

Gradually, however, the rites decayed. Fierce barbarian tribes ravaged the countryside. Anglo-Saxons ruled, and for the Druids they showed no mercy. They had their gods, too, and they were strong. There was no recurrence of the inexplicable phenomenon that had befallen the Roman devotees. What happened when the newcomers met the old ones in conflict has never been told. The manuscripts that the Reverend Dobson possessed were strangely

silent on this point. All that he had been able to learn was that in some curious way the Druidic priests suddenly disappeared. The grim invaders were unable to find them, though they were unafraid when it came to thoroughly exploring every portion of the forbidding countryside. There was one last mighty ceremony from the altar on the hill, and the next day they were gone. The tribesmen combed the moors in vain. Then they cut down the oaks and hemlocks, destroyed the crescent-glade, and let matters rest. The altar they were unable to remove, though attempts were undoubtedly made. Accounts are unnaturally hazy on this point, also.

Centuries passed. Gradually Christianity was introduced. The refining influences of civilization descended upon the land. A priory was erected near by. It was the good monks who chronicled the history of the surrounding regions, and they had likewise recorded the history of the altar. The latter they seemed to have avoided, though now only legend remained to warn them away. There were no repetitions of the archaic rites, and no disquieting evidence to encourage this avoidance, but nevertheless there were no attempts made to raze the pagan stone.

A new abomination rose and flourished later on. Returning knights from the Crusader citadels of Malta, Rhodes, and Cyprus established themselves in the priory. They brought with them the degenerate creed of Satanism, and there were loathsome rumours of a Black Mass. By now the country-folk were pious, and their simple concepts of religious reverence were outraged by the warrior bishops who ruled from within the walls of the monastery and abbey. Once again there was talk of Pan, and satyrs and oreads haunted the gloomy groves, or tittered across the lonely moor at twilight. Once again there was blood on the altar, and queer processions visited the hill on sacred nights. Still the Druids were not forgotten. Though the oaks were gone, and other gods were worshipped at their sanctuary, the peasants remembered the old tales, and feared the ancient horror more than they did the new.

The new passed. Henry VIII's minions swept down upon the robber bishops, and one night the priory disappeared in a red holocaust of flame. The next day the soldiers rode away, leaving only the dead behind them. They did not speak of what they found within the priory walls, nor did they venture near the altar, but it is recorded that their faces were deathly pale in the morning light.

The next night the villagers heard a faint drumming on the hilltop, and for a moment a tiny flame flickered and died. That was all, but it was enough. The Druids still reigned. Men might come

and go, kingdoms rise and fall, but the old ways still remained in the secret places.

Baron Nedwick won his spurs and his land under good Queen Bess. A castle rose at Nedwick, and hunters galloped across the verdant fields. The Nedwick line had prospered, and won esteem from village and countryside alike. Part of this popularity was due to the fact that they asked no questions about the altar, and did not hunt too far upon the moorland.

By now the altar was being used once again, but this time by the rustics themselves. Certain old women were known to have the gift of prophecy, and the dubious repute of possessing the evil eye. Oftentimes they retired to rude huts upon the moor, and consulted their familiars before the altar on the hill. Sometimes there was need of blood, and those that came to them for help were not averse to donating a heifer or a goat. By now the place was known throughout the land for what it was, and none but the followers of witchcraft and sorcery ever ventured near it. On certain nights these people were known to make use of it, but there were other nights when it appeared deserted, and a queer drumming was faintly heard from afar. Then even the witches were afraid, for they too knew and respected the olden tales.

There is little more to say. The witches passed, and once again the altar-top, or the fancied sound of nocturnal drumming from the hill; but in the opinion of the majority, it was now fairly safe to examine the spot. At certain seasons there were occasional sacrifices made quietly, but these were publicly disavowed by the more enlightened elements of the local population. Even so, the inhabitants still had their suspicions, and when the last of the Nedwicks died there had been a secret meeting on the hill.

The clergyman concluded his remarks by referring Sir Charles to the volumes he owned which dealt with the surrounding countryside; many of these contained references to the matter. Then he added a little advice. He was a man of God, he said, but even the Bible recognizes the Spirit of Evil. There was something wrong about that altar and the surrounding groves, something quite unsavoury. There had been too much blood spilt, too many unhalloved prayers. Throughout all its history the ancient Druidic rites had played a part, and the vates were evil men. As a close student of the Stonehenge legend, and other such manifestations of the Druidic powers, the Reverend Dobson was led to believe that their sway had not yet altogether ceased. Somewhere, in some place, there was a survival. There was still worship under the horns of the

resent. For this reason, although he was not ordinarily a superstitious man, the clergyman earnestly warned Sir Charles that he would do best to keep away from that portion of his land upon which the stone stood.

Hovoco thanked him for his narrative, and turned the talk to other fields. An hour later he departed, bidding the Reverend Mr. Dobson a pleasant good-evening. As he strode off into the night, however, his face became a mask of scowling determination. Druid humbug! The clergyman, for all his hospitality, was nothing but a credulous fool. The altar must go.

Morning heralded the arrival of the two working-men from Birmingham. Mr. Joseph Gauer and Mr. Sam Williams were sturdy, matter-of-fact souls, with a hearty dislike of the rural simpletons and their ways. Even so, Sir Charles thought it wise not to inform them as to the nature of the stone he ordered them to destroy. He did, however, accompany them to the spot to superintend their work. They procured tools from the battered car in which they came, and started off at a brisk pace over the meadows. It was a beautiful day. When they came to the grove they saw the altar clearly outlined against the blue background of sky. There was nothing sinister or disturbing about it in the least, for which fact Sir Charles was secretly very glad.

The two men set to work with a will. The task was difficult. First they dug around the base, spading up the firm earth until a narrow trench surrounded the stone. Then they began to use the picks, and finally the spades again. Sir Charles was surprised at the depth of the rock; it had been imbedded many feet. At last, however, their task was concluded. Using the picks as levers, they pried the great boulder loose, and with a tremendous heave, lifted it ponderously to one side. Then Sir Charles received a shock.

There was no ground beneath! Instead, a gigantic hole yawned where the stone had rested, and from it rose a putrid stench as of a thing long dead. The opening was circular, and very deep. A glimpse into the orifice did not reveal the bottom. A stone cast into the depths rebounded noiselessly from the earthen sides, and there was no sound to indicate how far it must have fallen.

Sir Charles bravely struggled to retain his composure at this unexpected revelation, and told the workmen to retire for the day. When they asked him about the hole, he informed them that in his opinion the thing was a former well, probably dry, whose shaft had been walled up. Then he hurriedly dismissed them, for he did not care to answer any further questions, or be asked to account for the nauseous odour that was still seeping from the gaping pit.

The men withdrew, and Sir Charles followed them at a distance. For the first time he was beginning to feel really afraid. He was forced to check a sudden impulse to recall the men and order them to replace the stone. Then he repressed the urge savagely. They would think him a fool, and he did not dare admit his fear, even to himself. Better to let them go. He watched them as they went off to find temporary lodging in the village, but all the while he was conscious of a black imp of anxiety tugging at his soul. At length he forced himself to go back to the manor and read, but he was far from feeling at ease.

By mid-afternoon he was so restless that he decided to run down to the city for the evening. He got out the car and left in time to arrive before the last rays of sunset. He did not want to be alone after dark right now. He spent the evening at a cabaret, and the night at a hotel, taking great pains not to be unaccompanied.

It must have been close to noon when he at last drove back into the village, his former composure now completely restored. But not for long. There was horrible news for him at the little town.

Gauer and Williams were gone. Not just disappeared, but gone forever. The story was simple. The tavern-keeper told him, with a touch of righteousness not unmixed with pity in his voice.

The two men had come into his place the afternoon before, to find rooms for a few days. The owner of the pub, not knowing, of course, the reason for their presence, had found room for them; though had he any inkling of their business he would have ordered them from his doors. The two men, once lodged, reappeared in the tavern below to get their evening meals. At first they held themselves aloof from the local habitues of the establishment, but after their supper they indulged in a few glasses of ale, and a gin-and-bitters. This encouraged them to let down their barrier of reserve, and look with more tolerance upon the friendly gathering that assembled for a nightly session about eight that evening. Soon the two men had introduced themselves by name, and became absorbed in the general conversation. One thing led to another, and by ten or so the jolly loungers were becoming tipsy. The two city men had bought several rounds for the assemblage, and the house had reciprocated in kind. All in all, it was a very pleasant and friendly little chat on things political, social, and economic.

The barman admitted to having several stiff drinks under his belt by this time, and in consequence he could not rightly testify to the events immediately precipitating the quarrel. It is quite evident, however, that somehow one of the men had unwittingly let slip the casual information that he and his companion were here at the

behest of Sir Charles Hovoco, for the purpose of reclaiming his land. They were, of course, totally ignorant of the general attitude on this affair, and were very surprised indeed by the reception accorded this statement. Several of their listeners had been among those present when Sir Charles had been there the afternoon before, and they took the lead in denouncing the two workmen for their contemplated part in the affair.

Here Gauer made another break. Testily he retorted that he, for one, didn't see what all this fuss was about—why, all they had done today, for example, was to dig up an old stone on a hill, and uncover some kind of abandoned well.

Immediately following this shocking revelation came a storm of horrified denunciation. No good would come of such doings; the Old Ones were not to be disturbed, nor their dwellings violated. A foul murrain upon such doings! There was a good deal of excited conjecture over the discovery that there was a shaft beneath the altar. God alone knew how old the stone was, and only the Devil could tell who burrowed the pit beneath it. Some wheezing oldster whispered a bit of ancient gossip about the Druidic days; his grand-sire had once spoken about the Druids worshipping before the altar as a *gateway*, and what could they mean but the passage or fissure beneath its base? The story about the Voice was revived, too—had it not come out of *the earth*? When the bards had disappeared, *where had they gone to*? The old ways still remain. It was a dangerous sacrilege that these men had committed, and only ill would come of it.

To this and similar statements the two labourers retorted in words of scorn and contempt. They would not be frightened by such boggy-man tales as these. They were not simple, superstitious country Reubens; they came from the city, where such foolish fancies were properly ignored. They did not believe in the stories, and furthermore they boldly expressed their crude opinions of any yokels who upheld such obvious falsehoods. The Druids, or whatever they were called, were nothing but myths. Perhaps some ignorant rustics had sacrificed animals on the altar? What of it? They were not afraid.

This drunken bickering continued to its tragic conclusion. One of the farmers, a grizzled simpleton named Leftwich, challenged the visitors' bluff. He offered to put up a pound note that the two of them would not dare to venture that very night upon the hill where the altar stood. The bet was immediately taken, despite the warnings that the aroused innkeeper offered. The dangers of such an

undertaking were ridiculed by the intoxicated non-believers, and after another round of drinks they started off, accompanied to the pasture nearest the hilltop by the farmer who had made the proposal. From there the two men went on alone, teetering slowly across the field with borrowed lanterns in their hands and a ribald song upon their lips.

The farmer stood watching them for a moment; then, suddenly, the moon went behind a cloud and the wind gave a sudden peal of mocking laughter. A strange horror assailed the now-sobered man, and unable to control his inexplicable terror, he hastily withdrew. As he did so he noticed that the faint notes of the song had died away, and the figures were lost to view in the blackness of the clouded night. All at once he found himself racing back in the direction of the village to get help. As he panted down the road he heard a booming from behind him, like the voice of muffled thunder. After that there was a piercing scream, then silence.

Breathlessly he ran into the village street, and re-entered the tavern. Ten minutes later a band of grim and earnest men streamed in a torchlight procession out of the little town and down the long road to the hills below the moor. The moon had reappeared, and when they reached the base of the pasture where the two workmen had cut across, they could see the top of the altar-mound quite plainly in the silver light. It was bare. The two men were nowhere to be seen. A few of the more daring volunteered to venture to the summit, while the rest combed the surrounding meadowland.

An hour later the party reassembled, and the delegation from the hill had a report. The men were not there now, but they had been. Perhaps the best idea of what happened to them could be gathered from the fact that one of their hats had been discovered not three feet from the opening below the altar-piece. The grass upon the hilltop was curiously trampled, and though there were definite tracks in the dewy grass which led up to the summit, there were no footprints going down. That was all.

Sir Charles heard this story with incredulous mien. "Dreadful," he said. "Dreadful, but perfectly natural. The two fools were drunk. They reached the top, overbalanced, and fell in. For that matter, you and Leftwich are almost legally responsible for countenancing such a stupid and outlandish wager. This affair will have to be thoroughly investigated and reported now, and may cause no end of trouble. I shall have to summon the police tomorrow, and I warn you I shall hold you and your companions morally responsible for this unfortunate occurrence. Good day!"

The baronet turned on his heel and moved rapidly in the direction of Nedwick Hall. He was never seen in the village again.

The rest of the story was told by the Reverend Dobson, and it is to this clergyman that the responsibility goes for its authenticity. Sir Charles disappeared into his study at the Hall immediately upon entering it. What went on in there between two in the afternoon and nine in the evening we shall never know. Did he at last come around to a belief in the macabre causes of the tragedy? Did his tormenting conscience urge him to make an atonement? Nobody can say. Whatever his feelings, he is known to have left the house at nine, hastily, without speaking to the servants or accounting for his actions in any way. He was haggard and dishevelled, but he almost ran down the road in the direction of the clergyman's abode. He never went in. Whatever his purpose in coming, he changed his mind at the last moment.

It was then, as he stood hesitant upon the doorstep, that Dobson, glancing out of the window, saw his tortured face. He watched Sir Charles as he turned, and with a shudder of inward agony, began to hasten back down the road along which he had come. Thinking he might be ill, the clergyman hastily put on his hat and followed him. But even as he hurried after the retreating baronet, Dobson was forced to revise his opinion. No sick man could set so brisk a pace. For a moment the reverend gentleman was minded to retrace his steps, but the mystery of his guest's peculiar behaviour drove him on.

Suddenly Sir Charles left the road and began to cut across the open country behind the village. He no longer walked erect. Instead he seemed to *lope*. It was as if he were ashamed of being seen, and yet in a hurry to reach his destination. It was frightening to see him scurry across the fields, like some great, misshapen animal. When he saw this, Dobson was prompted to call out to Hovoco, but he refrained. For a long while they continued in silence.

Sir Charles skulked ahead, never once looking back. His eyes were set upon the grove of trees and the little hill, and his body moved as if under the spell of some unnatural compulsion. Was he going to investigate the rumours for himself? Or was he being *forced* to go? He seemed unable to stop, and now, lanternless, and without a guide, he was racing over the rocky field that led to the trees.

Dobson followed as speedily as he could. He was still several hundred yards behind, however, when the hurrying figure of the

baronet disappeared amid the grove of twisted trees. The Reverend strained his muscles in pursuit, striving to overtake his man before Hovoco reached the top of the hill; for it was by now hideously evident that that was his objective. As Dobson entered the little glen, the moon disappeared, and his quarry faded from sight. He strained his ears to detect the sound of footsteps in the darkness ahead, but in vain. Instead there was another sound.

A drumming in the earth. The ground beneath his feet began to seethe with muted sound; a hellish drone of muffled beats rose upon his ears. He stumbled through the blackness, the ghastly thunder raging in the very depths of his being. If only he could reach that hill in time! Sir Charles was being lured to his doom, just as the blundering workmen had been snared. The Old Ones were about to claim their own!

Choking and gasping for lack of breath, the clergyman emerged at last at the base of the little hill on which the altar lay. His eyes pierced the blackness and sought out the blurred form of the baronet. He was nearly at the summit now, and the drums were yammering from within the very hillside itself. To Dobson's watching eyes came the maddening vision of Sir Charles Hovoco on all fours, frantically running up the slope with a bestial eagerness apparent in the very outlines of his body. As he covered the final slope the drums suddenly ceased.

For a moment there was silence, and Dobson saw the baronet, risen to his full height, gazing as if entranced into the black pit at his feet. Then came a single nightmare scream from Sir Charles' foaming lips, and a second later his feet began to slide along the ground towards the great gaping mouth of the opening. Then, as the scream died in his throat, the moon came out, and for an instant his straining body was clearly outlined against the leering sky. Then it toppled forward and disappeared into the black burrow below. But in that instant the Reverend Dobson had seen that which sent him reeling from the accursed spot; had seen in the silvery moonlight *the clutching hands from the pit that had grasped Sir Charles by his ankles and were dragging him to his doom.*

That's the story. Dobson swears to it, and those in the village who know are inclined to believe. Outsiders have been told that the three deaths were accidental, and this plausible and sane surmise has been officially accepted. Another man occupies the Hall today, and he knows enough to keep his hands off what he does not understand. The natives have relapsed into a careful silence, and

discourage all references to the altar, the glade on the hillside, or the legends of the Druids. They hope, in time, that the affair will be forgotten, and already they are beginning to deny any belief in the truth of the ancient lore.

But this has not prevented them from carefully replacing the altar over that ominous opening on the hill, and carefully bathing it from time to time with *fresh*, rich blood.

Fangs of Vengeance

(*Weird Tales* April 1937) as Nathan Hindin

CAPTAIN ZAROFF WAS NOT HIS REAL NAME. BUT THEN, OF COURSE, it did not happen at Stellar Brothers Circus, either. Both appellations are fictitious, though the facts—more the pity—are all too true. I know, for I was there to see the drama unfold; a drama of death and blood-stained vengeance, set against the glittering background of circus make-believe.

The affair occurred, fortunately, in winter quarters. That is the only reason it was fortunate enough to escape press notice. Despite its sensational aspects, I am very thankful that we were able to hush the whole thing up. It is not good for the common herd to know too much, and there are certain terrible questions in connection with it that are extremely difficult to answer. All that has ever leaked out is that Captain Zaroff met death in the big cage during a rehearsal of his act, and that his animals were shot in a vain effort to save him. Concerning the Ubangis, the press was informed that due to disagreements over salary, they severed their connection with the show.

There was something wrong from the very start that winter. We had had a bad season, and the old man decided that innovations were in order. Culper sent out an agent for the Ubangi troupe—six duck-billed and exceedingly ugly savages, only a year removed

from their native jungles. But the old man didn't stop there, either. He decided to go back to wild animal acts—a policy we had discarded some eight years previous. He argued that the public wants excitement—the cracking of whips, the snarling of sullen cats, the roaring of restless lions.

Now for some unknown reason, the majority of the larger shows have abandoned the cat acts within the last ten years. The result is that good animal-trainers are mighty hard to find. Practically the only ones available are European and they're scarce enough. So the old man counted himself lucky when a German agency sent him Captain Zaroff.

He arrived early in January. I wasn't there at the time, but he was described as very distant, and very foreign. He had his own quarters, and special cages for the nine leopards in his troupe. He even insisted on keeping his personal assistant to clean the wagons and feed the animals. These affectations of exclusiveness, coupled with his extremely reserved manner, did not win him any friends. He, on his own part, seemed unmindful of the circus people; eating alone, sleeping in his own private wagon on the winter grounds, and devoting all his time and attention to his act.

There were many vague and conflicting rumors floating around concerning the man. For one thing, there were speculations as to his age and nationality. It was said that he was just back from Africa, and that he was breaking in these jungle leopards for the new act. Another version of the story represented him as being driven from the Continent in disgrace, following a scandal over a woman. By the time I returned to headquarters, the whole show was engaged in wild speculation. I disregarded it all.

Then I saw him work. It was the first time, and only the old man and I were present in the barn-like hippodrome which held the great steel cage. Zaroff had promised the old man something distinctively different. He got it.

Picture to yourself a vast wooden arena, with white, bare walls that reflect hideously all the glare of a hundred overhead lights. In the center, a steel cage. Two assistants stand beside it, tense and alert. Occasionally, they finger nervously with their guns—guns that are not loaded with blanks. The boss and I sat on chairs placed near the door, our eyes glued on the runway. The old man chewed viciously on the stub of his cigar. The atmosphere was charged with the static electricity of fearful expectation.

There are no bands playing in the winter quarters, no happy, cheering crowds. No clowns perform their antic drolleries to ease the tension with a laugh. Working with newly broken jungle beasts

is by no means the same safe routine as a developed act. The real danger does not strike after the spectacular routine is perfected; it comes before, during the long, slow hours of winter training. It was with this thought in our minds that we waited in that silent, empty barn; waited, and worried.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a moan. From the wooden runway on the other side of the steel cage came the soft and purposeful padding of velvet feet—and the scrape of razored claws. Short, guttural coughs echoed in the air. At the same time our nostrils were filled with a warm, fetid odor of jungle musk—the wild-beast smell that makes the short hairs rise on the nape of one's neck. More coughs—amplified to a menacing roar in the vast silence of that looming atmosphere. They were coming!

Down the runway stalked a tawny shape—the spotted, sinister shape of a giant African leopard; graceful as a serpent and beautiful as death. Green eyes roved restlessly over the arena with an emerald glare. Yellow fangs parted, revealing a long, slavering tongue. The beast slunk stiff-legged around the arena, then turned to us with a roar. I suddenly realized that I was bathed in perspiration.

Another yellow body catapulted into the cage. Like a streak of amber lightning it leapt to the bars and clawed madly at the steel. Suddenly it subsided, and sank to the sawdust in a spasm of insanely hysterical laughter. A third spotted devil entered, suavely. Like an overgrown cat it purred, mincing its way as it made a circuit of the cage. Feline-like, it rolled over on its mottled back, exposing a sleek belly beneath which muscles played like bands of pliable steel. The other two animals growled deeper still. Then, like a golden avalanche, a horde of fanged furies raced down the runway—six snarling demons charged into the arena, and hell broke loose. In a moment the steel enclosure became a maelstrom of yellow shapes, tearing with frenzied talons at the iron barriers, and howling in fiendish chorus to the skies. There was death in their claws, hatred in their foam-flecked jowls, and blood-lust in their feral eyes. Beasts of the jungle, awaiting the coming of man.

They did not wait for long. Into the hippodrome stalked Captain Zaroff. A tall, thin, commanding figure of a man, his was the walk of a conqueror. Beneath his gorgeously-eпаuletted red coat I sensed the strength of supple sinews; the resiliency of his walk betrayed a perfection of muscular control. His face was immobile, but his eyes held a faint tinge of amusement. Slightly graying black hair worn in pompadour style, and a tiny waxed mustache—by these signs alone did he betray his foreign birth.

With a brief nod to the old man, he motioned the two assistants

to unbar the cage. I gasped. For Zaroff had no chair! All he carried in his hand was a whip to face nine ravening wild beasts, mad with animal excitement!

Clang. Steel grated on steel. The cage door was open. Quickly, Zaroff stepped inside—into that maelstrom of bared fangs, raking claws, and supple bodies crouched to kill. A roar of animal ferocity greeted his appearance. I gasped. Zaroff, weaponless in that vast cage with a jungle cat! Every trainer carries both gun and chair during the breaking in of a new cat routine. With the points of the chair outthrust before him he can ward off the sudden charge of a nervous beast. The animal, confused by the underside of the chair presented before him, usually bruises his nose and paws on the four projecting legs. For many years this protection, slim as it is, has saved dozens of trainers' lives. But Zaroff had no chair. Nor was there a gun at his hip. Alone, he faced them—a sneer on his face and a whip in his hand; man's eternal defiance of the brute.

For an instant he stood there just inside the cage, while ten feet away jungle eyes roved restlessly, jungle bodies flexed stealthily, jungle throats roared fearsomely. Suddenly, a leopard detached itself from the rest and began, ever so slowly, to edge its way forward on its belly. It was the big cat that had entered first. Zaroff watched it, his face flushed. To all intents and purposes the beast's body appeared relaxed, but it was slinking forward nevertheless, and its yellow tail lashed in fury.

Without warning, the leopard sprang. Into the air it soared, straight for Zaroff's shoulders; red maw glistening, ferocious claws outspread to rend, and tear, kill and destroy. Swift as the attack was, Zaroff had anticipated it. His hand shot out, loosing the thongs of the whip. The lash hissed like a serpent as it wriggled through the air. The heavy, weighted end curled smoothly around the spotted murderer, imprisoning the tawny neck and jerking the feline's body to the ground, where it lay choking and gasping for several moments. The other cats, meanwhile, had retreated to the other side of the cage. Zaroff, drenched and panting, turned his head to us—and smiled!

Then began the most amazing animal routine in circus history. While the old man and I trembled and the assistants gasped in awe, Zaroff, with only a whip in his hand, put those animals through paces so amazing that they pass the bounds of credibility. The beasts did everything but fly. Balancing, juggling, jumping, group-posing—everything in the regular wild-animal show repertoire was used and improved on. At the sound of Zaroff's whip every cat was

in its place. Despite snarls, growls, and obvious attempts to buffet the trainer from their perches, the creatures obeyed him perfectly. It was a great act—and I sighed with relief when it was finished.

The old man waxed enthusiastic. Surely Captain Zaroff would make show history! How he ever got new cats intelligent enough to build a routine like that was a mystery. Zaroff should be more careful, though. It was a bad business, going into the cage with only a whip.

After we left the hippodrome I went over to the front office for a quiet smoke. Somehow I couldn't agree with the old man. The act was good, no doubt, but there were some queer things to be explained.

To begin with, I know enough about the big cage to realize that no trainer could do what Zaroff had done when his animals hated him. An act is built very slowly, one animal at a time; for the tamer must instill trust and respect into the minds of his performers. Learning the tricks is a task founded on affection for the teacher.

Yet the leopards hated Zaroff—hated and feared him!

Then, too—Zaroff knew that they were dangerous and unfriendly. Even a well-trained leopard is never *tame*, as a lion or a bear can be. And despite that knowledge, the captain was foolish enough not to use a chair.

Surely there was some mystery here. New African leopards and a foreign trainer who dislikes strangers. Private cages for the beasts, and a special attendant. A wonderful act, beautifully performed by raw beasts who are openly antagonistic to their trainer.

I recalled some of the rumors floating around the lots concerning Zaroff and his cats. Something about queer adventures in Africa. Oh, well it was all nonsense—the man was merely a skilful trainer. But even a skilful trainer cannot make his animals work so *intelligently*. The whole thing was very strange. I decided to keep an eye on the man and wait for something to turn up. I didn't have to wait very long.

Three days later the Ubangis arrived. They had been signed for the act in New York, and were shipped south under the personal supervision of Culper himself. To me they proved a woeful disappointment. Six small, timid-looking blacks; three male and three female—their only exotic feature was the widely publicized lip deformity that gave them mouths projecting almost a foot from their faces. Even this barbaric feature looked sadly incongruous, since all six wore American clothes. Imagine a Harlem flapper with lips a foot

long and eight inches wide and you will get some picture of what I saw.

But the old man was pleased. The Ubangis must have special quarters. Was their interpreter here? He trusted that none of them had suffered overmuch on the journey. He hoped they would find the accommodations sufficiently comfortable. In the face of all this effusiveness, the blacks remained nervously silent. Without a word they suffered themselves to be led off to their sleeping-quarters.

During the next few days the Ubangis kept us busy. Not only did we have our hands full trying to explain their part in the performance through an interpreter, but we also had to contend with a really profound ignorance. They obviously knew the meaning of money—dollars meant francs, and francs meant luxury back on the Ivory Coast. That was why they had signed up. But as to the meaning of their duties, they were completely in the dark. Personally, I was not able to work up any enthusiasm over the whole venture. The poor savages were unhappy, the old man was unhappy, and the prospects of box-office draw were uncertain. But the old man had to touch off the fireworks.

He decided to stage one of the preliminary rehearsals, and arranged for the Ubangis to attend. There they could actually see a circus, and perhaps their part would be easier to understand thereafter. I was not pleased with the idea, but it was carried out. The six blacks occupied one of the observation booths, and the show went on.

At first everything went smoothly enough. Even the savage can appreciate the instinctive appeal of clown humor, and realize the agility of the aerial performers. They beamed like carefree children and jabbered constantly among themselves.

I was waiting for Zaroff. I knew that for the past few days he had been rehearsing at great length, and was eager to observe the changes or improvements in his act. The rest of the show waited, too. They had never seen him work, and the rumors had only whetted their curiosity.

The act went on. For fifteen minutes all eyes were glued on that steel cage. Zaroff outdid himself that day. His whip forever cracking, he put the carnivores through their paces in a way to keep everyone's attention riveted to the arena.

At last, when the coughing, snarling leopards had bounded back down the runway into their cages, the boss and I turned to the Ubangis to get their reaction.

It was not slow in coming. The entire troupe were excitedly haranguing one another in their box. At length they approached us, headed by their interpreter.

Hesitatingly, he announced that the troupe would not play in the show; that it resigned. Nor would he give any further explanation, save that the Ubangis did not care for Captain Zaroff and his act.

The boss fumed, swore, threatened, entreated, and pleaded. It did not avail. The savages left the following day.

But before they departed I went around and had a talk with their interpreter myself. Somehow I sensed a mystery behind their reasons for departure, and I questioned the man very closely. At last he abandoned his reserve and told me the details as he had overheard them.

Briefly, the Ubangis did not like Zaroff's act, but their aversion did not have a natural cause. They were going because they thought Zaroff himself was a witchdoctor; because they had heard him *talk to his animals*.

Naturally I was inclined to scoff at this statement. But then I began to remember certain details. Zaroff lived alone, took care of his animals alone. He had his own cages, his own assistant keeper. He avoided company, and spent most of his time with the beasts. It was quite possible that he did talk to his leopards.

But when I told the interpreter, he laughed. The Ubangis knew of such men, and feared them. Zaroff was a wizard, for they could see that he talked to the animals and they answered him! They had seen Zaroff growl in the cage as if he himself were a beast, and they saw the leopards answer his commands. The man was an evil shaman.

That was the substance of the Ubangis' complaint, as I got it from the interpreter. I left him a puzzled man. There was something hidden away in my brain that was beginning to bother me as it tried to edge into consciousness. Something about leopards.

The next day brought a train of events which further puzzled me.

I was walking through the menagerie quarters when the affair began. It was midafternoon, and the place was deserted, for the entire troupe was over in the arena for regular rehearsals. I rounded the horseshoe bend where the regular cages stood, and passed by the partitioned section. Here Zaroff's leopards were quartered. Behind the canvas which screened the cages from the rest I caught

a glimpse of booted feet. That would be Zaroff himself, feeding the beasts. Low moans and bestial laughter drifted over the canvas walls.

Then all at once I heard a sudden roar, louder than the rest, and a terrible clang of bars. Zaroff's voice rose in an angry curse, and it was answered by a terrible growl. Suddenly a streak of spotted lightning leapt through the side of the canvas, which shredded before saber claws. One of the leopards had escaped.

It landed on its feet and stood crouching there not a dozen feet before me; a great, tawny monster with flaming fury in its evil eyes. Slaver dripped from its wrinkled, furry snout as it glared at me with unmistakable menace. Its back stiffened, and I broke out into a cold sweat as the fanged horror edged toward me, tensing to spring. Quivering with fright I watched it, unable to move, or even breathe. Its feline gaze held me hypnotically rigid; for I knew that I was staring at the face of Death. The leopard gathered itself for a leap.

Crack! The sound of Zaroff's whip broke the tension. The tall figure stepped into view from behind the canvas, blazing fury in his face. At the sound of his master's approach the sullen carnivore turned. With a snarl it gazed up into the captain's face, but its body was still crouched and ready to hurtle in attack.

Then I heard with my own ears that which my mind told me could never be. I heard Zaroff talk to his leopard!

Low barks and growls issued from his throat. The voice of a beast came from human lips. And the leopard answered! Cringing, it fawningly approached its trainer, growling in return. And its growls and cries held a note that was dreadfully, unmistakably *human!*

It was hideous to hear a beast murmuring like a man and a man roaring like a beast. I trembled afresh as Zaroff, with cries of animal rage, brought his whip down over the leopard's shoulders; brought it down with full force again and again until the poor creature's dappled hide was streaked with crimson stains. And all the while it kept whining, purring, pleading in monstrously human tones, while Zaroff screamed like a great cat.

With never a look or word for me, he drove the leopard to its quarters. From behind the canvas I heard the bars grate into their place once more, and then Zaroff reappeared.

This time he was not alone. There was a woman with him—a beautiful woman.

She was tall and slim, like a Grecian Diana, with a body of

ivory and hair like ebony. Jade-green eyes dominated her aquiline face, contrasted oddly with her vivid red-lipped mouth and tiny white teeth. She wore a regal velvet dress which stood out incongruously amidst the sawdust atmosphere surrounding her.

I prided myself on knowing the entire personnel of our show, but I had never seen the woman before.

Zaroff, after apologizing to me for the disturbance, introduced her as his wife, Camille. The woman bowed graciously, but remained silent, eyeing her husband with restrained anger. I was speechless.

I had never known that Zaroff was married. I was just beginning to realize that there were a lot of things about him that I didn't know; a lot of things requiring considerable explanation. The scene I had just witnessed, for example. He was explaining about that now.

With elaborate ostentation he again apologized for the accident. The beast had escaped as he was feeding it. He was very sorry, and he would see that it did not occur again. He would be extremely pleased if I would refrain from reporting the affair to the management; it would unnecessarily upset people, he explained.

Here the woman broke in.

"He's lying, *M'sieu*. It will happen again, I know. You must report it; it happened in Europe, and a little boy was killed. He did nothing to prevent it, *M'sieu*, even when it began to—feed. You must make him stop beating them—it frightens me. Please, tell them and make them stop him. Please!"

Zaroff's countenance, as he listened to this recital, turned red with rage. He raised his whip—the long, cruel whip, still red from the lashing of the leopard—and brought it down on the woman's back with full force. She screamed, once. Then he seized her, and without a backward glance, bore her behind the canvas.

I stood stunned at the rapidity of events, then stumbled off to my own quarters. I wanted to be alone and think.

Zaroff—a foreigner whom nobody knew; a man who beat his leopards and his wife. Zaroff—the most brilliant trainer I had ever seen; hated and feared by his animals, yet obeyed. Zaroff—the man who talked to his cats like a beast, while they answered with the cries of men; Zaroff, whom the Ubangi savages denounced as a witch-doctor and wizard. Who was this man? What was he? Why was he so furtive and unfriendly? What was he doing to his wife that made her hate and fear him as much as the leopards did?

Before the show opened that year I must find out. And Camille

Zaroff, I decided, was the woman who could and would tell me.

Show business occupied my time heavily for the next few days, but the mystery of Zaroff still occupied my thoughts. Somehow, I was beginning to hate the man. I disliked his cruel, unsmiling features, his reticent, almost disdainful manner, and his pompous, arrogant walk. I did not care for the way he treated his feline charges, and I did not wonder that his wife was afraid.

His wife—there was another angle. When I saw her she had been afraid, but I could see that she wanted to speak. Perhaps that was why Zaroff had kept her away from the rest of the show people. Maybe she was his prisoner, because of what she knew. He had beaten her with the whip. . . .

He beat her often. Several nights later, as I went through the menagerie quarters on my way to the main office, I saw a light behind the canvas partition where Zaroff's tent stood. I'm not by nature or inclination an eavesdropper, but no one could ignore the shouts that came from the other side. The voices were audible throughout the deserted menagerie, and I recognized the guttural tones of Zaroff blending with the thrilling, husky speech of his wife, Camille.

"I will tell them all," she was saying. "I can't stand it any longer, do you hear? Knowing what I know, and seeing what I see. Unless you stop this dreadful business, I will tell them all."

A cynical laugh, almost gloating in its sardonic cadence. That would be Zaroff.

"Oh, no you won't, my dear. I have been gentle with you in the past—too gentle. But if you persist in making these—ah—demonstrations, I can take harsher measures."

"I'm not afraid of you any more. Tomorrow I shall go to him who is the head of this show and tell him the truth. You will no longer keep me caged up here like one of your beasts."

Again that mocking cackle of laughter from the man.

"So—I shall no longer cage you as I do my beasts, eh? We shall see. You know about my leopards, and what happened on the Guinea Coast, eh? Well—how would you like it if I were to—"

The voice trailed off here into a loathsome whisper, then culminated again in peal after peal of demoniacal mirth.

"No!" the woman screamed. "You dare not do that. I will go now—do you hear me?—now! I'll tell them all! Oh!"

There was a low moan, and then the hateful sound of a striking whip. Again and again I heard the hiss of a lash.

Clenching my hands in a frenzy of fury, I bit my lips to keep from crying aloud and rushing into that tent. I wanted to tear the whip from that unnatural monster and flog him. Red anger surged and poured into my brain, but something held me back.

There was more to this than a domestic quarrel. That woman, with her half-heard hints of secret things, was being mistreated for a purpose. It would do no good to accost Zaroff himself for an explanation and it would be worse than useless to precipitate a scene before the entire company. No, diplomacy urged me to wait. Tomorrow I would seek an opportunity to speak to Camille Zaroff alone. She would gladly talk then. Perhaps things could be straightened out.

Meanwhile, the show went into its final rehearsal in two days, and Zaroff was a good animal-trainer. I decided to bide my time, and left the tent. But that night I dreamed of a man, a leopard, and a whip. And the dream was far from pleasant. . . .

The next day brought with it an entirely unexpected surprize. At nine o'clock a man walked into my office and casually took a seat. Looking up, I gazed into the impassive face of Captain Zaroff.

I was astonished. The man had never come to me before; he habitually kept away from the rest of the company. Concealing both my surprize and distaste, I asked him his business.

"I am bringing in a new animal for my act," he said, calmly.

For a moment I was too startled to speak. The final dress rehearsal only two days away, and he was going to work a new cat! It was unheard of. I told him so. Besides, what did he need a new leopard for?

"Do not worry," he assured. "It is already broken in; I—I had it shipped here this morning. And it is not a leopard—it is a black panther."

A black panther! That *was* a novelty. A trifle mollified, I told him that he would have to take the matter up with the boss.

"I will rehearse tomorrow afternoon," he agreed, suavely. "Would you care to come over and look at the animal?"

Together we walked across the lot and entered the menagerie. There were ten cages behind the canvas partition now. In nine were the leopards; the other held the new beast. We approached the bars.

There is nothing more beautiful than a black panther. Sleek, sinuous grace is personified in its ebony body, and aristocratic poise blazes forth from its jade eyes. Its nervous pace is regal; it is a picture of dignified beauty even when enraged. Consequently I

expected much of Zaroff's acquisition. But I was to be disappointed.

The animal crouched behind the bars, its body limply lolling on the floor of the cage. Its exquisite black coat was disheveled, and on its back I detected the marks of the whip. Had Zaroff already begun his usual practises? The animal's eyes were lusterless; they gazed on me with a sort of dazed, numb expression in their depths. It whined, piteously, and once again I was shocked at the almost human tones in the throat of a jungle beast. When Zaroff approached closer, the panther cringed, and crawled away from the bars.

"Is it sick?" I inquired.

Zaroff smiled. "No, my friend. Perhaps the journey has tired it—the change, shall we say? It will be all right."

The great black cat whined dolefully. It kept staring at me with those amber eyes—staring and staring, as if it were humanly aware of my presence. With a slight shudder, I turned away. In order to make conversation, I casually asked after the health of Zaroff's wife.

A queer look came into the man's face.

"She—she has gone away," he said. But his stolid features were averted. "She has been nervous and ill of late, so I thought it would be best if she went for a rest instead of going out with the show. We had an argument last night, and she took the train this morning."

The man is lying. Accuse him.

The words ate their way into my brain.

He may have beaten her to death.

But such thoughts were mad. My eyes searched wildly for something on which to rest; something to divert my thoughts. I looked at the leopard cages. The cats were all curled up somnolently near the bars, as if they had just eaten. As if they were sated with food, rather.

Maybe he fed her to the leopards.

Was I really going insane?

She was going to tell a secret. I heard him threaten her with something, and he spoke of leopards before she screamed.

Why not? No one would ever know.

My mind rocked with chaotic confusion. The woman was gone; as we passed the living-quarters I saw that the tent was empty and I knew he never allowed her to wander free. What had become of her?

Zaroff watched me with an enigmatic smile. Did he suspect?

"I will see you at rehearsal tomorrow," he said. "Good day."

I stumbled out into the menagerie. As I passed the last cage the panther raised its head and moaned.

I often wonder how I got through the rest of that day. The morbid suspicions that preyed on my mind had come to a harrowing climax. I kept thinking of Zaroff, and the queer rumors I had heard about the man. His leopards were queer, his act was queer, his whole history was shrouded in a cloak of nebulous dread. His wife knew, and she had disappeared. I must find out the truth.

But perhaps I was wrong. Imagination, once unleashed, can distort facts immeasurably. Possibly his wife had left. True, he had beaten her, but they do such things on the Continent. The leopards were queerly trained, but Zaroff was an eccentric man. Was I unduly suspicious?

These two conflicting trains of thought ran riot through my brain. The afternoon was a dream. I performed my routine functions automatically, but I could not forget. I neglected to inform the boss that Captain Zaroff had a new black panther, and I said nothing about the rehearsal on the following day.

That night was the beginning of the end.

What impelled me I cannot say, but I felt that I must learn the truth. So at midnight I rose from my restless cot and staggered off to Zaroff's quarters. The lot was black and deserted, save for the looming shadows that lurked and capered in the corners beneath a leering yellow moon.

There was a light in Zaroff's tent when I entered. How I meant to excuse myself or what I intended to say I did not know. But Zaroff took the situation into his own hands.

He was quite drunk. There was a bottle on the table before him, and another on the floor. He sat there sprawled back so that he resembled a seated corpse in the dim light, and his face was equally pale. He had discarded his uniform, but the ever-present whip still rested on the ground beside him.

"Sit down, my friend," he mumbled. His foreign accent became more noticeable under the influence of liquor.

I seated myself beside him and haltingly began to talk. But his libations had made him loquacious, and he interrupted.

I cannot say to this day what got him started, or whether he was too drunk to understand, but he told me plenty.

Somehow he launched out on the story of his career during the

war. He had, it seems, been an officer in the "Belgische Congo." Later, he had become an animal trader in Senegal, and served as guide to several expeditions on the Sierra Leone coast.

I let him ramble, occasionally prompting him to refill his glass. Sooner or later, I believed, something would slip out. It did.

As the shadows about us deepened, his voice became lower and more confidential. He was speaking of the blacks now—the furtive, sinister blacks of Sierra Leone, who practised voodoo and obeah rites in the hidden swamps. He told me of the witch-doctors who invoked the Crocodile God to the beat of jungle drums; spoke of the snake-gods of secret, inner Africa. And he whispered of the Leopard-men.

I had heard of them before—the human leopards of Sierra Leone, whose cult was dedicated to the beasts of the forest. They were said to be vampires, possessing the power of anthropomorphism; that is, they could, by means of secret spells, become leopards themselves. This they were reputed to do, at certain times. As leopards they lay in wait for their enemies and destroyed them, or else invoked their rites to transform their foes into animals. I had read newspaper stories about the British police and their futile efforts to stamp out the dreaded clan.

Zaroff, mumbling incoherently, told me of these things again; spoke of how he himself had been initiated into the Leopard Cult one night beneath the waning autumn moon that gloats over Africa when the devil drums boom in nighted swamps. He told me of the spells he had learned from the shriveled arch-priests, and of the powers he could invoke by chants and rituals.

"Remember the legend of Circe?" he whispered, and his eyes were alight with unnatural flame. "Man into beast. Man into beast."

Abruptly he recovered himself once more, and changed the subject. By now he was so drunk that his voice slurred unintelligibly as he droned on. All I could catch were occasional phrases, but that was enough.

"I decided to show the fools a real act . . . knew the proper spells . . . rest was easy . . . nobody suspected. . . . Came to Europe with me. . . . Wish to God I'd never met and married that slut . . . spying on me at night . . . found out . . . spoiled the act . . . that damned child. . . . They wanted blood . . . scandal. . . . Looked all right here, but those Ubangis knew . . . her stubbornness . . . had to do it . . . was the only way. . . ."

As his voice droned on, his body slid flaccidly to the floor. I left,

but I had not found the satisfaction I sought. Instead, my heart was filled with a greater and more hideous unease.

The man's drunken tales had disturbed me. Of course all that rot about Leopard-men was childish, but still I felt afraid. There were those who believed it, and some of his furtive hints had smacked of the truth. Funny, what liquor will do to a man. But I could not dismiss the incident so easily. There was a strange and terrible mystery here.

As I stalked off to my quarters I saw the blazing eyes of the black panther staring silently at me in the darkness. A crazy thought assailed me—perhaps it knew the truth! With a shaky smile I turned away.

Of course I should have reported all this to the boss. A drunken trainer who abuses his animals is never to be tolerated in a show. But something held me back. I would at least wait until the final rehearsal the following afternoon. Zaroff would work the new panther then, and there would be a showdown.

There was a showdown, but not the kind I expected.

I can see it now in my mind's eye—that bare arena, with the great steel cage in the center. The boss and I were sitting in the box, just as we had sat that first day. The clown number had just ended, and now four men took their places about the grim, barred barrier.

Zaroff's figure swaggered into view. Despite his debauchery of the previous evening he was as cool and erect as ever. As he entered the little green-grilled door, his hand clenched tightly about the butt of his whip.

The runway into the arena jerked into place between the bars. The wooden gates opened.

Claws and fangs clicking, growls and coughs rumbling, tongues lolling and tails lashing, the leopards entered. Tawny bodies and green eyes, red throats and white teeth.

Nine leopards, and then—the panther.

The leopards had raced in, roaring their defiance. The panther sidled down the runway with stealthy tread. It uttered no sound, but entered the arena like a silent black shadow.

Zaroff cracked his whip. But today the leopards did not move. Instead, they held their places, a note of menace rumbling low in their great throats. They gave the curious impression that they were waiting for something. Zaroff cracked his whip again, impatiently.

The black panther padded over to the group of giant cats, then turned and stared at Zaroff.

Captain Zaroff stared back. There was a strange look on his face; he actually appeared to be nervous. He cracked his whip again, and swore. The growling in the leopards' throats rose in a thundering crescendo, but they did not move. The panther lashed its tail and continued to stare hypnotically at the tamer with evil, lambent eyes.

Sweat broke out on Zaroff's brow. I could have sworn that I saw a look of positive hate on that black beast's face as it gazed at the man. The trainers, guns ready, moved closer to the bars outside. They sensed something. Why didn't the man do something?

The leopards roared louder. They were grouped behind the panther now, and the panther, step by step, was slowly inching forward. Its tail shot erect but it never took its eyes from Zaroff's tormented white face.

Suddenly, with a shriek of almost human fury, the black body of the beast rose in the air and sprang for Zaroff's neck. The leopards closed in and the man went down beneath the fangs of ten jungle cats. There were shrieks from crimson-dabbled lips, then all sound was blotted out, as the four trainers shot blindly, pumping lead into that knot of blazing yellow bodies, shooting and shooting and shooting. . . .

The end came quickly; and only dead bodies remained about the mangled ruins of the thing that had once been Captain Zaroff.

Nobody ever speaks of that scene any more, but the tragedy itself was not the greatest horror. For I found the truth in Zaroff's private papers, and learned those things that had been hidden.

Now I know why Zaroff left Africa, and what he had really learned about the Cult of the Leopard-men. I know now why he boasted that he was going to have the greatest animal act in the world, and why he took such unusual precautions to guard and care for the beasts himself. I know how he was able to train them so well, and why the Ubangis thought he was talking to the creatures.

And I know just how his wife went away, too, and what she would have tried to tell the boss. It's not pleasant knowledge—those things in the papers and diaries of the dead trainer.

But it is infinitely more endurable than the memory of that last terrible sight—that dreadful glimpse of what lay in the arena when Zaroff, the leopards and the panther died. I can never forget that, because it is the final proof of all I dreaded to believe.

Captain Zaroff's chewed and lacerated form lay in a great pool

of blood. Around him were the bodies of what the men with the guns had slain—nine bodies, not of leopards, but of negro men. Negro Leopard-men, from Africa.

And the tenth—the dreadful thing that was tearing at Zaroff's throat; the new black panther with the human eyes—*was his wife, Camille!*

Death Is an Elephant

(*Weird Tales* February 1939) as Nathan Hindin

“Death is an elephant
Torch-eyed and horrible
Foam-flanked and terrible.”

—Vachel Lindsay: *The Congo*.

IT'S NOT THE EASIEST JOB IN THE WORLD, THIS BEING PRESS AGENT for a circus. The ordinary routine is bad enough, what with temperamental stars and equally temperamental newspaper men to deal with. There are a thousand angles to every story, and a thousand tricks to play in order to get that story printed.

But the very devil of it is, the best stories are those which can never be printed: fascinating, mysterious, incredible stories set against the background of circus glamor—stories which I can never write—that's the worst side of this business.

Of course, there's a way out, and I'm taking it. The queer business about the animal trainer, Captain Zaroff, has already seen publication; with radical changes in the names of the principals involved.

I have an itch to see the yarns in print; there's ink in my blood, as the boys say. Particularly when the tales are true; then there

comes a time when I can no longer suppress the urge to reveal them to the world.

Such a story and such a time is here again. Hence this document, with names, dates, and slight details altered—but with a strange story, to the truth of which my eyes can testify; for I was there to see it all. I saw the horror when first it crept from its lair in the jungle hills; I saw it stalk and strike. Sometimes I wish I could forget that striking, but still I dream. I dream of an elephant with blazing eyes, and feet that are blood-red. Blood-red. . . . But this is the tale.

In the fall of '36, Stellar Brothers Circus went into winter quarters and plans were begun for the following year, and a new show. The old man and I knew what we wanted and what the public always wants—novelty. But where to find that novelty? It's the perennial question which drives the entertainment world mad. Clowns, animals, acrobats—these are the eternal backbone of the circus's attraction; but novelty is the drawing-card.

Two weeks of planning, pondering, and bickering got us no place. The question of a novel star feature remained unsettled. To add to the confusion, the old man was in bad shape physically. As a result he left the whole situation in the balance, threw up the work, and sailed for a six-weeks' trip abroad.

Naturally, I accompanied him. I managed to see that the papers played it up in the right way; the boss was traveling to secure a mysterious foreign attraction for next year's show—an attraction so important that he personally would handle the affair.

This sounded pretty good, but it left us in a spot. We had to come back with something that lived up to expectations, and I swear neither of us had the faintest ideas as to what it could be. It was up to Fate to deal the aces.

A Pacific crossing took us to Honolulu; thence to the Philippines. Gradually the old man's temper improved, and my own spirits were raised. After all, we were heading for the Orient, and there's plenty of circus material there. The best jugglers, acrobats, tumblers and freaks are found in the East, and as for animals and natural oddities, the woods are full of them.

Acting on a hunch, I cabled George Gervis in Singapore. Gervis is an animal man; a trapper and collector of circus beasts who knows the tropics like a book. I felt confident that he'd have something new for us, and arranged to meet him.

And that's how we got the Sacred White Elephant of Jadhore.

Gervis explained the situation carefully that first afternoon as we sat in his hotel room. I've known George for a number of years, and never have I seen him so excited. He tried hard to speak casually of the matter, and emphasize the fact that we had only an outside chance, but enthusiasm fairly oozed from him.

Briefly, the situation as he outlined it was this. Jadhore is one of the smaller principalities of the Malay States, under British protectorate. The natives are ruled by their own hereditary rajah; for unlike the majority of the Straits Settlements, the inhabitants are more Hindoo than Moslem. They have their own priesthood, their own government—under British jurisdiction. For years it had been the custom of the English government to pay the rajah an annuity; this, in turn, maintained the dignity and splendor of his court.

At this time, however, the annuity had for some reason been discontinued, and the present rajah was in sore straits for money. If his splendor as a potentate diminished, he would lose face before the eyes of his own people and neighboring kingdoms. And this rajah, in accordance with the tenets of his faith, had a Sacred White Elephant. Now if we could tactfully broach the matter in such a way as not to offend the religious scruples of the rajah or his priests; well—there was our attraction!

It sounded like a natural to me. Evidently the old man felt the same way, for he immediately gave Gervis *carte blanche* in the matter and sent him off to Jadhore to negotiate the transaction.

It was nearly a week later that he returned—a very anxious and fretful week for the old man and myself, for we were fighting against time.

Gervis had not brought the Sacred Elephant with him, but he had come to terms. These he now outlined for us.

The rajah definitely refused to sell the animal. His religious principles absolutely forbade the sacrilege. After consultation with the priests, however, he offered to rent the beast to the show for one season, provided that certain stipulations be made.

The animal must not be trained nor molested in any way. It must not be decorated, nor allowed to mingle with common pachyderms. It could, however, be placed on exhibition, and take part in any parades or processions that were a feature of the performance. Special food and quarters would have to be provided as a matter of course. In addition, the rajah himself must be allowed to travel with the show, as guarantor of the Sacred Elephant's safety to the priests. Native attendants would be provided by the priests as well, and certain religious ceremonials must not be interfered with.

Such were the terms Gervis had agreed to. He had inspected the animal, and pronounced it to be a splendid specimen of its kind—abnormally large for the Indian elephant, and quite handsome.

At the conclusion of this report the old man blew up.

“Animal be damned!” he shouted. “I can’t buy it, I can’t train it, can’t use it in the regular show. Can’t even handle it myself—got to let a two-bit rajah and a gang of nigger priests feed it and burn incense in front of its trunk! What’s the use? Special quarters, too—a gold freight car, I suppose. How much did you say?—seventeen hundred a week rental and expenses? Of all the——”

Here the boss demonstrated his restored health by going off into one of the profane tirades for which he is justly famous. I waited for him to cool a bit before I stuck my oar in.

Then I quietly pointed out certain obvious facts. These terms—they sounded difficult, but really were just what we wanted. Novelty—we’d play up the restrictions ourselves. “The Sacred White Elephant of Jadhore—Accompanied by the Priests of Worshipping Millions! See the Sacred Rites of the Jungle Temples! Personally Accompanied by the Illustrious Char Dzang, Rajah of Jadhore!” And so on.

I recalled for his benefit the success of the old white elephant importation of other days, which resulted in the famous Barnum-Forepaugh feud. Barnum’s white elephant was a great success, and Adam Forepaugh, a rival circus-owner, thereupon took an ordinary beast and whitewashed its hide. The subsequent exposure of this hoax and the resultant publicity attendant had made fortunes for both men.

I showed the old man how the religious angle would pack them in. We’d play up the sanctity, the restrictions, the priests and attendants. And imagine a circus with a real rajah! Why, this was an attraction that would sell itself—no other build-up was needed.

When I had finished I knew from the look on the old man’s face that my case was won.

“How soon can you arrange to get the animal down here?”

“Within two days,” the animal-man promptly replied.

“Get going,” said the old man, lighting a fresh cigar. Then to me, “Come on. We’re heading for the steamship office.”

True to his promise, Gervis returned on the third morning. We were already on the dock, waiting, for the boat sailed at noon. Passage had been arranged, quarters for the beast made ready;

cables had been sent ahead to winter quarters. And I had just released a story that met with instant success. It was therefore with an air of pleased anticipation that we greeted the arrival of our prize and regal guests.

Nor was our first glimpse disappointing. Today, in view of the sinister aftermath of the whole affair, it seems almost incredible that we so blithely accepted our acquisitions; that we did not realize even then the curious and disturbing features of the itinerary. But that morning, as the procession came down the dock, I felt quite proudly satisfied with our work.

Two swarthy Hindoos led the way—little, turbaned, bearded men, clad in robes of purple and gold. Their hands held silvered chains, for they were leading the Sacred Elephant.

The mighty beast lumbered into view—I gasped a bit, I confess. Never had I seen an elephant like this! Fully ten feet tall was the White Elephant of Jadhore; a giant among the East Indian pachyderms. It had long, gleaming white tusks that swept outward from its massive jaws like twin sabers. Its trunk and hooves were enamelled in gold, and on its back rested a howdah of hammered brass. But the color!

I had expected, from what I'd read, that a white elephant was a sort of sickly gray-skinned creature. This beast was almost silver; a leprous silver. From its oiled body glistened little shafts of scintillating light. It looked unreal, unearthly, yet magnificent.

At a word of command the beast halted and surveyed us with smoldering little eyes that rested like red rubies in a silver skull.

The occupants of the howdah dismounted and came forward, and again I was astonished. The rajah of Jadhore wore an ordinary business suit, and his face was clean-shaven in contrast to the bushy beards of the attendants. He wore a green turban that seemed utterly incongruous in comparison to the modern attire. It seemed even more incongruous when he greeted us in perfect English.

"Are we ready, gentlemen?" he inquired. "Have arrangements been made to take this—er—sacred tub aboard ship? My men want to handle it, of course; there are certain religious restrictions against crossing water, y'know."

I stared at him, and I saw the old man's eyebrows rise in surprise as the rajah lit a cigarette and calmly tossed the match beneath the Sacred Elephant's gilded feet. He took charge of the situation.

"It was stipulated in the agreement, gentlemen, that the beast was to have a permanent religious attendant. Allow me to present her—the High Priestess of the Temple of Ganesha."

He beckoned the figure in the background to come forward. Out of the shadow cast by the elephant's body stepped a girl. And for the third time that morning I uttered a low murmur of surprise.

Now I understood the meaning of that beauty of which Oriental poets sing. For this woman was lovely past all understanding or describing. She was dressed in a robe of white, but the lissome curves of her perfectly molded body shone through her garments and caused all memory of them to be forgotten. Her hair was ebon as the jungle night, but it was coiled like a crown above a face of such bewitching perfection as to render powerless even a press-agent's powers of portraiture.

Was it the ripe scarlet blossom of her mouth, the gem-like facets of her high bronze cheeks, the creamy marble of her sweeping brow that so blended into a blaze of indescribable beauty? Or was it her eyes—those great green jewels with tawny flecks glittering in a serpent stare? There was icy wisdom here as well as loveliness; the woman had the look of Lilith about her. Woman, girl, priestess; she was all three as she gazed at us, acknowledging all introductions in calm silence.

"Leela speaks no English," the rajah explained.

Leela! Lilith! Green eyes—priestess of mystery. For the first time I was aware of an inner disturbance. I sensed now the reality of what we were doing; we were dabbling in sacred spheres. And I knew that this woman did not like us; that she scorned and hated this prostitution of her religion. We had made a dangerous opponent, I mused.

The truth of my surmise was soon to be horribly revealed.

In due time the elephant was hoisted aboard the ship and deposited in special quarters within the hold. The attendants and Leela accompanied the animal; the rajah joined us. At noon, we sailed from Singapore.

The old man and I found the rajah a likable fellow. He was, as I suspected, educated in England; his present life frankly bored him. We found it easy to converse with him about our plans for the circus, and told him how we intended to use the elephant in the procession and build quarters in the menagerie tent. I even proposed that the High Priestess be a member of the Grand Entry number, riding in the howdah on the beast's back.

Here the rajah looked grave. No, he declared, the idea was out of the question. Leela was sacred; she would never consent. Besides, she had opposed the entire venture, and the priests had upheld her. It was best not to cross her, for she had mystic powers.

"Well," I interjected. "Surely you don't believe all that Oriental bosh."

For the first time the rajah of Jadhore lost his carefully-acquired British aplomb.

"I do," he said slowly. "If you were not ignorant of my people and their ways, you would also know that there are many things in my religion which you of the West cannot explain. Let me tell you, my friend, what the High-Priestess means to our faith.

"For thousands of years there has been a temple of Ganesha, the Elephant-God, in our land. The Sacred White Elephant holds His Divine Spirit, bred through generations of the animals. The White Elephant is not like others, my friends. You noticed that.

"The God of my people is more ancient than your Christian one, and master of darker forces which only the jungle peoples know and can invoke. Nature-demons and beast-men are recognized today by your scientists; but priests of my simple people have controlled strange forces before ever Christ or Buddha trod the earth. Ganesha is not a benevolent god, my friend. He has always been worshipped under many names—as Chaugnar Faugn, in the old places of Tibet; and as Lord Tsathoggua aforetime. And He is evil—that is why we treat His incarnation in the White Elephant as sacred. That is why there have always been High Priestesses in his temple; they are the holy brides and consorts of the Elephant One. And they are wise; bred from childhood in the black arts of worship, they commune with the beasts of the forest and serve to avert the wrath of the evil ones from their people."

"You believe that?" laughed the old man.

"Yes," said the rajah, and he was no longer smiling. "I believe. And I must warn you. This trip, as you must have heard, is against the wishes of my priesthood. Never has a Sacred Elephant crossed the great waters to another land, to be gaped at by unbelievers for a show. The priests feel that it is an insult to the Lord Ganesha. Leela was sent with the elephant by the priests for a purpose—she alone can guard it. And she hates you for what you're doing; hates me, too. I—I don't like to speak of what she can do. There are still human sacrifices in our temples at certain times, of which the Government knows nothing. And human sacrifices are made with a purpose—the old dark powers I spoke of can be invoked by blood. Leela has officiated at such rites, and she has learned much. I don't want to frighten you—it's really my fault for consenting to this—but you should be warned. Something may happen."

The old man hastened to reassure the rajah. He was smugly cer-

tain that the man was nothing but a savage beneath his veneer of superficial culture, and he spoke accordingly.

As for me, I wondered. I thought again of Leela's eery eyes, and imagined easily enough that they could gaze on bloody sacrifice without flinching. Leela could know evil, and she could hate. I remembered the rajah's final words, "Something may happen."

I went out on deck, entered the hold. The elephant stood in his stall, placidly munching hay. Leela stood stolidly beside him as I inspected the animal's chains. But I felt her eyes bore into my back when I turned away, and noticed that the Hindoo attendants carefully avoided me.

Other passengers had got wind of our prize, and they filed into the hold in a steady stream. As I left, a fellow named Canrobert strolled up. We chatted for several minutes, and when I went up on deck he was still standing there before the beast. I promised to meet him in the bar that evening for a chat.

At dinner a steward whispered to me the story. Canrobert had come up from the hold late in the afternoon, walked to the rail in plain view of several passengers, and jumped overboard. His body was not recovered.

I took part in the investigation which followed. During the course of it we ventured down into the hold. The elephant still stood there, and Leela was still keeping watch beside him. But now she was smiling.

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I never did learn about the death of a man named Phelps on the third day out. But it was a hoodoo voyage for certain, and I was glad when we disembarked at last and headed for winter quarters.

I am a practical man, but I get occasional "hunches." That is why I avoided the rajah during the rest of our homeward journey. I fled when he approached, because I felt that he would have an explanation for the deaths of the two men—an explanation I did not care to hear. I didn't go near Leela nor the elephant either, and spent most of my time doping out the show with the old man.

It was good to see winter quarters again. A handsome stall had been built for the Sacred Elephant, and Ganesha (for so we had christened the beast) was quartered therein.

No greater compliment could have been paid to my advance publicity than the attention shown the beast by our hardened circus folk. Stars and supers alike, they crowded around the stall, eyed the

mighty animal, gazed at the silent bearded attendants, and stared in speechless admiration at Leela. The rajah struck up an immediate acquaintance with Captain Dence, our regular elephant-keeper.

I immediately plunged into work with the old man, for the show opened shortly.

Therefore it wasn't until several weeks later that I began to hear the disquieting rumors that floated around the lot concerning our star attraction.

The restlessness of the other elephants, for example—how, in rehearsal for the Grand Entry, they shied away from the Sacred Ganesha, and trumpeted nightly in their picket line. The queer story of how the foreign woman *lived* in the stall with the animal; ate and slept there in stolid silence. The way in which one of the clowns had been frightened while passing through the animal barn one evening; how he had seen the two Hindoos and the girl bowing in worship before the silver beast, who stood amidst a circle of incense fires.

Even the old man mentioned a visit from the rajah and Captain Dence during which both men pleaded to break the contract and allow the animal and its attendants to return to Jadhore before the show opened. They spoke wildly of "trouble" to come. The proposal was of course rejected as being out of the question; our publicity was released, and both men were evidently under the influence of liquor at the time.

Two days later Captain Dence was found hanging from a beam behind the elephant-line. It was a case of suicide beyond question, and there was no investigation. We had a show funeral, and for a while a gloomy shadow overcast our lot. Everyone remarked about the shocking look of horror on poor Dence's death-distorted face.

About this time I began to wake up. I determined to find out a few things for myself. The rajah was almost always intoxicated now, and he seemed to avoid me purposely; staying in town and seldom visiting the lot. I know for a fact that he never again entered the menagerie barn.

But I learned that others did. Perhaps it was morbid curiosity; but the show-folk, even after their first trips of inspection, seemed to spend much of their time around the elephant lines. Shaw, our new keeper, told me that they were continually before the stall of the Sacred Elephant. In his own opinion many of the men performers were stuck on that "pretty foreign dame." They stared at her and at the elephant for hours on end; even the big stars came.

Corbot, the trapeze artist, was a frequent visitor. So was Jim

Dolan, the acrobatic clown, and Rizzio, our equestrian director.

Another was Captain Bladé, our knife-thrower in the side-show. What they found in the woman he couldn't say, for she never spoke and they were silent.

I could make nothing of this report. But I determined to watch the beautiful High Priestess for myself.

I got into the habit of sauntering through the menagerie at odd hours and glancing at the Sacred Elephant. Whatever the time of day, there was Leela, her emerald eyes burning into my back. Once or twice I saw some of the performers gazing raptly at the stall. I noticed that they came singly at all times. Also I saw something which proved the keeper's theory to be wrong.

They were not infatuated with the woman, for they looked only at the elephant! The gigantic beast stood like some silver statue; impassive, inscrutable. Only its glistening oiled trunk moved to and fro; that, and its fiery eyes. It seemed to stare mockingly in return, as though contemptuous of attentions from the puny creatures before it.

Once, when the place was deserted, I saw Leela caressing its great body. She was whispering to it in some low and outlandish tongue, but her voice was ineffably sweet and her hands infinitely tender. I was struck by a curious and somewhat weird thought—this woman was acting toward the beast as a woman in love acts toward her lover! I remembered how the rajah spoke of her as the bride of Ganesha, and winced. When the animal's serpentine trunk embraced the lovely girl she purred in almost blissful satisfaction, and for the first time I heard the beast rumble in its massive throat. I left, quickly so as to be unobserved.

Opening day loomed, and once again I was forced to turn my mind to other things. The cars were loaded for Savannah; the dress rehearsal was performed; I sent the advance men on the night before we left, and the regular routine got under way.

The old man was pleased with the show, and I must admit that it was the best we'd ever turned out. Corbot, the trapeze artist, was a good drawing card; we got him from the big show through sheer good fortune. Jim Dolan, the chief clown, was always a draw. We had some fine animal acts, and many novelty features as well. And the Sacred Elephant of Jadhore was bidding fair to become a household name before the public had ever seen it.

We had a private car for the animal and its three attendants; the two Hindoos smiled happily when they saw it, and even Leela was

slightly taken aback with its splendor. On our arrival under canvas the beast was installed in a superb new station atop a platform in the center, and with its hide newly oiled and decorated it looked superb.

The menagerie crowd on the opening day was highly impressed. They stared at the impassive Hindoos and positively gaped at Leela in her white ceremonial gown. The rajah they did not see—he was shaking drunk in his own quarters, behind locked doors.

I didn't even have time to think of the superstitious coward. I'm like a kid when a new show opens each year, and the old man is no different. We sat in our box and positively beamed with joyous excitement as the trumpet blasts announced the Grand Entry.

Our procession was Oriental—Arabian riders, Egyptian seers on camels, harem beauties on elephants, califs and sultans in jeweled litters. At the very last came the Sacred White Elephant of Jadhore; the mightiest of them all. The great silver beast moved with a sort of monstrous beauty; in regal dignity Ganesha padded on to the beat of thundering drums. The two Hindoos led the way, but Leela was not present. The great spotlight followed every step; so did the eyes of the crowd. I can't explain it, but there was *something* about the animal which "clicked." It had beauty—and that unearthly majesty I had noticed. It was the Sacred Elephant indeed.

The procession vanished. The show was on. Sleek black ponies galloped into the rings, and whips cracked in merry rhythm with their hooves. The music altered its tempo; the clowns strutted in to do the first of their walk-arounds. Applause, laughter, and the ever-beating rhythm of the band. Excitement, as the jugglers vied with a troupe of seals in dextrous competition.

The star acts were coming up, and I nudged the old man to attract his special attention.

With a flurry of drums the big spot in the center ring blazed forth as the other lights dimmed. Alonzo Corbot, the trapeze star, raced in. His white body bounded across the ring to the ropes beneath the main pole where his partner waited.

The snare-drums snarled as the two performers mounted up—up—up—sixty feet in the air to the platform and the trapeze rings.

Out they swung now, silver bodies on silver rings; out into the cold clear light that bathed the utter emptiness of the tent-top. Swing—swoop—soar; rhythmically rise, unflinching fall. Tempo in every movement of the clutching hands; timing even in the feet that danced on empty air.

Corbot was a marvel; I'd seen him work in rehearsal many times and was never tired of watching the perfection of motion he displayed. He trained rigorously, I knew; and he never slipped. He caught his partner by the hand, the wrist, the elbow, the shoulder, the neck, the ankle. Feet suspended from the rings, he shot to and fro like a human pendulum while his partner somersaulted through space into his waiting hands. At precisely the exact fraction of a second they met in midair; an error in timing meant certain death. There were no nets—that was Corbot's boast.

I watched, the old man watched, the audience watched, as two men fluttered like tiny birds so far above. Birds? They were demons with invisible wings now in the red light that flashed on for the climax of the act. Now came the time when Corbot and his partner would both leave the rings, leap out into that dizzying space and turn a complete somersault in midair, then grasp the rings on the opposite side of their present position.

The drums went mad. The red light glared on that little hell of high space where two men waited, their nerves and muscles tense.

I could almost feel it myself—that moment of dread expectancy. My eyes strained through the crimson haze, seeking Corbot's face so far above. He would be smiling now; he was preparing to leap. . . .

Drums, cymbals crashed. The waiting figures sprang. Corbot's arms were ready to grasp his partner in whirling space—or were they? Good God, no—*they were stiff at his side!*

There was a streaking blur crossing that empty scarlet expanse of light, and then it was gone. Something struck the center ring with a heavy thud. Somebody screamed, the band blared a desperate march, and the lights went up. I saw that Corbot's partner Victoire had saved himself by catching a ring just in time, but my eyes did not linger above. They centered themselves on the ground; on the center ring where something lay in a pool of crimson that came from no light.

Then the old man and I were out of our box and running across the tent with attendants at our side. And we stared for a sickening second at that boneless pulpy red thing that had once been Alonzo Corbot the trapeze star. They took him away; fresh sawdust covered the spot where he had fallen, and the band, the lights, the music covered the audience's panic until their fears were forgotten. The clowns were out again as the old man and I left, and the crowd was laughing—a bit weakly, perhaps, but laughing nevertheless. Corbot's hail and farewell was typical; the show went on.

Victoire, the partner, staggered in as we gathered by the body in the dressing-room. Pale, limp, badly shaken, he wept convulsively when he saw—it—lying there.

"I knew it!" he gasped. "When he stood on the other platform just before he leaped, I saw his eyes. They were dead and far away. Dead. . . . No, I don't know how it happened. Of course he was all right before the show. I hadn't seen him much lately; between rehearsals he spent a lot of time some place. . . . His eyes were dead. . . ."

We never learned anything more from Victoire. The boss and I hurried through the menagerie to the main office. As we passed the big platform where the Sacred Elephant was quartered, I noticed with a shock that it was empty of attendants. Something brushed against me in the dark as I hurried on. It was Leela, the High-Priestess, and she was smiling. I had never seen her smile before.

That night I dreamed of Leela's smile, and Corbot's redly ruined face. . . .

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There's only a little more to tell. For that I'm thankful, because the rest is even now a nightmare I would rather forget. We learned nothing of Corbot's death from anyone. It created a flurry, of course, and the performers' nerves were shattered. After all, an opening-day tragedy like that is disquieting.

The old man raved, but there was nothing to do. The show went on; the morbid public swarmed in that second day, for despite my efforts publicity was released.

Nor was the morbid public disappointed. For on the second night, our fourth show—Jim Dolan died.

Jim was our acrobatic clown, and a star in his own right. He'd been with us twelve seasons, always doing his regular routine of juggling and pantomime.

We all knew Jim and liked him as a friend. He was a great kidder; nothing of the pagliaccio about Dolan. But on that second evening he stopped for a moment in his routine before the center ring, put down his juggling-clubs, pulled out a razor, and calmly slit his throat.

How we got through that night is still a mystery to me. "Jinx" and "hoodoo" were the only two words I heard. The show went on, the boss raved, and the police quietly investigated.

The following afternoon Rizzio, our equestrian director, walked into the line of the bareback routine, and a horse's hoof broke his spine.

I'll never forget that twilight session after the show, in the old man's tent. Neither of us had slept for two days; we were sick with fear and nameless apprehension. I've never believed in "curses," but I did then. And so I looked at the official reports and the headlines in the papers, glanced at the old man's gray face, and buried my own in my arms. There was a curse on the show.

Death! I'd walked with it for weeks now. Those two chaps on the boat, then Captain Dence, the elephant man, then Corbot, Dolan, Rizzio. Death—ever since we had taken the Sacred White—

The rajah's words! His story about curses and queer rites; the vengeance of the god and his priests! The Priestess Leela, who smiled now! Hadn't I heard stories about the performers visiting the elephant's stall?—why, all three of the men who died here in the show had done that! The rajah knew—and I had thought him a drunken coward.

I sent a man off to find him. The old man, utterly collapsed, slept. I spent an anxious hour waiting.

The rajah entered. A glance at my face told him the story.

"You know now?" he said. "I thought you would never come to your senses. I could do nothing without your belief, for *she* knows I understand, and she hates me. I have tried very hard to forget; but now men die and this thing must be stopped. Ganesha may send me to a thousand hells for this, but it is better so. It is magic, my friend."

"How do you know?" I whispered.

"I know." He smiled wearily, but there was black despair in his eyes. "I watched from the beginning. She is cunning, that Leela, so very cunning. And she knows *arts*."

"What arts?"

"You of the West call it hypnotism. It is more than that. It is transference of will. Leela is an adept; she can do it easily with the elephant as medium."

I tried vainly to understand. Was the rajah crazed? No—his eyes burned not with derangement but with bitter hatred.

"Post-hypnotic suggestion," he breathed. "When the fools came to watch the Sacred Elephant, she was always there. Her eyes did it; and when they watched the gleaming trunk of the beast it acted as a focal point. They came back again and again, not knowing why. And all the while she was willing them to act; not then, but later.

That is how the two men died on the boat. She experimented there, told them to drown themselves. One went immediately, the other waited several days. All that was needed was for them to see her once at the time she willed for them to die. Thus it was. And here, in the menagerie, it has been the same way. They stare at the silver elephant. She willed them to die during the performance. At the proper time she stood in the entrance-way; I have seen her there. And the men died—you saw that.

"She hates the show, and will ruin it. To her the worship of Ganesha is sacred, and she is wreaking vengeance. The old priests that sent her must have instructed this, and there must be an end. That is why I dare not face her."

"What's to be done?" I found myself asking. "If your story is true, we can't touch her. And we can't give up the show."

"I will stop her," said the rajah slowly. "I must."

Suddenly, he was gone. And I realized with a start that the show was almost ready to begin. Quickly I roused the old man from his slumber. Then I dashed out. Collaring a roustabout, I ordered him to find the rajah at once. There would be a showdown tonight; there must be.

I had two guards with guns secretly posted at the side entrance to the tent, where the performers came in. They had orders to stop anyone who loitered there during the show. There must be no Leela watching and commanding that night.

I dared not incarcerate her at once for fear of a row while the show was on. The woman was evidently capable of anything, and she must not suspect. Still, I wanted to see her for myself. A half-hour before the menagerie opened I hurried in. The elephant's stall was again untended!

I ran around to the side entrance. There was no one there. Out on the midway I raced, mingling with the crowd. Then it was that I noticed the excited throng before the side show. Elbowing through, I came upon two men and the barker as they emerged from the tent carrying a limp form in their arms. It was the girl assistant of Captain Blade, the knife-thrower. He had missed.

Leela passed me in the crowd, smiling. Her face was beautiful as Death.

When I rushed back to the boss tent, I found the roustabout and the rajah. The latter was trembling in every limb.

Hastily I collared the potentate and dragged him through the crowd toward the main tent.

"I believe you now," I whispered. "But you're not going to do anything rash. Give me your knife."

I'd guessed correctly. He slipped a dirk out of his sleeve and passed it to me unobserved.

"No more bloodshed," I muttered. "I have two men at the side entrance. She'll not watch *this* show and cast any spells. When the performance is over, I'll have her behind bars on your testimony. But no disturbance before the crowd."

I shouldered my way into my regular box and he followed after me.

The big tent was crowded. There was an air of grim waiting, as if the spectators were *expecting* something. I knew what they expected; hadn't the papers been full of "the Hoodoo Circus" for the past three days? There was a low murmur as of massed whispering voices. I thought of a Roman amphitheater and shuddered.

The big drums rolled. The parade swept into view, and I cast an anxious glance at the side entrance when it cleared. There were my two guards, armed with efficient-looking guns. No trouble tonight! And the rajah was safe, with me.

The Sacred Elephant swept into view; serene, majestic, lumbering gigantically on ivory hoofs. There was only one Hindoo leading him tonight and—the howdah was on his back!

In it sat—Leela, the High Priestess of Ganesha.

"She knows," breathed the rajah, his brown face suddenly animal-like with convulsed terror.

Leela was smiling. . . .

Then horror came.

The lights flickered, failed, blinked out. The vast tent plunged into nighted darkness and the band ceased. There was a rising wail of sound, and I rose in my seat with a scream on my lips.

There in the darkness glowed the silver elephant—the Sacred White Elephant of Jadhore. Like a leprous monster, its body gleamed with phosphorescent fire. And in the darkness I saw Leela's eyes.

The elephant had turned now, and left the parade. As shrieks rose in a thousand throats it thundered forward—straight for our box.

The rajah broke from my grasp and vaulted over the railing to the ground. My hand flew to my pocket and I cursed in dismay. The knife he had given me was gone. Then my eyes returned to the hideous tableau before me.

The elephant charged with lifted trunk, tusks glistening before it. There was a shrill trumpeting from its silver throat as it bore down on the slight figure of the man who raced toward it.

He ran to death, but his head was high. He was seeking that black figure in the howdah on the beast's back.

In a moment everything was over. A gleaming arc in the air as something long and thin and silver whizzed up to the elephant's back. A woman's shrill scream and gurgling sob. A mighty bellowing of brutish, berserk rage. A thud of massive feet as the silver giant trampled on. The crunching . . . the screams, the shots, and the great shock as the great body turned and fell.

And then the audience rose and fled. When the lights went on once more, there was nobody in the tent but the performers and the roustabouts.

In the center of the areaway lay the gigantic Ganesha, silver sides streaked with scarlet in death. The crumpled howdah held all that remained of Leela the High Priestess. The rajah's knife had struck home, and her torn throat was not a pretty sight.

As for the rajah himself, there was only a slashed red horror dangling on the end of those ivory tusks; a mashed and pulpy thing.

Thus ended the affair of the Sacred White Elephant. The police accepted our story of the animal's running amok during the show when the lights failed.

They never learned of the Hindoo who had so horribly short-circuited the connection with his own body, and we buried his seared remains in secret.

The show closed for two weeks and we re-routed it for the rest of the year. Gradually, the papers let the story die and we went on.

I never told the truth to the old man. They're all dead anyway, and I'd like to forget it myself. But I have never liked novelty acts since, nor visited the Orient; because I know the rajah's story was true, and Leela had killed those performers as he had explained it. Those priests and priestesses have secret powers, I am convinced.

I've figured it all out—Leela found out that the rajah had told me the facts; knew she'd be exposed, and acted accordingly.

She sent the Hindoo to fix the lights, then arranged to have Ganesha the elephant charge our box and kill the rajah as she'd planned.

I have it all figured out, but I'd never tell the old man. There's one other fact I know which I must not reveal.

The rajah's knife did not kill Leela as she rode on the elephant's

back. It could not, for she was already dead; dead before she entered the tent.

One of the two guards I stationed had shot her two minutes before at the side entrance as she rode past in the howdah of Ganesha, the Sacred White Elephant.

It seems that she must have hypnotized the beast, too—or did she? The Soul of Ganesha inhabits the body of the Sacred Elephant, the rajah said. And Ganesha wreaks a vengeance of his own.

A Question of Identity

(*Strange Stories* April 1939) as Tarleton Fisk

MY LIMBS WERE LEAD. MY HEART WAS A GREAT COILED CLOCK THAT throbbed rather than ticked, ever so slowly. My lungs were metal sponges, my head a bronze bowl filled with molten lava that moved like sluggish quicksilver, back and forth, in burning waves. Back and forth—consciousness and unconsciousness interplaying against a background of slow, dark pain.

I felt just that, nothing more. I had a heart, lungs, body, head—but I felt nothing external; that is, my body did not *impinge* on anything. I was not sitting or standing or walking or lying or doing anything that I could feel. I was just heart, lungs, body, head alone in darkness that was filled with the pulsing of a muted agony. This was myself.

But who was *I*?

The thought came; the first real thought, for before that had been only an awareness of being. Now I wondered as to the nature of my being. Who was I?

I was a man.

The word *man* aroused certain associations which struggled through the pain, through the thumping heart and gasping lung sensation. If I was a man, what was I doing? Where was I?

As if in response to the thought, awareness increased. I had a

body, and therefore I possessed hands, ears, eyes. I must try to feel, hear, see.

But I could not. My arms were lumps of immovable iron. My ears knew only the sound of silence and the throbbing that came from within my tortured body. My eyes were sealed by the leaden weight of enormous eyelids. This I knew, and felt panic.

What had happened? What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I feel and hear and see?

I had been in an accident, and I was lying on a hospital bed under ether. That was one explanation. Perhaps I had been crippled; blinded, deafened, maimed. Only my soul existed faintly, like a whispering that rustles through the ruins of an old, old house.

But what accident? Where had I been before this? I must have lived. What was my name?

I resigned myself to the darkness as I strove to grapple with these problems, and the darkness was kind. My body and the darkness seemed to be equally detached so that they mingled. It was peaceful—too peaceful for the thoughts that throbbed through my brain. The thoughts fought and clamored and finally screamed, until I felt myself awaken.

It was the sensation, I vaguely recalled, of finding one's foot "asleep." It spread over my body, so that a pleasant tingling made me aware, bit by bit, of having definite arms and hands, definite chest and pelvis, definite legs and feet.

Their outlines *emerged*, and were defined by that tingling. A burring droned in my spine, as though a dentist's drill had bit into it. Simultaneously I became aware that my heart was a Congo drum within my chest, my lungs great gourds swelling and sinking in frantic rhythm. I exulted in the pain, for through it I felt myself. That sensation of detachment faded, and I knew that I—complete, intact—lay against softness.

But where?

That was the next question, and sudden energy seemed ready to solve it. My eyes opened. They encountered nothing but a continuation of the blackness which lurks behind the curtains of closed lids. If anything, the blackness was deeper, richer. I could see nothing of myself, and yet my eyes were open. Was I blind?

My ears still heard no sound other than the mysterious inspiration of my own breath.

My hands moved ever so slowly at my sides rustling against cloth which told me that my limbs were clothed, and yet unblanketed. They moved upward, outward. An inch, two inches, three—

and then they encountered hard, unyielding surfaces on either side. They rose upward, prompted by fear. Six inches, and another unyielding surface of wood. My feet thrust out as I stretched, and through shoe-leather the tips of my toes encountered wood. My mouth opened, and a sound poured forth. It was only a rattle, though I had meant to scream.

For my thoughts whirled around one name—one name that somehow groped through a haze and loomed as the symbol of my unreasoning fear. I knew a name, and I wanted to scream.

Edgar Allan Poe.

And then my rattling voice whispered, unprompted, that which I so feared in connection with this name.

"*The Premature Burial*," I whispered. "Poe wrote it. I am—living it!"

I was in a coffin, in a wooden coffin, with the hot stale air of my own corruption reeking in my nostrils, burning in my lungs. I was in a coffin, locked in earth, and yet I was alive.

Then I found strength. My hands had been frantically scratching and clawing at the surface above my head. Now they gripped the sides of my prison and thrust outward with all strength, my legs braced at the foot of the box. My legs, then, kicked. New vigor, the vigor of a madman, rushed through my boiling blood. In sheer frenzy, in an agony born of the fact that I could not scream and give expression to it, I lashed out with both feet at the bottom of the coffin, felt it splinter and give way.

Then the sides cracked, my bleeding fingers clutched at the earth beyond, and I rolled over, burrowing and scrabbling at the moist, soft-packed earth. I dug upwards, wheezing in a sort of mindless desperation as I worked. Instinct alone combatted the insane horror which gripped my being and transformed it into the activity which alone could save me.

They must have buried me in a hurry. The earth above my grave was shallow. Choking and half suffocated, I clawed my way to the top after endless eons of utter delirium during which the dust of the grave covered me and I wriggled like a worm through the dark ground. My hands reached up to form a cavity; then I lunged upward with full strength and burst through to the surface.

I crawled out into silvery moonlight flooding down upon a world of marble toadstools which sprouted richly from the mounds of grass all about me. Some of the fantastic stone growths were cross-shaped, others bore heads or great urnlike mouths. They were the headstones of graves, naturally, but I saw only toadstools

—fat, bloated toadstools of dead-white pallor, reaching unthinkable roots into the ground below to draw forth nourishment.

I lay staring at them, staring back at the pit through which I had come up out of death into life once again. I did not, could not, think. The words “Edgar Allan Poe,” and “*Premature Burial*” had come unbidden to my brain, and now for some reason I found myself whispering in a hoarse, dreadful voice, then crooning more loudly, “Lazarus. Lazarus. Lazarus.”

Gradually my panting subsided, and I drew fresh strength from the air that sang through my lungs. I stared at the grave again—my grave. It bore no headstone. It was a poor grave, in a poor section of the cemetery; probably a Potter’s Field. Nearly on the outskirts of the necropolis it was, and weeds writhed over the poor graves. There was no headstone, and it made me remember my question.

Who was I? It was a unique problem. I had been someone before I died, but who? Surely this was a novel case of amnesia; to return to a new life in the actual sense of the phrase. Who was I?

Funny I could think of words like “amnesia” and yet could not in the least associate them with anything personal in my past. My mind was utterly blank. Did death do this to me?

Was it permanent, or would my mind awaken in a few hours, just as my body had? If not I was in sore straits. I didn’t know my name, or my station, what I had been. For that matter, on reflection, I didn’t even know where I was. The names of cities flooded foolishly through my brain. Chicago, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, Washington, Bombay, Shanghai, Cleveland, Chichen Itza, Pernambuco, Angkor Wat, Rome, Omsk, Carthage. I could not associate a single one with myself, or for that matter, explain how I knew those names.

I thought of streets, of Mariposa Boulevard and Michigan Avenue and Broadway and Center Street and Park Lane and the Champs Elysées. They meant nothing to me.

I thought of proper names. Felix Kennaston, Ben Blue, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Studs Lonigan, Arthur Gordon Pym, James Gordon Bennett, Samuel Butler, Igor Stravinsky—and they represented no image of myself.

I could see all those streets, visualize all those people, picture all those cities; but myself I could not associate with any of them.

Comedy, tragedy, drama; it was a mad scene to play in a cemetery at nightfall. I had crawled out of a grave without a headstone, and all I knew was that I was a man. And yet who?

My eyes roved over my person, lying in the grass. Beneath mud

and dirt I saw a dark suit, torn in places, and discolored. It covered the body of a tall man; a thin body, poorly muscled and flat-chested. My hands, rustling over my person, were long and leanly muscular; they were not the hands of a labourer. Of my face I knew nothing, though I passed my hand over each feature in turn. One thing I felt certain of: whatever the cause of my apparent "death," I was not physically maimed.

Strength prompted me to rise. I rose to my feet, stumbled over the grass. For a few minutes I had that drunken floating sensation, but gradually the ground became solid under my feet. I knew awareness of the cool night wind on my forehead, heard with indescribable joy the chirping of crickets from a swamp afar. I walked around the tombstones, gazed at the clouding sky, felt dew and dampness fall.

But my brain was aloof, detached, wrestling with invisible demons of doubt. Who was I? What was I to do? I could not wander strange streets in my disheveled condition. If I presented myself to authorities I would be put away as a madman. Besides, I did not want to see anyone. This fact I realized quite suddenly.

I did not wish to see lights, or people. I was—different.

It was the feeling of death. Was I still—?

Unable to bear the thought, I frantically groped for clues. I tried every means of awakening dormant memories. Walking endlessly the night through, combatting chaos and confusion, fighting the gray clouds that clung to my brain, I wandered up and down the deserted corner of the cemetery.

Exhausted I stared at a lightened sky. And then my thoughts fled away, even the confused ones. I knew only one thing—the need for rest, and peace, and forgetfulness. *Was it the death-urge? Had I risen from the grave only to return?*

I neither knew nor cared. Actuated by a compulsion as inexplicable as it was overpowering, I stumbled toward the ruins of my grave and crept inside, burrowing like a mole into the grateful darkness, whilst the earth tumbled in behind me. There was enough air, the thought came, to enable me to breathe while I lay back in the shattered coffin.

My head fell back and I settled in my coffin, to sleep. . . .

The muttering and rumbling died away from dreams I could not remember. They died away from dreams and grew in reality until I sat up, pushing wet earth so that it fell around me. I was in the grave!

Again, terror. Somehow the hope had lurked that this was a dream, and awakening might bring me to grateful reality. But I was in the grave, and a storm howled above. I crawled upward.

It was still night—or rather, instinct prompted me to believe that it was night again. I must have slept the clock around. This storm had kept people from the graveyard, kept them from discovering the torn earth and its inmate. I rose to the surface and the rain lashed me from skies wild with anger.

And yet I was happy; happy for the life I knew. I drank the rain; the thunder enraptured me as though it were a symphony; I marvelled at the lightning's emerald beauty. I was alive!

All about me corpses rotted and sloughed, nor could all the fury of the unleashed elements imbue them with one spark of existence or of memory. My own poor thoughts, my own poor life, were infinitely precious in comparison to the lot of those below. I had cheated worm and maggot; let the storm howl! I would howl with it, share in the cosmic jest.

Vitalized in the truest sense of the word, I began to walk. The rain washed the earth-stains from my garments and body. Singularly, I felt no cold, no especial dampness. I was aware of these things, but they did not seem to penetrate. For the first time I realized another odd thing; I was not hungry or thirsty. At least I did not seem to be. Had appetite died with memory? I wondered.

Memory—the problem of identity still pressed. I walked along, impelled by the storm. Still pondering, my feet carried me past the confines of the cemetery. The gale leading me seemed to guide my footsteps out onto the stone sidewalk of a deserted street. I walked, almost without heeding.

Who was I? How had I died? How revived?

I walked through the rain, down the dark street, alone in the wet velvet of the night.

Who was I? How had I died? How revived?

I crossed a block, entered a narrower street, still stumbling along with the wind and the laugh of thunder from clouds mocking my bewilderment.

Who was—

I knew. My name—the street told me. Summit Street. Who lived on Summit Street? Arthur Derwin, myself. I was Arthur Derwin, of Summit Street. I used to be—something, I couldn't remember. I had lived, lived for years, and yet all I could recall was my name.

How had I died?

I had been to the séance, and the lights were out, and Mrs. Price was calling to someone. She had screamed something about evil influences, and then the lights had gone on.

They hadn't gone on.

But they *must* have.

They had, but *I* wasn't there.

I had died. Died in the darkness at the séance. What killed me? Shock, perhaps? And then what happened? Mrs. Price had hushed it up. I was alone in the city; I had been buried hurriedly, in a pauper's grave. "Heart failure," the coroner had probably called it. I was laid away. That was it. And yet I was Arthur Derwin, and surely somebody had cared.

Bramin Street said the sign in the lightning.

Bramin Street—someone had cared—Viola.

Viola had been my fiancée. She had loved Arthur Derwin. What was her last name? Where had I met her? What did she look like?

Bramin Street.

Again the sign. Unconsciously my feet seemed to have led me down this way. I was walking down Bramin Street without thinking in the storm.

Very well. I would let my feet lead the way. I wouldn't think. My feet would take me to Viola's home through habit. There I would learn. No thinking, now. Just walk through the storm.

I walked, my eyes closed to the blackness through which thunder beat. I walked out of death, and I was hungry now. I was hungry and thirsty for her lips. I had come back from death for her—or was that too poetic?

I came from the grave and went back to sleep in it and rose again and sought the world without memory. It was gruesome and grim and macabre. I died at a séance.

My feet plodded, slopping through rain. I felt no cold, no wet. I was warm inside, warm with the memory of Viola, her lips, her hair. She was a blonde, I remembered. Her hair was coiled sunlight, her eyes blue and deep as the sea, her skin the milky whiteness of a unicorn's flanks. I had told her so, I recalled, when I had held her in my arms. I knew her mouth as a scarlet gate to ecstasy. She was the hunger within me, she the burning beacon of desire that led me back through mists of memory to her door.

I was panting, and did not know it. Within me revolved a wheel that had once been my brain and was now just a grinding round screen flashing kaleidoscopic images of Viola, of the grave, of a séance and evil presences and inexplicable death. Viola had been interested in mysticism, I had been interested in the occult. We went to the séance. Mrs. Price was a famous medium. I died at the

séance and woke up in a grave. I came back to see Viola. I came back to find out about myself. I knew now what I was, how I had died. But how revived?

But how revived? Bramin Street. Feet plodding.

And then instinct turned my feet up the pathway to the porch. It was instinct which caused my hand to fumble for the familiar door-knob without knocking, instinct which led me across the threshold.

I stood in a hallway, a deserted hallway. There was a mirror there, and for the first time I could see myself. Perhaps that would shock me into complete remembrance and recognition. I looked, but the mirror faded before my gaze into a blur. I felt weak, dazed. But it was due to the hunger within me; the hunger which burned. It was late. Viola wouldn't be downstairs. She would be in her bedroom at this hour.

I went up the stairs, dripping water at every step, walking quite silently aside from the little dripping patter of rills running down to the stair below.

All at once giddiness left me again and I felt strong. I had the feeling that I was ascending the stairs to Destiny; as though once I reached the top I would know the truth of my fate.

Something had brought me from the grave here. Something lay behind this mysterious resurrection. The answer lay above.

I reached the top, turned down the dark, familiar hall. The bedroom door opened beneath my hand. A candle burned at the bedside, nothing more.

And I saw Viola lying there. She slept, incarnate beauty, slept. She was very young and lovely at that moment, and I felt pity for her at what she must know upon awakening. I called softly.

"Viola."

I called softly, and while I did so my brain said the last of the three questions over and over.

"And how revived?" said my brain.

"Viola!" called my voice.

She opened her eyes, allowed life to flood them. She saw me.

"Arthur—" she gasped. "You're dead!" It was a scream, that last.

"Yes," I said softly.

Why did I say "Yes"? I wondered. And my brain whispered, "And how revived?"

She rose up, shuddering. "You're dead—a ghost. We buried

you. Mrs. Price was afraid. You died at the séance. Go away, Arthur—you're dead!"

She moaned it over and over. I looked at her beauty and knew hunger. A thousand memories of that last evening came to me. The séance, and Mrs. Price warning of evil spirits; the coldness which had gripped me in the darkness and my sudden sinking into oblivion. Then this waking, and my search for Viola to appease my hunger.

Not for food. Not for drink. Not for love. A new hunger. A new hunger known only at night. A new hunger that made me shun men and forget my former self. A new hunger that hated mirrors.

A hunger—for Viola.

I moved toward her very slowly, and my wet grave-clothes rustled as I reached out my hands reassuringly and took her in my arms. I was sorry for her just for an instant; then the hunger came stronger and I bent my head.

The last question rang in my brain once again. "And how revived?" The séance, the threat of evil spirits, answered that question. I answered it myself.

I knew why I had risen from the grave, and who and what I was, as I took Viola in my arms. I took Viola in my arms, and my teeth met in her throat. That answered the question.

I was a Vampire.

Death Has Five Guesses

(*Strange Stories* April 1939)

THE REAL HORROR LAY IN THE FACT THAT HARRY CLINTON WAS just an ordinary college boy.

He sported a disreputable suede jacket, the left under-arm well-worn from the rubbing of the textbooks he carried. He was given to whistling popular song hits, and he owned most of the latest "swing" phonograph recordings. He drove a nondescript car, and worried about the price of gasoline. He played basketball on the second team, he liked ketchup on his hamburgers, he—oh well, he was an ordinary college boy, just one of thousands. And yet he knew grinning Fear.

Harry Clinton had gone to Western Tech for two years when Professor Baim began his experiments. Like the other students in Psychology 4, Clinton participated in the initial trials. It was just a routine matter, nothing more.

Professor Baim was interested in the Rhine Experiments—the Duke University studies in extra-sensory perception. He summarized his intentions to the Psych. 4 class briefly, at the outset.

The Rhine Experiments were an effort to determine the laws of Chance and their relation to human guesses.

"You've heard of hunches, and intuition, and telepathy," Baim told his class the first day. "Well, here's your chance to find out

what it's all about. I have here a pack of twenty-five playing-cards. They are special cards—five suits of five each. There are five stars, five circles, five squares, five sets of wavy lines, and five crosses. They are single black line figures on a white background, and these five were more or less chosen for their simplicity and their symbolic association with ordinary conscious and subconscious images.

"Is that clear enough? Five sets of cards; square, circle, cross, star, wavy lines. I'll pass these sets out and allow you to examine them."

He did so, and Harry Clinton looked at the little cards with the rest. Professor Baim continued:

"The basic idea in using these cards is simple. The operator holds one of them up to the subject, with only the back visible. The subject closes his eyes, allows his mind to become a blank. Then he calls out the name of the first of the five symbols to cross his consciousness. He may actually seem to *see* a square, or a circle, or a star, as the case may be. Perhaps the operator and the subject are seated back to back, so that there is no possibility of facial expression or eye reflection on the part of the operator informing the subject, or giving him a hint."

The class exhibited tepid interest, Clinton included.

"According to the experiments, the score of correct guesses in most cases is five. This seems natural enough, because if you were to go through the deck of twenty-five and call out 'star' each time you'd have to be right five times, since there are five cards in each of the five suits.

"But—and this is a very large 'but'—in the course of these experiments it was discovered that some students were able to guess perhaps ten or twelve cards correctly. Upon repeating the tests over a period of days, many achieved scores of fifteen or even twenty. Certain people seemed peculiarly apt guessers. While the scores of others varied from high to low, there were some who *persistently* turned in the same or nearly the same high score.

"This has led to the setting up of a theory of extra-sensory perception—an unknown quantity which may, or may not, account for certain people having the knack in making hunches or foreseeing the future, or even for receiving telepathic communications."

Harry Clinton was thinking about betting on football games.

"Certain students submitted to months of testing. It was discovered, then, that odd effects on their scoring ability could be brought about by getting them drunk; or by testing them when they were fatigued, or excited, or stimulated. Some of them scored higher

when told they were making progress; others dropped woefully.

"It was ascertained that guessing ability has nothing to do, apparently, with the actual intelligence of a person.

"But—and this is important—the variance of reaction under differentiated forms of stimuli implied that there was a definite power affected—Rhine has chosen to call this power the power of extra-sensory perception. I believe that Professor Rhine has shown the way to opening up new frontiers of the human mind. And with your permission, I should like to call upon a few volunteers today."

Clinton was one of the five chosen. He watched three others sit blindfolded in a chair while Professor Baim held up the cards one by one and waited for them to call out a symbol. He sorted the cards into piles of correct and incorrect guesses.

Clinton noticed that the first subject, a girl, guessed very swiftly. The second hesitated often. The third went quite fast for a space, slowed down, and regained speed toward the end.

Clinton sat in the chair, placed the warm blindfold over his eyes, and began guessing.

"Square—circle—circle—star—square—curly line—star—cross—cross—curly line—cross—no, that's a square—now a cross—circle—"

He felt queer. It was hardly his own voice droning. It was hardly his brain that saw in the darkness the rapid flickering images of circles and squares and stars and curly lines and crosses. Something directed him, made him speak. He completed the test in forty-two seconds.

Baim said nothing. He discoursed on individual peculiarities, mentioned how some guessers were fast, others slow, others erratic. He also intimated that memory, that is, the knowledge that one had already called "star" five times and consequently would not call it again during the same testing—might subconsciously influence the guessing.

"A real definitive score," he said, "can be obtained only after seven consecutive tests. Ah—Mr. Clinton, would you care to go through the pack again six times for the benefit of the class?"

Clinton agreed, sat down in the chair again.

The images came swiftly.

The period bell rang as the tests were concluded, and the students trooped out.

Baim's bulky figure leaned close as Clinton rose and removed his bandages.

"Mr. Clinton, I'd like to have a word with you."

"Yes, Professor."

"Mr. Clinton, I should very much appreciate your working with me this semester on these tests. Your initial scores, I might say, are—ah, remarkably high. This might be a fluke, an accident; but any extraordinary ability should be cultivated. Of course, this will be credited to your regular work, you know."

"Why, sure. Why not? Say, what is my average, anyway?"

"Twenty-three, Mr. Clinton. An amazing twenty-three."

Clinton worked with Professor Baim for months. The experiments broadened in their technique. New methods were employed. One night Baim called Clinton on the phone and requested him to guess the cards over the wire. They worked in separate rooms for several days; worked with screens between them; worked in total darkness; conducted the tests with telegraph keys, and called the guesses in French and German. It made no difference; Clinton showed his remarkable aptitude throughout.

At first, for Clinton, it was a lark. Then it became a problem to wonder over. After a time it reached the stage of a competition, a battle of wits against the Unknown. And finally, during the third month, it was drudgery.

Baim was writing a monograph on his work with Clinton. Although the professor endeavored to repress his enthusiasm, Clinton knew that he was highly pleased with the venture.

The extra-classroom nature of the studies kept Clinton very busy. Baim's demands on his time, and his insistence on undertaking tests at odd hours and under odder circumstances began after a while to annoy him.

There were days when Clinton went through the deck thirty times running. He grew sick of the symbols, exasperated. Even the surprisingly high percentage of totally correct scores no longer seemed a worthy goal to him. Despite all the work, he understood no more of his unusual power or ability than he had at the beginning. He merely closed his eyes and the pictures came; the five symbols loomed up almost automatically.

He tried guessing ordinary playing cards and failed miserably. He lost two dollars on the home team in a football game. He had no luck in guessing examination questions. Undoubtedly, this peculiar sixth sense was uncontrollable.

By the conclusion of the third month it was worse than that. He left his daily tests with headaches. He began to experience periods of moody irritability. Moreover, he had a tendency to forget trifles and details. A sort of mild amnesia seemed to steal over him at

times, so that he was unable to account for his actions for half-hours at a time.

Usually, after his testing periods, he would have difficulty in concentrating on anything else for quite a while. The symbols stuck with him, and closing his eyes he would involuntarily conjure up images of crosses and stars and curly lines and squares and circles. They floated in his head, and when he opened his eyes again an hour had passed, somehow.

This got worse. Clinton told no one, for he himself did not quite know what was the matter. But in the middle of May he suddenly experienced an attack of amnesia which lasted for three days.

It was so hard to think.

Harry Clinton—that was his name—had gone into a room and now his hands were around something soft.

He had done many things in the past three days and somehow he couldn't think just what they were. Or rather, a part of him didn't want to remember what they were. They had been bad things.

Was he at home, in the rooming house, in his own bed? Was this all a nightmare?

No, it was real. He was standing with his hands around something soft, and three days had passed.

Three days of school, of study, of work. Why couldn't he remember them?

It was even hard to see. He felt as though his eyes were closed, as though he was taking the tests—guessing at the brightly-colored mental pictures of crosses, stars, curly lines, squares, and circles.

That was why he couldn't remember. It had something to do with the tests, and the way they had affected him lately.

He must think back now. For a week or so he had been taking forty turns through the deck a day. Professor Baim had asked him to, as a final experiment to be written up for his almost completed monograph. Each day's testing had left him with a terrific headache.

More than that, he had been unable, lately, to shake off the recurring visions of the five symbols. He would leave the college and one or more of the symbols would come and stay in his brain. He would fall asleep thinking of the cross, and awake with the same thought static in his mind. That had caused his memory lapse. But where was he now?

He stared down again at his hands, and gasped as mists cleared.

He—Harry Clinton—remembered. He remembered that first evening, when he had thought he was going to be sick, and had stepped into the alley. He had leaned over the refuse-box as consciousness dissolved into a swirling mist. But now he could recall what happened.

He had leaned over the refuse-box, had gazed into it and seen what lay at the bottom. Two broken sticks lay there; probably torn from some packing-crate. They lay there, one atop the other—and they had formed a cross.

A cross. Clinton had picked them up—that is, his hands had done so. Clinton, himself, did not exist. There were only hands, and something guiding them which was not Clinton, or Clinton's brain—some alien force that felt drawn to the symbol of the cross. The hands picked up the sticks, fumbled about in the trash-box for a length of wire, bound the sticks into a permanent crucifix-shape. Then Clinton's body had walked down the narrow alley, and Clinton's eyes had kept looking at the base of the cross, where the stick was broken and ended in a jagged point. Clinton's eyes had gloated.

But Clinton himself had hated what he was doing because he did not understand, and hated the other part of his consciousness which drove him to fashion a symbol he wished to forget; so that as he walked, he grew very angry. Every time he closed his eyes the cross was there, in his forehead.

It was burning up there, just the way it did when Clinton guessed the cards at school. Only there were no cards this time, and still the cross remained. The memory was haunting him, making him do absurd things like fashioning this wooden crucifix with the pointed end. If only Clinton could forget the cross! He closed his eyes quite tightly, lurching down the alley, wishing that the two crossed iron bars against his brain would go away. He must not see the cross—

Clinton opened his eyes and saw the man coming down the alley from the opposite direction. It was dark, but the moon was up, and he saw that the man wore black skirts. For a moment he feared he was delirious, and then he realized the truth. It was a priest. Coming near, he saw the moonlight pick out a glittering pattern on the priest's chest. A glittering pattern—of a cross.

The golden cross dangled, it swayed from side to side as the priest walked. The moon was cruelly bright, so that its rays made of the crucifix a blinding blur. Clinton looked and could not tear

his eyes away. But he wanted to; he wanted to with all his soul. He did not want to do what he—

And then Clinton stepped over to the priest just as he passed, and from behind his back he drew the wooden crucifix with the pointed end, and drove the point straight into the priest's chest.

He walked away, his empty hands clutching at the air with a sort of joy born of the fact that they were empty; they no longer held the cross. There was joy in his mind, too, for it was empty of the symbol which, when normal, he so deeply respected, but which, in his dreamlike state of abnormality, obsessed him. No cross now, only that tingling emptiness—his whole brain was empty and free.

Harry Clinton went home and slept; slept gratefully without dreams. For he was empty, and when he awoke he had forgotten the night before with the cross and the priest.

In the class the next day when the cards were called Clinton scored only seven. Two squares had come, two circles, one curly line, and two stars. But no cross. Never, during the entire test, had he called out a cross or thought of one.

There were times when, his eyes closed, he had almost consciously tried to conjure up the vision of the cross in his mind. He had failed. He knew that there were five crossmarks in the pack of twenty-five, and yet in honesty he could not call aloud an image that he did not see.

This Clinton now remembered.

He remembered the following day—the day he guessed the five stars correctly. It was the day of the astronomy lecture too. Had that affected him? He wondered.

He had called the five stars correctly. After leaving class the headache had come.

He walked through the cool streets of dusk, his feet moving automatically along unbidden paths. Thoughts refused to come. He stopped in at a drug store and bought some aspirin, then meandered along the streets again. He had not wanted to go to his room. He caught himself straining to hear the sound of cars passing, the conversation of others in the street. For some reason he was particularly anxious to be amidst noise and lights and people—anything that might arrest his attention and ease the ache in his temples; the ache that was all dull nothingness in which a bright star blazed.

Erratic footsteps followed his gregarious urge until he was moving along downtown. The welcome clangor of street-cars began to fade, and only constant blinking enabled him to keep his eyes open. Abnormal nictation seemed the sole salvation at the moment when now even sounds failed to hold his attention.

Gratefully he had entered the vaudeville theater, sunk into a loge seat, and willed himself to watch the final reels of the motion picture flashing across the screen. At the conclusion he experienced a nasty shock when the trademark of the producing company flickered into view with its crest of five stars. The theater was nearly deserted at supper-hour, and in the darkness Harry Clinton fought a losing battle with the five-pointed image that thrust itself again and again between his inner eyes and his outer vision of the screen.

The brassy orchestra heralded the stage show, and for a few minutes Clinton again knew peace.

But the star act—Clinton had winced when the master of ceremonies announced the turn as such—was the personal appearance of a movie queen.

The whole thing was madness. *Movie star*—she swept onto the stage against a background of a glittering silver-foil *star*. Garishly lighted, the five silver points gleamed painfully, and Clinton could not move his eyes away. The image mocked him, and the blonde girl before it, undulating about the stage in sequins, seemed a part of the star itself.

Clinton bit his hand to keep from screaming.

His mind groped for a thought—any thought to hold his attention, to swerve it from the thought which engulfed him. And in the darkness he lost.

He rose to his feet and started down the aisle before the act was over. No longer was he conscious, aware of thought or action. He passed the boxes and entered the passageway which led backstage. Some part of him was moving slowly, cautiously. All he saw was a great glittering star—a star which was emblazoned on his mind and which obtruded between any other image and reality. He must get rid of the star in his mind.

Cautiously he moved along the deserted backstage corridor. The act was over, the hallway momentarily deserted. He walked slowly down toward the door under the light, paused before it.

There was a gold star on the door of the dressing-room. Its five points were saw-teeth biting into his brain. He stared at it, then pushed the door open.

The blond girl was sitting at her dressing-table, eating. Clinton did not see her. He saw a star.

There was a heavy, blunt-ended mirror on the table. There was a large, sturdy walking-stick in the corner. Clinton did not see them. He saw a stage-property artificial mace in a wall-stand. Its head was studded with five points. A star. Clinton ignored the other weapons. Walking slowly, he seized the mace as the door closed behind him.

The girl turned around. Clinton saw the star burn brighter. She rose, said something. Clinton saw the star move closer. It was close enough to reach now. Some part of him held the mace. And then dream fused with reality as he brought the mace down. One, two, three, four, five times—each time a point fell away from the core of torment in his brain. Then there was only a blur that became red; red as the pool on the floor where something lay.

Clinton turned, opened the door, walked out back through the passage and resumed his seat in the theater. He must have fallen asleep, for when he awoke the last show was over, and the house-lights were going up.

He did not remember how he had come to this place, or what he had done here. And he did not think about stars.

The next day in class he had refused to take the test, telling Professor Baim that he was indisposed. At the time he did not know any reason for doing so, except that he felt vaguely tired and incapable of effort.

He asked to be excused early and went home. He did not even read the papers; had he done so he might have seen the accounts of the mysterious death of Father Pornelski who had been murdered by an unknown religious fanatic two days before. He could have read of a second murder which was already making national headlines; the strange death of a well-known motion picture actress.

Harry Clinton was oblivious to all; he only knew that he felt tired, and quite unaccountably he did not wish to continue with the extra-sensory perception experiment. They had given him these recent headaches and peculiar lapses of memory, he felt sure. Today he was glad that his mind was free. Once in his room he lay back in the windowless gray and almost revelled in the blankness of his brain.

Funny—since taking up these psych. experiments, he'd thought

a hell of a lot about his own mind. Before that he had never even known he had one. Oh, well. It was pleasant and soothing here. Closing his eyes he watched the two dancing lines of parallel curls—two gray curly lines wriggling before his naked brain. Two curly lines. What did they remind him of?

Sally.

Of course, Sally. Sally's curly hair. He sure *was* forgetful these days—why, he hadn't seen Sally for over a week. Mrs. Johnson, the landlady, had left a note under his door three days ago saying that Sally had called the night he was out somewhere, walking off his headache. The poor kid; she was worrying about him! Why had he neglected her that way?

Now that he thought about it—thought of gray lines—he could not stop. This psych. stuff was sure developing his concentration, all right. It seemed as though he just had to go and see Sally. She would be home now, Thursday afternoon. Her biology lab period was over at eleven on Thursdays. He must drop in and surprise her. He had to surprise Sally. Sally with the curly yellow hair. Two curls in back. Long golden curls. Old-fashioned girl. Curls.

He was already walking down the street, turning up. A light misty rain was falling, and glancing into the street Clinton noticed the treadmarkings caused by the tires of a skidding car. They left two curly lines. He was going to see Sally.

One block more. The curly lines. They got mixed up with his thoughts of Sally. Two golden caterpillars on her neck. On her white neck. Two curly lines.

Ring the bell. No one in? Open the door, her room is in front.

Curly fringes on the carpet beneath his feet. Curly fingers knocking on the door. Curly lines of two red lips to kiss.

"Oh Harry—where have you been? I've worried so—"

Curls. On her neck. Think about Sally, not the curls.

"What are you staring at? You look—funny."

Must feel the curls. Don't want to, but must. Can't think until they are felt.

Can't think at all. . . .

It was only after touching the curls that Harry Clinton did begin to think. It was then that he remembered everything—the death of the priest, and the star, and the obsessive mingling of Sally and the curly lines. Clinton thought of all these things because he had been shocked into doing so—shocked by gazing down at his own hands clutching Sally's curls! Sally's curls which his hands had wound about her neck and tightly pressed to strangle her to death!

Clinton knew then. Even as he ran through the streets he knew. He could think only too clearly now. He was in the grip of some obsession concerning the five symbols on the extra-sensory perception cards. The strain of guessing those symbols with closed eyes, day after day for months, in a variety of experiments; his facility in conjuring up the proper mental images—these things had induced some abnormal condition whereby one or more of the symbols now came to his mind without conscious effort to recall any. It was sheer habit to think of a star, a cross, a curly line, a square, or a circle.

Telepathy—what was it? What peculiar force in the brain aided him in his guessing? Was it a psychic power, or an alien intelligence prompting him?

Whatever the cause, the matter had passed all controllable bounds. He was helpless to fend off the power of the symbols; for symbols they had become.

When preyed upon by the recurring image of the cross, he had encountered the priest, and some part of his brain had identified the holy man with the cause of his torment. He had killed the priest to erase from his mind the cross symbol. And had not instinct guided him to choose a symbolic weapon?

In the vaudeville theater he had seen the star. Out of several weapons in her dressing-room he was prompted by the symbolism of the mace-head.

Was he actually guilty of such crimes? Or was he a dual personality? Some subconscious murdering impulse had guided him very cunningly in the execution of his killings. Was he insane?

He must have been, to kill Sally. Good God, he had killed her! That was why he was running. No one had seen him. Her curly hair, two curly lines on her neck, writhing through his brain—he was forced to erase the crawling curly lines from memory. Symbolically, he did so with her death.

That was another thing. He had not taken the test. Merely thinking of Sally, this last time, had caused identification. And there was still the circle and the square to go. Would he murder two images of transference because of them?

He panted with exhaustion, lying on the bed in his room. Would he murder two more? What could he do to prevent it?

Had to drop psych. That was certain. And keep from anything which might even vaguely be associated with the last two symbols. He could not, he fancied, play poker any more with the three boys

down the hall. They sat at a square table, and there were four of them. It might suggest the square. Or the chips might suggest the circle. A fat man could evoke the circle image. Or even the phrase, "a square-shooter," applied to some man, was liable to set him off.

Yet he needed a square-shooter. He had to tell someone about this. That was the way they did it in psychiatry, wasn't it? The old idea of the confessional. Whom could he trust? Whom could he tell? He would state the case hypothetically, of course, and get the dope straight. But whom?

Professor Baim. Yes, Baim was the logical man. He knew about all this. Clinton would have to see him to drop the class, anyway. And perhaps Baim knew of a way out.

There had to be a way out, at once. Murders could not continue. He was going crazy. It was all insane, and at any minute the torturing images might recur to blot out all thought and sanity.

Why not go now?

Clinton rose and walked swiftly out of the room, out of the house, down the street to the Campus Square.

It was four o'clock.

He had murdered Sally at two-thirty.

It was an absurd thought. An hour and a half ago he had murdered a woman. Now he was going to—what was he going to do? Oh yes, see Baim. Good old Baim. He would know a way to help. His classes were over, he'd be working in his office.

The wide office door loomed before him. It was very wide. Almost square.

Clinton walked in. Baim was sitting at the desk, his square shoulders hunched over—

Oh no. Mustn't think of squares.

"Hello, Professor."

Don't think about the square jaw.

"I wanted to talk to you."

Think of something else, quick. What's he doing? Oh yes, he has the cards out on the desk. Why—the cards are square!

"Your cards are square, Professor."

What was he saying? *The cards are square.* Professor Baim taught me to think of squares. Professor Baim will play square with me. Professor Baim is a square.

"What's the matter? Don't be afraid, Professor."

Professor Square—no, Baim—he's afraid. He's backing away. What do I look like? What am I doing? He's backing up to the window. The window, think of anything but Professor Baim is a square. Think of the window.

The window is square.

Baim is backed against the open square window.

Square against square.

Square accounts.

"Professor, I—"

He's falling. Twisting around. Twisting—why he isn't square any more. He's all crumpled.

Well. That was easy. It's gone. Simple. Now, to get rid of that damned circle.

Clinton was almost happy as he slipped out the side entrance. He walked slowly back to the rooming-house, even listened to the newsboy on the corner of Hale and Jefferson shouting about the "Extra! Reedalla bouta moider! Collichgoil-foundead! Extraaah!"

He didn't buy a paper. He knew all about the murder. He knew all about lots of murders. But what worried him was that he didn't know about the next murder.

There had to be one. There simply had to be one. He must get rid of the circle. Then he'd be all right again. Somehow he realized that these things were not right, but it was all necessary. A man couldn't live when his brain was on fire with incomprehensible images. This peculiar power of his—this psychic power of guessing correctly—it was somehow alien, and evil.

Poor old Baim; had he actually realized the full extent of the forces he had tampered with? There was certainly a lot to it he hadn't suspected. Must have had his suspicions though, when he went out the window. Perhaps he knew now.

This stuff was all from across the Border. Clinton didn't know and couldn't control it. Funny idea. Suppose this was really some "extra-sensory perception" of his, this guessing faculty he'd developed. Suppose it were, and that it was not meant for men. Something or some one might guard it. Or perhaps this faculty merely opened up a new part of the mind in such a way that the old mind was unable to govern or control the actions of its augmented self?

There was dark stuff here, and Clinton didn't want to tamper with it. Do the murder, get rid of the last image, forget about it all—erase the circle and be free.

Whom to sacrifice?

The moonfaced husband of Mrs. Johnson, the landlady? Rogers, the kid with the shaved head and the round skull?

The circle is the symbol of infinity, eternity. All life is a circle. Curved space. Curved existence. Round. Round and black.

Up the stairs, around to the room.

Think deliberately of the circle, so that it may provide a key to the way out. Release the brain.

This would be a planned, deliberate murder. Why not? There was a gun in the drawer. A gun.

Clinton took out the gun, filled it with round cartridges, gazed down the round hole in the muzzle.

He was trying hard to think of the person he meant to kill, and strangely no thought came; although by this time he could see the circle quite plainly in his mind, and for the first time he actually rejoiced in the pain. The blazing circle coruscated, swirling round and round and round as he looked down the dark round muzzle of the gun.

It was then that he heard the sounds from below, and the tramp of footsteps on the stairs.

Sluggishly he realized the truth. They were coming for him. After all, four murders—he was in a daze, must have left many clues. They were coming for him now.

But they couldn't come. They couldn't lock him up now. Not now, when the circle was squeezing tightly around his brain. He must get rid of the circle first, find peace. Because they would shut him away for the rest of his life in a madhouse, and he couldn't stand it there with nothing but the thought of the circle. They were coming up the stairs.

Who? What? Clinton rose and stepped forward wildly, gun in hand. The circle of his room.

Something bright arrested his attention. Something bright, and round like the circle in his head. He tried to see it. Yes. Yes. He could see it. It was the mirror—the silver circle of the mirror over his bureau. He stared into it.

In the silver circle he saw himself—his own round head.

The knocking on the door came.

But Clinton stared into the silver circle at his own round head. Clinton stared into the dark circle of the gun-muzzle. He put the round muzzle to his round head and looked into the round mirror as though for confirmation.

Yes, it was right.

“Open in the name of the law.”

He had found the fifth symbol. It was the circle of life—back to himself. He was the last symbol. Once he erased that he could find peace.

Harry Clinton sent a circular bullet into his circular brain.

Whatever the source of his extra-sensory perception, he had guessed right at the end.

The Bottomless Pool

(*Strange Stories* April 1939) with Ralph Milne Farley,
as Ralph Milne Farley

IT WOULD BE STUPID OF ME TO WRITE THIS WITH THE INTENTION of saving my life. Of course I shall be threatened with a murder charge, but they shall never be able to produce the body. Consequently they must eventually set me free.

But there is a possibility that I may be held for a sanity hearing. For that reason I must pen this account, and attach it to the other papers. It may serve to convince the officials at the investigation. And those officials *must* be convinced.

They must be convinced, because there is a deed which they must do. It is imperative that they heed my plea and board up the bottomless pool in the swamp beyond Prichard's Woods. They must board up the pool and drain the bog-land; fence it off if they cannot destroy it. Otherwise there will be further tragedies—this I swear is true. And until that black pool is boarded over I shall never find the solace of sound sleep, but will continue to dream of that thing in the swamp—the dark thing that took the life of my friend, Martin Aylethorp.

There was a time when I knew peace. That's the mockery. My friend Martin had been in a "slump period"—he wrote for a living—and I invited him East for the sole reason that I thought we'd find a soothing tranquility at my home.

My cottage is near Mill Brook, just outside of Concord. Martin, I reasoned, would enjoy tramping in Prichard's Woods, and in the fall the New England countryside takes on a mellow beauty most conducive to easing shattered nerves.

As I recall my preparation for his coming, it seems like a grim joke. I was so careful in rigging up his room to insure its quiet—I even sent into town for a noiseless portable to replace my regular typewriter.

For when Martin arrived in late August he was a sick man. His tall, normally lean figure was now emaciated; his eyes were sunken behind his spectacles, and the smile I had remembered as habitual upon his countenance seemed drowned by inward melancholy. He smoked too much, and when he held a cigarette the gray spirals rose from the tip unevenly because of the trembling of his hand.

I did my best to conceal my concern over his changed appearance. He had been working on a novel and trying to hold down a librarian's job during the day. I gathered that he was completely done in, and had lately found it impossible to continue with his short story work. It is amazing what creative effort can do to a man of Martin's peculiar temperament. He was drained dry—sucked of all vitality as though his nights had been given over to visits from a vampire or succubus, rather than writing.

It isn't a bad comparison, for Martin Aylethorp wrote weird fiction. He wrote it intensely; and it was his theory, not mine, that writing fantasy took more out of an author than work in any other field. His own person certainly seemed to be good proof of this contention.

I did my best for him. I carefully avoided all topics of conversation which might relate to his work. I did not show him any of my recent stuff. I locked away all my reference books and magazines. And I did not allow him to speak of his book.

I coaxed him into resting, argued and bullied him with the notion of getting outdoor exercise interspersed with plenty of sleep. After a week or so I gradually augmented the menu at meal time and encouraged him to eat.

It worked. By the time September had passed, he had regained his normal attitude, and his health was once more back to par. Incidentally, I myself had gained six pounds.

Soon I proposed a series of daily hikes in and about the local woods. Martin took to the idea, and for the first time I learned that as a boy he had often spent the summer with relatives in Concord. He seemed eager, as his health improved, to re-visit familiar land-

marks. Although I had been at my cottage for over a year, I was amazed at the unsuspected secrets of the countryside he uncovered. Soon he was acting as my guide and I played the meekly following visitor to local shrines.

As his physical well-being increased, his normal interests were correspondingly re-aroused. Within several weeks he was talking stories and plots to me again, and by the end of the month he was literally champing at the bit, eager to get back into harness and do a few tales. Although I held out as long as I could, he insisted that he be allowed the use of my typewriter, and our daily jaunts were now filled with his talk of proposed work and plans for stories.

And then our hikes and his interest converged—disastrously.

One morning after breakfast he came into my room and yanked me out of my chair.

“Come on,” he urged. “The sun’s high and we’re going for a little exploring jaunt.”

“Where to?” I asked. “Haven’t we covered all the local show-places yet?”

“This is no show-place,” he replied, smiling. “It’s a secret. I’ll wager there’s a spot you’ve never seen, and only a mile away from here, too.”

“I doubt that,” I said. “What kind of place is it?”

Martin assumed a look of melodramatic grimness.

“It’s called ‘The Bottomless Pool,’” he whispered.

“What’s the gag?”

“I’m serious. It’s in the swamp south of Prichard’s Woods. I remember my gang explored it during one of the summers I stayed here as a kid. It’s a strange place—George Graves warned us to stay away from it when we told him we’d been there. He was the only grown-up we ever spoke to about it, and it was he who called the place ‘The Bottomless Pool.’

“He mentioned Walden Pond in Concord—the place where Thoreau wrote his nature studies, you know—and said that it was bottomless, too. It lies in a hollow in the hills; has neither inlet nor outlet, yet the water is always fresh. Springs and a subterranean river cause that, no doubt; the glacier created some queer freaks hereabouts. But he said that Government engineers once came to Walden to take soundings, and there were spots in that pond that were deeper than their longest sounding-wires. That’s what he meant by a ‘bottomless’ pool, and he said that the one in Prichard’s Woods was similar.

“Well, his warning just whetted our interest in the spot, you see.

Kids are like that, I guess. We got together all the fishline the gang could lay their hands on and tied it all together with a lead weight on one end. Then we lowered it down into that sluggish black pool in the swamp.

"We never struck bottom! Well, that sort of scared us—it's a creepy place—and we took the warning more seriously.

"I never have gone back. That was my last summer at Concord—and I gradually lost track of the boys. But I did hear something in a letter once about Sam Dewey disappearing in the swamp the following year. Sam was the lad who suggested we take soundings. Of course I don't think his disappearance had anything to do with his interest in the Bottomless Pool; although it might have at that. He was foolhardy and George Graves, when warning us, hinted something about people who had fallen in."

I listened to all this with a sort of tepid interest. But Martin seemed genuinely enthusiastic.

"Let's go take a look at the place," he urged. "It's really a weird spot, and I've got a hunch there's a story there somewhere."

I rose and obediently put on my boots. In my own solitary wanderings I had avoided the mucky, wooded depths of the old swamp, and it was only to humor my guest that I acceded to his request. We struck out to the south and soon reached the swamp edge.

The swamp was awful. The limbs of dead trees interred the sunlight, and only the wan ghosts of its beams haunted the murky avenues of the morass. Rotten logs and slimy creepers covered a slough of quicksand and bog through which I floundered at Martin's heels. The instincts of boyhood guided him aright, so that he avoided the gray, bubbling patches of deeper ooze. He remarked over this, voicing his amazement that after all these years the place seemed to be unchanged.

At first it was the physical difficulties we encountered which impressed me. Gradually, however, as we waded deeper into the dark swamp, I became more aware of other, less tangible things. The place looked like death, and smelled of death's rotteness and decay. Moss and fungoid growths clung to the gray tree-trunks; bloated toadstools reared pulpy death's heads on fat, stemmed necks rising from the ooze.

The bubbling of the swamp-juices beneath our boots was a silent kind of sound, or rather a noise that seemed to intensify the silence and at the same time to be a part of it. There was no wind in the hanging branches, and we saw neither bird nor animal in these depths.

Still, there had been life here once, for we soon struck a rickety old fence which wound in a seemingly haphazard manner through the lower swamp. Martin, beckoning to me, turned and followed the meandering wooden outlines until he came to the willow tree that bent over the ground before it. And there, in the deep, dark shade of the ancient boughs, lay the Bottomless Pool.

It was small—barely six feet across—and black. Jet black water, motionless. The pool was like a large, unblinking eye, with an odious green scum filming its pupil.

That's a highly fantastic comparison—but something about the pool's appearance inspired such thoughts in me. It was strange, and somehow unnatural. It wasn't right for this small pool to be here in the swamp, and certainly the thing looked as evil as any natural formation I've ever seen.

Martin stood looking into the depths for a few moments. "The water's black, too," he murmured—strange how in the presence of silence the human voice is always hushed. "The water's black as ink," he said. And he dipped one hand into the pool, brushing off the scummy froth and cupping ebon drops for me to see. The water was black, and the decayed matter in it gave it a veined appearance; it was striated with dark green rills.

"Place eery enough for you?" asked Martin. I nodded.

"Scared us when we were kids," he observed. "And I wouldn't be too sure of my reactions now. But what a setting for a story."

"Perhaps." I had been staring into the silent water, and now I wondered what was generating the impulse in me to turn and run away.

Were my own nerves bad? I hastily averted my gaze.

"Look!" Martin shouted. He really spoke in a normal tone of voice, but in contrast to our previous hushed murmurs, it was a shout.

"Look at the lizard," he exclaimed. Sure enough, the surface of the black water had parted with a widening ripple, and a small dark lizard of some sort appeared. It floated on its back, as though dead. I reached down and grabbed it; yanked it out.

"Why, there's a wire attached to it!" I gasped. The wire led down into the water.

Just then there came a pull on the line from within the pool. It yanked the little dead reptile right out of my hands, but something attached to it caught in my coat, cut right through it, and dug painfully into my side. A hook!

"I'm caught!" I cried, as I stepped toward the pool to ease the pain of the barb in my side. But now the wire line had tightened, was drawing me in short jerks toward the brink of the black pool. I grabbed the line with both hands, braced my feet at the very edge, and leaned backward. But the sod on which I was standing crumbled, and I slid feet foremost into the stygian water.

"Help!" I cried.

Martin leaped forward and grabbed me. With a tremendous tug he hurled me back on the bank. Water coursed down my body, and warm blood scalded the deep wound in my side. I felt faint.

Martin swore softly as he daubed iodine on the cut beneath my shirt, and I swore loudly at the pain. Neither of us were ready to comment, but suddenly Martin turned his head and darted again to the edge of the pool. He pointed, speechless.

Another lizard, larger than the first, now rose to the surface of the pool. It bobbed, and seemed to beckon.

Martin scowled deeply, pointed to my hook-gashed side, and growled out a single word:

"Bait!"

Bait? What bait? The lizard? I snorted disgustedly.

But all the way home we marveled at the incident. We argued as I changed into dry garments; debated as I bandaged my side; mused during luncheon, and speculated wildly all the long afternoon.

Martin, ever the imaginative, had a dozen fantastic theories.

Who fished at the depths of the bottomless pool? And with hooks? Something lived in the pool. Maybe *some things*. The *some things* fished for men. As a boy, hadn't George Graves hinted about disappearances? And hadn't Sam Dewey vanished near the swamp?

Something in the pool set traps for men—putting lizards on hooks and using a wire line. The Bottomless Pool led to inner earth, and there was life below. Thus Martin expressed himself, half-seriously.

To which I offered the obvious replies. The hook and line had been used by some fisherman. It had fallen into the water. Perhaps the lizard had been accidentally impaled upon the hook, risen to the surface as it died, and brought the line up. I grabbed it, got hooked, and a snag, entangling the line's end under water, had pulled me into the pool.

"But what about the second lizard we saw?" Martin insinuated, gently.

I was silent.

Martin was grave for a moment before continuing. "I remember, as a boy, fishing for pickerel up Assabet. The boat rocked. I was only about nine at the time, but I was a smart fisherman. I hooked a big pickerel that day—and the pickerel hooked *me*."

I gave him an uncomprehending glance. "How?" I asked.

"Line got wrapped around my foot and the fish pulled me out of the boat," he laughed. Then, in graver tones, he went on: "If I were a fish, and I wanted to catch a fisherman, I'd tangle him up in a line. Take the Bottomless Pool, for example. If I meant to capture whoever or whatever is fishing for me from below, I'd grab that lizard bait and allow it to drag me in toward the pool. Then I'd pull up more line and attach the wire to a windlass rope. And then I'd let go of the hook. The sudden release might precipitate the fisherman below overboard into the water and tangle him up. Then, by quickly winding in the windlass, I'd haul the fellow up to the surface."

"But that's absurd," I began. "There's no fisherman in the Bottomless Pool—there can't be, and besides—"

"How does your hooked side feel this evening?" interjected Martin sarcastically.

"Oh, let's forget it," I grumbled.

But I didn't forget. I dreamed that night. And Martin did not forget, either. He spent the midnight hours at the typewriter, taking notes for a story. Neither of us, however, spoke again of the Bottomless Pool.

The next day I awoke with a slight fever. The wound in my side was a little inflamed, and I lay abed, bathing it with hot cloths to reduce the swelling. Martin, after assuring himself that I was not utterly helpless, announced that he was going for a walk.

"I'd like to interview a few oldtimers around here about that place," he told me. "There should be myths."

I forget what remark I made, but I know that I tried to laugh him out of his interest. Secretly, I was very much disturbed. My dreams had not been pleasant, and the Bottomless Pool had figured rather too prominently in them. For a moment I had the wild notion that Martin was going off to try out his fishing theory. He seemed almost unnaturally interested; a person of his temperament can be greatly influenced by imaginative concepts.

He left on his purported mission of investigation, and I spent a long day in dozing and dreaming. It was late afternoon when he returned, greeted me brusquely, and went in to the other room. In

a few moments I heard the vibration of the noiseless typewriter.

Rising, I got supper together. We ate but little; fever had banished my own appetite, and excitement seemed to grip Martin so that food could not interest him.

Almost as soon as he sat down he launched into a long babble of gossip he had picked up during the day. Old Bert Pickens down near the Causeway had known Martin's parents; he had filled my friend up with old Colonial tales and even some Indian lore he'd heard as a boy back in the seventies.

There were stories about the swamp south of the woods; specific cases of disappearances dating way back as far as community memory went.

Visiting Granny Mercer's cottage later in the day, Martin had persuaded the always garrulous old woman to recount her own family history. It was a point of pride with the crone that her pure blood had at one time produced a martyr during the Salem witchcraft hysteria, and she warned Martin most gravely about the old pool. It was from her that he picked up his tale of the Indian rites in the swamp, where the braves sometimes offered up sacrifices to the pit-god they believed dwelt in the pool—casting bodies into the orifice.

I could see that Martin was more impressed with this lore than even he admitted; he was very glib in patching together his yarn so that it formed an almost recognizable story sequence. He quoted from memory the words of Cotton Mather concerning "gateways to Hell and openings in the earth which lead to the Regions of the Damned." Indeed, he weaved a fine romance about the pool, and did it so deftly that I was forced to the conclusion that he half-believed some of it.

"I'll write it all up tonight," he told me. "Then I must have another look at the place. You know, there's something fascinating about all this—it's a real mystery. Wouldn't it be remarkable if there *is* some truth about my theories concerning the fishing? After all, those lizards don't manufacture hook and wire. And some of these old wives' tales are very definite."

I made no comment. I went to bed early, leaving Martin to type away in the next room as he had planned. My sleep was troubled, and it must have been about midnight when I woke in a cold sweat and stumbled into the kitchen for water. The house was dark and still. I passed through Martin's room, and noticed with a start that his bed was empty.

Fever left me. I knew, with an inexplicable dread, that Martin had gone. And I knew, too, *where* he had gone.

My first thought was that I had over-estimated his recovery. He might still be mentally ill; the pool in the swamp had exercised a morbid fascination on his mind. Poor judgment might have led him to see the thing by moonlight, for the sake of capturing story "atmosphere."

I went back to bed, but I did not sleep. I kept waiting for him to return. The night was long. I trembled with fever, and with secret fear. It was not a good thing to wander alone in the swamp by night. Quicksand and fog, to say nothing of the possibilities of running into some prowler, made the stunt dangerous.

But after an hour had passed, I found that it was not this spectacle of actual, apparent dangers which disturbed me. I began to think only of the pool itself, and of the bait upon its black surface.

Then it was that unreasoning panic gripped me. I rose and bundled up, tugged on my boots. I snatched up my belt flashlight and ran out.

I swear I had no sense of time passing on my nocturnal trek in the woods. It seemed only a fever-filled instant before I was already wading into that black jungle fringing the swamp; only a mist-wrapped moment before I darted from hummock to hummock in the rising fog, calling Martin's name. Only the frogs croaked an answer.

Then I was following the fence-rail and finally grasped the willow trunk as I stared down at the bank of the pool—the bank of wet mud in which were implanted the fresh boot-prints of human feet. They faced one way only—toward the pool. And as they neared the edge they slurred into a sort of sliding, scooped-out impression, as though the wearer had been dragged. . . .

Dragged into the black, silent water, from which the tiny bubbles now arose, slowly, slowly. . . .

I screamed and ran back into the night.

Fever held me the next day. But I was glad, for it kept me from thinking too much—thinking about what had happened, and also about what I planned to do.

I didn't consider the possibility of suicide—not when I read the typed notes Martin had written the night before. The whole story of his belief lay there, and there were incredible hints of what he expected to bring forth from the pool depths. At the last he spoke

of the urge to re-visit the scene and capture a lizard for examination—to see if it were of a recognizable species, and also to determine just how it had been killed. He wanted some wire, also, and one of the hooks. Then he would go ahead and try his plan.

For he quite definitely had intended to use the windlass trick. I learned that before the morning was over—the delivery truck brought the order from the city.

I went sick as I signed Martin's name for the shipment. I had a sudden vision of him on the night before, standing by the pool as he waited for the appearance of the bait, then stooping to remove the reptile and being caught, dragged. . . .

No, it was not suicide. It was murder.

But by what means?

Through burning delirium came the answer—pictures conjured up from Indian legends and witchcraft whisperings. A Dweller beneath the waters, fishing for humankind, and snaring the curious. A fissure in the earth's crust, leading to some hellish subterranean cavern. And Martin going down, down into the inky waters on the end of a hook, to be seized by—what?

I would find out. The windlass and Martin's scheme—he would be avenged with his own plan, his own instrument.

I must have been a little mad. I talked and laughed to myself a great deal as the day sped. I gathered the equipment together at dusk, and started for the swamp. An unhealthy night-fog was already rising when I left Prichard's Woods, but though fever coursed through my veins I plodded on. I walked through nightmare.

The unseen frogs croaked a dismal litany as I stumbled through the bog. Tapers of fog rose dimly on all sides, and smoky mist hung about my head. I floundered through the gray darkness, lugging the windlass. Often I sank ankle-deep into puddles of bubbling slime.

All about me in the night was rottenness and decay and death, and I recall thinking that this putrescent swamp was but a frame; a background, a setting for the black jewel of the bottomless pit. But the fog and the fever in my temples accounted for such wild fancies.

Fog and fever conspired toward my feeling of unutterable loathing when first I caught sight of the ebon waters upon the inky chasm in the center of the swamp.

Fog and fever addled me so that I monotonously cursed as I anchored the windlass to a big log set upon the firm higher ground of the bank. A short rope from the drum of the windlass ran to the

edge of the pool and ended in a quick-settling clamp. There was a detached part of me that carried out these operations with methodical precision, and yet another part that inspired my cursings as I crouched there in the forest darkness of the heaving, breathing swamp.

Beneath my feet the quicksand thrummed and groaned, and I recall that a wild picture rose in my mind. I had a fantastic image of myself crouching upon the epidermis of some gigantic monster—as though the swamp itself were just the skin of a vast beast, and the bottomless black pit a tiny pin-prick in the flesh. But that, too, was fog and fever.

The preparations were made. I had not even glanced at the scummy surface of the pool; so sure was I of what my eyes must encounter. Now, with the drum ready for use and the windlass securely placed, I gazed into the dark depths and jerked on the flashlight I wore at my belt.

Its rays disclosed the floating blue body of a tiny lizard, bobbing monotonously upon the surface of the cryptic waters. There it lay in death, rising and sinking upon water that did not move. And that fact inspired me with the terrible fear of a corroboration for poor Martin's story.

I stared at the creature, fighting the fog and fever that created gray mist upon my brain until the only thought distinguishable was a panic impulse to flee the spot. I rocked on my heels when I wished to run screaming back across the bog to a spot where Nature is sane and friendly.

And then I felt in my pocket for the wire-clipper I had found on Martin's desk. For some absurd reason, the cold feel of the prosaic, factory-cut metal reassured me. And with my free hand I reached out and snatched at the blue lizard.

I tugged the body from the water in the beam of the flashlight on the bank—and the clear yellow beam was cut by a black line. The lizard *was* wired! Seizing the clamp next to me, I quickly clipped the wire to the windlass rope.

Then I yanked on the wire with both hands. I tugged. A shudder ran through me, for I felt a dreadful unmistakable *response* from the other end of the line! Through the water it tightened, jerked.

Someone below was pulling on the rope. *Someone was fishing!* But who? And from how far below?

The tugger was strong. In sudden desperation I felt my heels slide along the bank. Powerful jerks were drawing me close to the

black brink of that dark, still pool. With a gasp, I let go.

The line whipped back into the water. In my mind's eye I formed a silly, senseless picture of a fisherman standing on his wharf; then falling over backwards as the catch released his line. An idiotic picture it was, for there could be no fisherman at the bottom of a bottomless pool. Or could there be?

I would soon know. The line fell back, then reached the spot where I had clamped it to the windlass rope. There it snapped—taut.

The fisherman had fallen overboard. He had been hooked. I laughed without mirth at the insane thought.

And then I gripped the windlass handle and turned the drum, and I felt a terrific threshing tauten the line until it stood straight in the flashlight's beam again. The wire began to snap back and forth in the black waters of the pool. I turned and turned; a hundred, a thousand revolutions were made in augmenting frenzy—for now I desperately realized that each crank was bringing me closer and closer to the secret of the bottomless pool.

Suddenly the winch jammed. I stared in dismay, then saw that the drum was full. Then I leapt in front of the windlass and grabbed the remaining wire in my hands.

It took a second, but I experienced a year. Through fever and fog came images of what I might expect to find at the end of my line. Martin's bloated corpse, blue and swollen, with the line gripped between death-clenched teeth . . . the shapeless body of a child long mired in the slime of the pit . . . sea-monster. . . .

But no, it could not be. There was a fisher down there—a fisher that baited cunningly this hook and sent a wire line upwards to entrap children, and wanderers, and curious men. And the fisher had taken Martin, and was now entangled in this line. A fisher in a black and bottomless pool; I was drawing in a fisher from Below.

The rays of the flashlight on the bank now gleamed upon the surface of the scummy waters, but they were still no longer. In oozing eddies they bubbled and swirled, and black slime was tossed upwards as I drew the cutting wire through my hands. A terrific force was pulling against me, and fright alone conspired to intensify the strength of my grip. At that moment, I would gladly have released my hold but sheer hysteria made my muscles rigid. Slowly, inexorably, I drew the final length of the wire from the water in the yellow light.

The Fisher emerged. . . .

I cannot remember if I screamed aloud, but there was the sound

made by utter fear ringing and crashing against my brain. For I saw the creature of the pit—saw the strangled neck about which the tangling wire had wound and allowed me to pull the Fisher upwards. I saw what filled the six-foot surface of the pool as it emerged.

It was a head shaped by horror's dreams alone. Not human, not reptilian, not frog-like—it was nevertheless featured with great staring yellow eyes, snouted like a saurian, and covered with a greenish batrachoid skin that glistened slickly against the yellow light.

The monstrous bulging eyes rolled wildly and dilated in agony as the creature opened its great slitted mouth in a soundless, choking gasp. I stared into a red maw that was fanged in a manner unknown to any beast still roaming earth—and as I did so a sickening realization swept over me. This was the Fisher!

An instant only did that gigantic glistening head rise greenly above the waters of the pool—then my clippers were out, the wire snapped with a shrill twang, and the Fisher from Below sank beneath the bubbling black waves with a thunderous splash of slime. I stared down blankly into the depths as the waters quickly became quiescent once again. I could see nothing—but I did not wish to.

I did not wish to learn what manner of horrid life flourished unnaturally at the bottom of this opening—wherever that bottom might be. I did not care to speculate upon the cunning intelligence of a primal entity which even now fished for men from its lair in the black deep. I did not think I could endure surmises which now clamored for consideration.

Was this the only creature of its kind, or were there more down there? What inversion of sane natural laws allowed existence in nighted depths, and what manner of ghastly intelligence prompted prehistoric beasts to set bait for men? Were there other such openings in the earth's concealing crust through which the madness below had access to humanity?

But what I most devoutly tried to keep from thinking about was the scraped sides of the pool-bank, and the reasons for it. Only the *head* of the monster had emerged, and it had filled the pool. The sides were scraped by the shoulders—and *the six-foot pool had not been wide enough to permit the passage of the body.*

Fog and fever were merciful releases. I know that I dumped the windlass in the pool and it sank like a plummet, and I dimly remember running back through the swamp.

I was ill the next few days, and then the police came, and I told them what I dared. They have seen the pool, but they have said nothing of their opinion to me. I told them more today, and will tell them all I know soon—not to preserve my freedom, but because now I want the spot boarded up. It must be, lest others see the bait. It must be boarded up; for it cannot be *filled up*.

I shall tell them soon, or let them read this. They can think me demented if they like, but I trust they believe enough to act, and act promptly. Perhaps if even then they do not believe, I may show them the hook I have—the hook from the wire in the pool, which I cut off. I hate to reveal it to them, for I detest the very memory of the thing myself.

It is made of some golden metal, harder than pure gold. It is cut, and rudely shaped—and I dislike to conceive of the creatures who deliberately formed it for its horrid purpose and made the wire to which it was attached. I cannot bear to think of the civilization behind such a creative effort. And worst of all is the memory of those designs in the metal.

Those designs, created by what primal artist? There are three of them, cut into the gold surface. They tell all, so that I know only too well why the Fishers seek men with bait from their bottomless pits.

The first design is tiny like the rest, but it unmistakably depicts a creature such as the one whose head I saw. I dare not describe the body which is shown here. But the creature is baiting a hook. . . .

The second little design is a crude representation of a man, falling through water at the end of a line, as Martin must have fallen.

And the third design—but I must not speak of that—tells of what Martin's fate was; tells why the Fishers fish. That third hellish design on the hook!

It shows a feast. . . .

The Bottomless Pool must be boarded up.

The Dark Isle

(*Weird Tales* May 1939)

THE CELTS KNEW IT AS MONA; THE BRITONS CALLED IT ANGLESEY; but the Welsh spoke truly when they named the shunned spot "Ynys Dywyll"—the Dark Isle.

But all the peoples of Britain feared it for its dwellers. Here were the oaken temples of the Druids, the caves and caverns of the forest people, and the strange altars reared to dread gods. In these times the Clan of Mabon ruled, and heavy was its hold upon the lands. Erin knew the furtive, bearded priests that stalked through the forests seeking stealthy counsel with voices that moaned in the night. The Britons paid their tribute, turning over the criminally condemned for unspeakable sacrifice before the menhirs of the Druids in groves of oak. The Welsh feared these silent wizards and wonder-workers who appeared at clan gatherings to dispense law and justice throughout the land. They feared what they knew of these men, but greater still was the fear of what they *suspected*.

It was said that the Druids first came from Greece, and before that, from lost Atlantis; that they ruled in Gaul and crossed the seas in boats of stone. It was whispered that they were gifted with curious magics, that they could control the winds and waves and elemental fires. Certainly they were a sect of priests and sorcerers possessing powers before which the savage, blue-painted Britons

quailed; black wisdom to quell the wild clans of Erin. They made the laws of the land, and they prophesied before the tribal kings. And ever they took their toll of prisoners for altar rites, their tribute of maidens and young men rich in blooded life.

There were certain groves in isolated forests where the boldest huntsmen did not venture, and there were great domed hills bearing curious stones and dolmens where voices cried in the night—voices good folk did not care to hear. In glades of oak the priestcraft dwelt, and what they did there was not a thing to be rashly spoken of.

For this was an age of demons and monsters, when dragons slumbered in the seas, and coiling creatures slithered through burrows beneath the hills; the time of Little Folk, and swamp kelpies, of sirens and enchanters. All these the Druids controlled, and it was not good to stir their wrath. They kept their peace, and their island stronghold of Anglesey was inviolate to other men.

But Rome knew no master. Caesar came, and the legions thundered into bloody battle with the stout kings of Britain. Emperor Claudius followed later, and the Eagle Standards were planted ever further in the land. Then crafty Nero held the throne afar, and he sent Suetonius Paulinus to ravage Wales. And so it was that one black night, Vincius the Reaper looked on Anglesey—the Dark Isle of the Druids.

Vincius the Reaper gazed on Anglesey with bold black eyes; wise, unblinking eyes that had seen much that was beautiful, and strange, and dreadful. These eyes had seen Imperial Rome, they had beheld the Sphinx, they had visioned the dark forests of the Rhine, the templed columns of ancient Greece.

They had witnessed blood and battle; fierce fighting, scenes of pain, anguish, barbaric torture.

Yet now they stared in a manner previously unknown; behind the dark pupils crept an unfamiliar tinge of fear. For the great dark island rising out of the sea was reputed a dreadful place. During the long sea-voyage to Britain, the fleet had buzzed with wild tales of the Druids; tales of their dire magic and hideous blood-thirst in the presence of enemies.

Vincius' friends—grizzled veterans of the legions—had known comrades serving against the Druids in Gaul. Some of these comrades had returned with horrific stories of almost unbelievable sorceries they had seen; of voices that cried out in the night, and of sentries found with mangled throats in the morning. They had whispered, these comrades, of how the beasts of the forest fought

side by side with the blue barbarians; how packs of wolves and boars were summoned by wizard priests who piped. And these returning comrades of Vincius had been haggard, their laughter hushed, as though dark memories precluded all thoughts of gayety again. Then too, many of Vincius' comrades had not returned at all. The tales of their dying were singularly unnerving—Druid killing and torture and sacrifice employed ghastly magics.

All through the voyage, rumors and hintings spread from vessel to vessel. For once the invincible might of the Roman standard was questioned; arms were not invulnerable to wizardry. And everyone knew that the fleet sailed to Anglesey—the great sullen island stronghold of the chief Druid clans. It had been a disturbing passage, through the dismal green seas of the North.

Now, anchored offshore, the fleet awaited morning to land and attack.

And Vincius, sleepless, took the deck and stared out across the brooding waters toward the black bulk of the island.

His lean, lantern-jawed face, browned by Syrian sun in the last campaign, was set in a scowl of puzzled bewilderment. Vincius was a veteran, and there were many things about this night which past experiences warned him of.

For one thing, the great island was too dark, too silent. Usually on the eve of battle the barbarian peoples gathered for war dances about great fires. They would shriek and prance to the thunder of drums, give frenzied sacrifice to the gods for victory. But here all was dark and still; and the darkness and the stillness hinted of secret thoughts and plottings.

Again, Vincius' trained senses told him that the fleet was being watched. Although they had anchored under the cover of a foggy dusk, he felt that their movements had been observed; nay, expected. And now eyes peered across the silent waters.

The old soldier scowled, and stroked an ancient scar which whitely slashed the bronze of his forehead. A restless uneasiness kept him from sleep; some inner intuition told him to wait out the night and the silence.

The silence—it was too silent! The sullen lapping of waters against the sides of the vessel had seemingly ceased. Instinctively, the Reaper's eyes turned toward the helm, where a sentry stood peering and still. In the murky torchlight Vincius saw that his eyes were open, but glazed. He had turned, so that his back was to the rail.

And now, in the soundless hush, Vincius stared at the rail—

stared at the two blue talons that slowly crept above it and clutched for support.

Two *blue* talons!

And two blue arms—long, emaciated arms, leprous and phosphorescent in the night—writhed above the rail. A great shaggy head appeared over the side of the ship, a terrible head, haloed by a tumbling mass of matted white hair. It framed a face shaped in Hell; a gaunt, thin face with cadaverous cheeks, hollowed eye-sockets, and a snarling mouth opened to reveal animal fangs. Two burning yellow eyes blazed under corpse-lids.

The face was blue.

Vincius the Reaper stared transfixed, and gaped as the bony body slithered over the rail, dropped noiselessly to the deck and stood erect; a figure clad in animal skins; a figure whose moist and dripping skin was deep, unearthly blue—a burning blue no dye could produce.

The withered old man crept slowly toward the glassy-eyed sentry. His hands stretched out, and taloned claws sought a wind-pipe. Then Vincius moved.

A flash of reason bade him still the cry which instinctively rose to his lips. The enormity of this; a naked barbarian boarding a ship of the fleet and killing a sentry at will—it would be shocking and shameful were this fact revealed to the legions on the eve of battle. Better to keep silent; better to draw one's sword, leap silently across the deck, press the blade into the neck of the ancient horror.

Vincius did so. The old man dropped the sentry's body without a sound. As the lean claws released their hold, a muffled burbling came from the dying throat of the strangled soldier. Then the strange blue creature turned and stared.

Vincius held him, pinioning his arms with one hand and holding his sword with the other. His flesh crawled at the feel of the slimy wet flesh that seemed unnaturally cold, and dreadfully soft.

Still, his grip never relaxed as with his free arm he drew the naked sword-blade in an arc under the throat of the ancient horror that gazed at him unblinking and impassive. Looking deep into the empty yellow eyes, the Reaper shuddered. On the wrinkled forehead he now discerned the almost imperceptible outline of a coiled serpent set in raised weals against the terrible bluish flesh.

"A Druid priest!" The exclamation escaped him in a whisper. At the sound of the words his captive smiled.

"Aye." A croaking voice wheezed out, as though the effort of speech were painful and the Latin tongue difficult.

"Aye," said the blue man. "Druid am I. Mark ye, Roman—I came to slay, but ye thwarted me in that; else there would be a dozen sentries dead, and as many ships at the mercy of my people.

"I came to slay, but I remain to warn. Tell this to your commander, O blasphemer! On the morrow ye come to attack the shrines of our people; this we know. And we are ready. Aye! It will be a warm welcome—by Primal Nodens, know that we of the Druids can conjure magics for your confoundment. Tell your commander to turn back lest he and all his cursed hordes perish dreadfully before the Children of Mabon. Tell him, fool."

The old man croaked out his words slowly, in deep gutturals which unnerved Vincius more than he durst admit even to himself. Impulse prompted him to drive his sword home and destroy this creature whose weird blue skin was somehow utterly unnatural.

Still, reason told him to wait. This old priest evidently knew the plans of the enemy. Threats might force him to talk, or else torture might be employed as a last resort.

Accordingly, the Reaper whispered.

"Speak of these plans, dog, or my sword will prompt your tongue." The blade bit into the neck.

And the old man lifted his blue and ghastly face in a horrid smile. Retching mirth burst in cackles from his corded throat.

"Eeeeeee! The fool—the heathen fool threatens me with death. The jest is rich. Eeeeeeh!"

Mad laughter, though Vincius shook the withered body in rage. Then the terrible eyes slitted, and the fretted mouth gaped again.

"Look at me," hissed the ancient Druid. "Did ye not mark the blue pallor of my flesh? Think ye the Druids are fools to send a common priest on a desperate errand such as this? No!"

Vincius guessed, with a thrill of horror, the next words.

"Look at me," droned the croaking voice. "No paint, no dye empurples the flesh to my hue. Yet ye think to threaten me with death! Know then, fool, that I am dead—dead and drowned these three years past!"

With a sort of madness, Vincius plunged his blade out of the laughing corpse-head, slashed at the bony yellow eyes set in flabby, bluing skin. The sword sheared the grinning face, and laughter ceased. The body fell, and like a pricked bladder, collapsed. No blood flowed forth, yet the form dwindled and shrank upon the deck. There was an instant of terrible coagulation as the flesh fused, and then the planks were drenched with a wave of gelatinous ichor. Where the twice-dead body had crumpled there was now

only a greenish-black pool of slime that flowed bubbling over the deck toward the rail.

Vincius the Reaper turned and ran cursing from the spot.

Trumpets sounded the dawn. The boats set out, laden with cargoes of living steel. Armored, corseletted men glared shoreward through the mists. Sword, lance, spear, bow, shield, helmet, breast-plate—these were thousandfold duplicated jewels to glitter against the rising sun. These were thousandfold instruments to clash in martial symphony. These were thousandfold symbols of the might that was Mother Rome. The boats rode shoreward.

Vincius stared again at Anglesey as it loomed near. He had not spoken of the night to anyone. The ichor had vanished almost instantly from the deck when he returned after arousing another sentry to stand watch.

Wisdom had kept him from going to Paulinus, the commander, with any fantastic tale of a dead Druid who came to slay and warn. Not only was such a story difficult to credit, but even belief meant only disaster—for such a fearful warning might dishearten the leaders. As it was, Vincius noticed that there had been no report on the auguries taken this morning; no word that favorable omens had been observed before battle. It was a bad sign when the gods did not prophesy victory for the arms of Rome. The soldier's smile was grimly echoed by his comrades.

Now the boats were beached. The phalanx formed along the sandy shore as the leaders gathered under the Eagles. Britons and scouts delegated by the Army of Occupation were scurrying off into the deep woods offshore. They sought the Druid hordes in the woods.

Formations stood in silence; then signals flashed in sword-points against the sun. Bugles blared, and kettle-drums set up a martial clangor. The long lines swept on. If the Druids chose to keep silent and lurk in the woods, they would be hunted out—beaten from cover.

Armored ranks swept across the rocky beach toward the still green depths. Clank of weapons set against utter silence from beyond.

And then, soundlessly, a thousand serpents flew straight against the sun. A thousand barbed, feathered serpents, rigid and unswerving, dipped toward the legion rows.

Arrows!

From the seemingly deserted woods they poured and found their marks. Men dropped.

Another cloud followed very swiftly. Screaming and cursing the phalanx formations burst into a charge. More arrows met their advance, and hundreds fell. Each dart, wherever it struck, produced a hideous result. Within a moment after the wound was inflicted, the unfortunate victim was writhing on the ground, froth bubbling from shrieking lips. A moment later and the man was dead—dead and decaying!

Indeed, the Druids employed strange magic. Invisible, they poured poisoned arrows into the finest men of Rome.

The broken front ranks entered the outskirts of the woods. Arrows hummed about them as they sought foemen behind tree-trunk and buried boulder. They found only death—swift, writhing death.

Officers swore, bugles bleated vain commands, men shouted in confusion, fear, sudden agony. The dark woods closed about the legions—the bold legions that planned to swoop in unbroken lines straight across the barbarian island.

And still, no foes appeared.

Men cursed and died there in the green dark, as swarming arrows struck again and again—yet never a face of the enemy.

Vincius was in the van. Perhaps a hundred had managed to penetrate the wood to any extent; behind them came the confused murmur which bore the shameful tale of an army in flight. The legion was retreating back down the beach!

Vincius' companions turned to follow, arrows pursuing. And then there were shrill whistlings and pipings all about them, and from beyond further trees robed figures appeared—blue-faced, bearded men screaming in wild triumph as they closed in on the fleeing band. Now stone clubs whizzed about helmeted heads. To the commands conveyed by the pipings, little groups were creeping around to head off the escaping men. Stones catapulted into the running bodies. Arrows found screaming targets.

Vincius and two companions made for a thicket. The Reaper took the lead, beckoning for the others to follow. He knew that an instant's delay would be fatal, for the forest men had virtually cut off all avenues of escape.

He entered the brush—and five skin-clad savages rose to confront him. Roman swords and stone war-clubs met in blow, thrust, parry. A legion man went down, his face crushed to red pulp. A short dagger tore a bearded throat. The Reaper's sword whirled about in a pendulum-course of death. The blue-skinned men crept under the guard as the second Roman fell, pinned to the ground by a shivered spear. The Reaper fought alone, lopping at arms that brandished bludgeons and crude maces. He fought until a crouch-

ing figure sidled to his rear, half turned to meet the blow of his enemy; then sank to the ground as red fire drowned his senses.

Vincius opened his eyes. He lay where he had fallen, in the shadow of a large rock.

He stirred tentatively, then sat up and rubbed his aching head where the glancing blow of the stone club had left its painful bruise. Satisfied that he had suffered no permanent or seriously incapacitating injury, the Roman glanced about.

The glade was very still, and there were no noises audible from the beach. Far out on the water, the galleys still rolled at anchor. But from them rose no martial clangor, no trumpeting of victory. The pennons of triumph did not flutter forth amidst the billowed sails. The Reaper was puzzled—could it be that the attack had failed?

In the glade about him he found the answer with his eyes; the mute answer of arrow-riddled bodies, heaped in gory profusion. The men of the legions lay as they had fallen, and in death they were hideous to see. Some few had fallen by the sword or by the blow of club and ax, and these had made a peaceful passing compared to the greater number that lay slain by Druid arrows. For the latter were lying in twisted and contorted attitudes of agony. Their hands clutched at the sod in torture, their faces bore the mark of delirium. And their bodies—their writhing, convulsed bodies—were blue! Swollen, puffed, bloated with evil poison from the wounds, they had died in an instant; an instant that brought them madness. It was an awesome spectacle, and one which caused the soldier to shudder. Never before had he seen Romans in a death like this. It hinted of sorcery, of the dark magic prophesied by the Druid priest.

Vincius the Reaper rose to his feet slowly, his thoughts a confused jumble of pity for his companions, awe at their defeat, and furtive fear at the manner of their passing. But in a moment a much more personal note of concern obtruded.

For even as he rose, a hand fell upon his shoulder. Cat-like the Roman wheeled and faced—a Druid warrior!

Short, squat, his moon-face painted blue in ghastly simulation of the dead, the Druid confronted him. Vincius raised his sword.

The Druid held up his hand hastily and spoke: spoke in Latin—not as the old priest had spoken, hesitantly—but as though it were his native tongue.

“Wait, soldier,” the short man gasped. “I’m Roman, not a savage.”

Half expectant of some treachery, though he now saw that the fellow was unarmed, Vincius lowered his blade.

"Who are you?" he growled. "And if you're a Roman, what means this heathen garb?"

"I can explain," babbled the little man, hastily. "Lupus, my nickname is. I served on the triremes—at the oars, you know. Galley slave for bad debts. The ship foundered off this cursed coast three months ago, and I swam ashore. They captured me, the priests did, and gave me my choice: service or death. Well, I'd no mind to die; so since then I've lived with these blasted barbarians."

"What do you seek now?" asked the Reaper, suspiciously.

The little man's face was pale beneath the woadstains. He peered up at the tall soldier earnestly.

"Believe me in this," he murmured. "When I heard of the attack today I sought the shore hoping to escape; even the galleys are better than life among such godless swine. But more than that, I had hoped to find someone whom I could warn. The attack failed; I could not pass through the fray and make myself known in time. I've been skulking about in the bushes ever since, hoping to find some survivor to give my message to."

"Well, speak up, man," grunted the Reaper.

Lupus nodded gravely before continuing.

"My message is this," he said. "I've heard in their black council last night that these heathens mean to sink the fleet tomorrow."

"Sink the fleet?" echoed the Roman, incredulously. "Why, that's impossible! They've no boats, and besides they fight on land behind the trees like the cowards they are."

"So?" said Lupus. His voice was mocking, but his manner gravely earnest. "Did not the attack fail?" Look around you and tell me what you see." With a wave of his hand he indicated the blue and swollen bodies of the dead.

"I tell you that they spoke truly. If they vowed to sink the fleet they'll do it. Not with boats, or men, but with their cursed magics. It was magic that defeated us today, and it will be magic that brings doom on the morrow. I know. I've seen their devilish ways before. They control land, air, fire, water—and *things that dwell in them*. What demons they mean to conjure up for the deed I cannot say, but be warned. We must get news to the ships."

The Reaper scowled.

"How are we to do this?" he questioned. "We're marooned, practically prisoners here. There are no boats available, and the shore is probably guarded well."

"I have a plan," said Lupus, slowly. "We can't get through to

the beach without being observed. If we move inland we are equally liable to capture. But tonight there will be a big ceremony and sacrifice in the biggest temple grove."

"I understand," nodded the Reaper. "We shall wait until then, and make for the beach."

"Not so fast, friend," returned the other, with a sad smile. "It isn't as simple as that, by any means. The Druids are cunning. They keep guard everywhere along the shore, by night as well as by day. Only on the sea-wall is there no sentinel. And it is a thousand-foot drop of sheer rock."

"Then what do you propose?" countered the Reaper.

"This." Lupus lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. "In my days here I have had occasion to observe many things. I watched, and I learned. There is one altar in the big glade that has a hollow base. Beneath it is a tunnel of some sort that runs under the island to an opening on the base of the sea-wall. This the priests have spoken of, and with my own eyes I have seen certain of them go and come by means of this tunnel below the altar. Methinks I can find that altar and learn the secret of its pivot."

"But what is the purpose of this passage?" asked the soldier, a trifle incredulously. Lupus looked grave.

"That I do not know," he answered. "What the priests do down there I cannot say. Perhaps they commune with their black heathen gods. They are strange men. We may encounter peril below, but it is better than certain death above, say I."

"Your plan?" persisted the Roman.

"Simply this. In the evening they will gather by the oak glade and perform some damnable rite or other. That I know. Then the woods between there and the beach-sentries will be free, and we can approach the spot. After their ceremonies will come some revel or feast. At any rate, the grove will be deserted for the rest of the night. We can enter then, find the altar-stone and the passage beneath it, and take our chances on making the shore by morning. From there we shall swim out to the ship, the gods willing."

"Umm." The Roman grunted. Then he placed his hand on the little man's shoulder. "A pact it is, friend," he said.

Until twilight they remained crouching in the concealment of the boulders. Lupus kept up a steady stream of conversation in a soft voice, narrating his story of captivity among the oak-men. He told the soldier of Druid ways, and the strange faith of the nature-gods these people worshipped. He spoke of their black powers, and how their magic had driven back even the Roman might this afternoon.

Night fell, and as the moon crept across the sky, the two ventured forth from their place of concealment. The Roman was hungry. Down the path lay a body—that of a huge German mercenary, in full regalia. The Reaper, spying the provision pouch at the dead man's belt, stooped down and tugged it free. His eyes grew wide with loathing at the sight of that blue, contorted face, those blackened, swollen limbs that bore mute testimony to the strange power of Druidic poison. With an oath, he tossed the pouch aside and followed his companion down the path that led into the woods.

They walked slowly, in wary silence. The trees about them rustled in the stillness, and Lupus started nervously upon several occasions.

How far they proceeded it was difficult to judge, but the moon rode high in the heavens when first the sound of voices was audible from somewhere ahead.

Soon faint flickers of light filtered through the twisting trees. Lupus leading, they warily circled the path and crept close through the untracked woodland. In a short time they were nearing the open space in the forest from which the light and sound proceeded.

The Reaper scowled at the spectacle before him. A throng of triumphant Druids moved about the grove, clustering before stone altars on which reposed the limp bodies of sheep and cattle. Blood bubbled redly on the slabs in the light of the torches flaring at the sides of the clearing; blood stained the robes and limbs of the celebrants.

Gongs clashed, horns blared, men and women moved and gestured, but the whole gathering maintained an attitude of expectancy.

Lupus gestured the Reaper to come forward, and together they took their station behind a thick cluster of underbrush.

Vincius saw the priests foregather about the central altar and heard the throbbing drums boom out in a subtle, augmented rhythm that steadily mounted to a delirious crescendo. Something was about to happen!

Drums beating, and the shadows on the trees. . . . For the first time the two men noticed that tree-bordered background and discerned what stood against it.

It seemed as though there were great, shadowy shapes weaving and hovering over the heads of the multitude; great shapes moving in rhythm with the surging drums; nightmare shamblers, tall as the treetops. The drums boomed madly. More torches flared.

"Look!" cried Lupus. His fingers dug into the Reaper's wrist as

with his free hand he gestured excitedly toward the clearing ahead.

The Reaper gazed, and for all his stoicism he could not repress an involuntary shudder. For in the torchlight he discerned the outlines of the great, shadowy figures; saw that they were green and moving; saw that these giants were like trees in the shape of men. And they were forty feet tall!

Crouching in the bushes, Vincius the Reaper stared in fascinated horror at the cyclopean shapes looming before him. Gigantic human trees? That was not possible. What then?

Lupus placed his mouth against the Reaper's ear as he whispered an explanation.

"It's the sacrifice," he murmured. "The Druids are disposing of the prisoners. I've heard tales of this: Caesar's men spoke of it in Rome. The devils build great wicker frames and place branches around them; these they shape into a series of cages until they construct the figure of a man. Then they fill these cages with prisoners and condemned and burn the tree-idol in honor of their heathen gods."

The Reaper looked again and saw that his companion spoke truly. For ringed in a semi-circle stood six great green figures made in a horrid mockery of human form. Their lower limbs were trees, their arms vast pruned branches formed from whole trunks, stripped white in ghastly semblance of flesh.

Evil, painted faces were surmounted by leafy hair, so that each giant stood like a green ogre in the forest—a green ogre whose monstrous wicker belly was filled with living men!

Sweat beaded the Reaper's brow as he gazed at the gargantuan paunches that bulged forth in a wicker framework from those huge and dreadful simulacra. Through lattice and leafy interstice, through knotted rope and wicker vine he saw that each idol's body was in reality a vast cage, a cage packed with the huddled bodies of Roman soldiers and mercenaries. Stifled, half suffocated by the density of their crowding together, they clawed vainly at the bars of their prison, or stared down in white-faced horror at the dancing throng below.

Vincius caught the flash of armor through the green trellises, heard the moaning wails of frightened men as they huddled together awaiting an undreamt-of fate.

Nor was that fate long in coming. For even now the bearded priests had stepped forth from the throng, and torches in hand, they approached the white columns of the giant feet. The torches

flared, then quickly kindled the dry wood. The limbs of the moving monster-shapes burst into livid flame.

Others had climbed to adjoining trees, the Reaper noticed. Now, leaning out on the branches, they flung their brands into the bushy green hair of the gigantic images so that each painted brow now wore a flaming crown.

A scream of animal ecstasy rose exultant from the crowd below. It was echoed by a shriek of horror from the imprisoned men, as they strained at the iron bellies of the monsters that held them.

Vincius stifled an oath, and his hand leaped instinctively to his scabbard. But Lupus pulled him back into the concealment of the shrubbery.

"Don't be a fool, man!" he growled. "One man can't help them. An army couldn't, now."

It was true. The flames were eating into oaken arms and rising to girdle the wooden waists. Suddenly, with a grotesqueness utterly terrifying in its sheer, unexpected horror, the six painted faces of the burning monsters were contorted as if with hideous pain. Great eyes rolled in anguish-torn sockets, and red lips writhed back to reveal clenched white teeth. Deep, droning bellows rose from the burning wooden throats.

The Reaper trembled. The voices of the tortured gods! Then common sense told him that the faces were hinged so that they could be manipulated with ropes by the priests below. Horns and bladders of air in the hollow necks produced the terrifying sounds. But the reality was dreadful, for the fiery images moved flaming arms as if in torment, and crumbling legs twisted in agony. The howling worshippers danced and bowed in adoration, their faces ever turned upward, for now the flames were reaching the bound bellies from both ends of the tree-monsters' burning bodies. The flames were licking at the wicker prisons, and the captives were wheezing and choking in the swirling smoke.

Tongues of fire licked between the oil-soaked bars. A man cried out terribly in a scream that rose even above the roar of the fire as he was consumed by the blast. Others within the prison beat at their flaming hair. The fire spread, until all six of the colossal shapes were merely great pillars of glowing flame; flame that glowed more redly as it sucked fresh nourishment from the burning bellies.

Then, one after another, the giants pitched forward, still burning. Showers of sparks singed the bodies of the fleeing crowd; the images fell with thunderous crashings and disintegrated into ashy

embers or smoking dust. The fire still ate away at the skeleton bellies, and a few awful shapes still writhed and twisted in the red furnaces.

But the priests and devotees had gone, back into the forest groves. From far away came the thudding thunder of their drums.

"It's over," Lupus whispered. "No one will disturb this spot till morning now. You see, the whole rite is connected with the religion; it is symbolical. The tree-images are those of Mabon and their other devil-gods. The prisoners are placed in the bellies to signify that the gods have devoured their enemies. The fire is a purification of the gods after their contamination by enemies. Now that the rite is accomplished the gods sleep appeased, and the Druids—curse their black entrails!—may celebrate their triumph undisturbed by wrathful eyes. They will not return here to wake the divine spirits."

Vincius grunted. The sonorous speech of his companion annoyed him. A man of action, he wanted only to escape. Consequently it was he who led the way into the clearing. Lupus followed, stepping gingerly to avoid the rosy ashes and still smoking embers that littered their path.

Soon they reached a spot untouched by the flames, for the bare, hard-packed earth did not allow the fire to spread. Then Lupus resumed his place as leader, and guided the soldier to a shadowy corner of the grotto. Here loomed an altar, gray against the darkness.

"This is the one," the little man whispered. "Give me your sword."

Vincius complied; then, frowning, he watched his guide thrust the tempered blade amidst the small rocks at the altar's base.

"I'll find the pivot," grunted Lupus, as he poked away. "Damnably clever, these barbarians."

The metal rang. Lupus tugged at the hilt of the weapon as he twisted it into some invisible niche. With a little click the stone tilted forward.

"Wrath of Jupiter!" the Reaper swore. Leaning forward, he stared down into a black chasm slanting deep into the earth beneath the altar-base. A series of stone steps was dimly discernible in the darkness.

"I was right, as I told you," said Lupus, calmly, as he relinquished the sword to his companion. The soldier shoved it back into its scabbard with a sigh of satisfaction. But he knitted black brows as he gazed again at the cryptically yawning mouth of that mysterious pit.

"I don't like the looks of this," he declared. "Such crawling about in the dark is not to my liking. And if there be such things below as you hint of—"

The other held up his hand in a gesture of despair that served to silence the Roman.

"It's our only chance," he whispered. "We can't skulk about in those heathen-infested woods, and when the morning comes we'll be taken surely. I do not like the passages myself, but I like still less the usage accorded those in the wicker cages." With a wry grimace, Lupus indicated the smudging remains of the fire giants.

"What we may encounter there below I dare not say, but I would rather risk my skin with a chance of reaching the beach and escaping than stay behind. They'll kill you, but I shall assuredly be tortured." Lupus subsided, awaiting a reply.

The Reaper smiled dourly. "Come on, then," he said, pushing his companion before him. "We'll chance the caverns. But I'm not blundering through darkness."

So saying he stooped and picked up a burning branch from one of the tree-images. It made an admirable torch.

Steps led down. Torchlight flickered on stone stairs, low rock walls of a narrow passage. The Reaper turned, and drew the altar-base down over their heads. His muscles tautened with effort, and his face contorted.

Lupus's countenance was likewise contorted, but it expressed fear rather than exertion.

"There's no turning back now," he whispered, eyeing the now immovable stone barrier above their heads. "We'll have to risk whatever lies ahead, and I've little stomach for any Druid magic this night."

The Reaper smiled grimly.

"It's your decision," he declared, "and we must abide by it. Let's be off."

Torch in hand, he padded down the stairs, Lupus following with obvious reluctance as he stared at the carved-out walls of the tunnel. The stairs turned, then abruptly gave way to a slanting stretch of stone that wound off into deep darkness. It was a hot, unhealthy darkness; as they walked, the rocky floor became damp. Moisture dripped from the walls and the low ceiling. Moss and lichens were green-coiled on wet walls beaded with a diamond sweat in the firelight. They walked on in silence, into still blacker abysses ahead.

Now the footing became precarious, as they toiled through the rocky under-earth. Occasionally side-passagès pitted the walls,

sometimes singly and sometimes in pairs like the eyeless sockets of some strange stone monsters. The silence and damp heat were more and more oppressive as time went on. Stolidly, the Reaper plodded ahead; Lupus glanced about with increasing nervousness.

The little man grasped Vincius by the sword-arm, halting his stolid stride. He whispered shrilly in the soldier's ear.

"I've a feeling we're being observed. Quick—your torch."

Grasping the beacon, he flashed it suddenly toward the nearest opening in the wall just ahead. Was it fancy, or did the light indeed glint upon two staring eyes in the darkness? Neither man could say, for in a moment the half-fancied flash of reflection had disappeared. The flame disclosed only the silent blackness welling from the orifice mouth.

"Hurry," mumbled Lupus.

Their feet quickened as they half ran along the rocky floor of the burrow. The Reaper was almost flung against the wall when with a sudden sharp turning the tunnel twisted still deeper into the earth.

Now the damp silence exuded tangible menace. As they gazed down the long corridor ahead, their pace slackened to a halt. They stared into the gloomy shaft, its sides so ominously slitted with grinning cavern mouths.

And then from afar rose the sound of a strange piping—a faint, eery cascade of sweetness. Its import was unmistakable; only a combination of reed and lips could produce that high stabbing wail that held within its weird beauty a hint of summoning and dark command.

It came from one of the side-burrows ahead, and welled forth to echo through the stillness of the caves. The unseen piper played, and Lupus half turned as if to flee.

"We can't go back, you fool," the Reaper muttered. "The altar-stone is replaced."

"Druid magic," whimpered the other.

"We—"

"Come on." Vincius half dragged his cowering companion along the path. "There's a man playing that pipe, and I've something here to change the scoundrel's tune."

His sword flashed silver as he thrust the torch into Lupus's trembling hands.

They advanced down the corridor, and still that high-pitched music swelled, luring and calling.

Abruptly another sound was superimposed upon the shrillness; a deep whispering, a rustling noise that gathered rhythmic volume. It came from the pit mouths, and slithered forth as though answering the music's summons.

The Reaper's eyes scanned each pitted opening in turn, seeking the source of the shrilling pipes. Then the strange rustling crawled, and the Reaper, glancing downward, saw coiled horror.

The path before him was filled with serpents. Weaving, writhing, hissing in dreadful rhythm to the sound of the far-off flute, they swayed and undulated forth from each pit until the floor of the shaft ahead was a wriggling mass of moving emerald menace. Snakes of every size and shape glided across the gelid stones.

For a moment Vincius recoiled. Lupus crouched behind him in sudden terror. His mumbled prayers were faint against the eery wailing, the rustle and hissing. The great living wave advanced.

Steeling himself, the Reaper met the attack. His sword rose, descended to shear the heads off a dozen wriggling foes. And still the serpentine sea moved forward, choking the narrow passage and rising knee-deep in living, writhing dread. The Roman slashed again, and again. Hissing in pain, a score twisted severed coils, but those behind swept on, commanded by the wild whistling of the unseen pipes.

The great mass bore down upon the two, a twisting torrent studded with opal eyes that flamed malignantly in the dusk. The Reaper scanned the choked path before him, then turned hastily to his cringing companion.

"Get ready to follow me," he whispered. Lupus nodded, lips working in his white face.

Vincius stepped forward, both hands gripping the hilt of his weapon as he brought it down in a sweeping arc. Again and again it rose and fell, slashing, slicing, shearing at the shapes that now pressed his very legs. He felt the slimy wetness of cold bodies, smelt the sickening reek of their foulness. He hacked a pathway through, only to see it obliterated by fresh hordes from further pits. And the piping mocked from afar.

The writhing blob swept him back. The green strands of Medusa's locks were coiling about his waist and thighs, dragging him down to fanged kisses and choking caresses.

"Follow," he yelled, glancing at Lupus over his shoulder.

Wheeling, he dashed back a few paces along the corridor, with Lupus at his heels. Then he turned and again confronted the reptile army. He ran forward, swinging his blade. To Lupus's startled eyes

it looked as though he were running directly into the mass that crawled before him.

But as he reached the spot he leaped. His jump carried him over the heads of the foremost serpents. Lupus closed his eyes and followed suit. His feet left the ground, he sailed into space. His feet landed on a treacherous wriggling heap. He leaped again, seeing the Reaper ahead of him. The Roman was alternately leaping and landing. So sudden were his movements that the reptiles had no time to prepare themselves for striking, and each time he came down the sword swooped.

Within a few breathless minutes the two stood clear on the other side of the blocked corridor.

Vincius forced a wry smile.

"Much more of that," he observed, "and we'll never live to deliver our little message of warning before daybreak."

It was quite evident from his frightened face that the little man agreed only too well with this statement. When the soldier started forward once more, Lupus restrained him.

"Don't go on," he begged. "They know we're here. The priests—the high priests—must be down here tonight. And I've a feeling that they are summoning up their Powers for the morrow."

"What's this?" the Roman queried.

"This must be the Place of Mysteries they speak of," Lupus went on. "The place where the Arch-Druids and the inner circle come to seek aid of their gods for magic. Tonight they have to do with the wrecking of the fleet. We'd best turn back. Those devils would never let us through alive, and if we were to encounter what they may have summoned to aid them—"

"We must go on," pronounced the Reaper, shortly. "You know there's no turning back. And hurry."

"It's death."

"Death for the fleet if we don't get through," Vincius reminded. "We'll have to try."

Turning, he hurried down the gloomy incline. Lupus dogged his heels, turning his head quickly from side to side and eyeing each burrow he passed as though expecting the worst.

Winding, twisting, writhing into darkness, deeper and deeper into the tunneled maze they plunged. A hundred turnings, each with a thousand branch burrows, were passed at almost running speed. There were no further evidences of hostility, but both men still felt that peculiar sensation of being under scrutiny of alien eyes—wise, evil eyes that waited.

Then they took that final turning that led into the cyclopean chamber where the red torches flared interminably from rocky niches in the vaulted walls. They saw the piper waiting before them—a tall, white-robed Druid, with the shaven head of a Vate, and a bearded face alight with gloating expectancy. In one slim hand he bore the slender reed of his piping, and in the other he held a coiling viper that fawned up at him even as it hissed. And from out of the chamber's stone sides stepped other Druids, armed and ready for combat.

They were silent, and the Reaper did not speak as he reached again for his sword. But he was speechless not at the sight of them, but at the vision of what lay behind them. For he saw that which they guarded.

There was a pool in the center of the cavern—a great murky pool of gelid water that rose subterraneously from some hidden spring below. It was black, unmoving. Beside its ringed orbit stood a flat stone and on it lay something huge and red and swollen—something that bled horribly, yet wobbled as though still pulsing with life. It was monstrous, gigantic, yet unmistakable—a swollen, severed *tongue*.

Vincius could not tear his eyes away from the tremendous ruby organ that lolled palpitant upon the stones. Imagination quailed before the thought of a beast so enormous as to possess a tongue of this incredible size. Lupus cowered behind him.

Then the slender, shaven-headed piper raised his head so that his gaze challenged and commanded attention. The other Druids grouped behind him in the red torchlight, standing upon the brink of the black chasm of water at their back.

The mocking Vate smiled, stepped forward.

“Who interrupts the Council of the Crescent?” he purred. “You stupid Roman intruders have troubled our deliberations.”

Vincius scowled, but stood silent. His grimness cloaked a fear only too fully manifested by the quaking Lupus at his side. Why did this priest speak? Why not strike? His sneer of mockery seemed to veil a horror greater than anything yet revealed to the Reaper—and the Roman almost wanted to cast himself forward on the swords of the foe, to die in a red blaze that might drown the uneasy presence of dread which now oppressed him.

Yet the priest continued, sibilantly. “Ye have dared the secret temple of our people, and for that ye shall die. But a few hours and all your kind shall perish. We Druids will never bow before the spawn of Rome. Even as today the Dragon's tongue venom laid

your comrades low, so tomorrow the Dragon shall destroy the cursed ships which brought ye."

Dragon's tongue? Vincius glanced again at the monstrous red thing lying on the stone—glanced at the oozing greenish fluid which dripped onto the floor—and knew the secret of the day's battle. This organ held poison; reptile venom, which, placed on the Druid arrows, had brought swift and dreadful death.

Dragon's tongue? Dragons—those were the terrible creatures of old British legend; great sea-serpents, reptilian monsters supposed to inhabit the subterrene sea-depths. But they were only legends, like the Tritons, and Dagon, and Greek monsters.

Or were they? This great red tongue was real, and the Druids could summon and control all beasts and creatures of the deep. Tomorrow they planned to wreck the fleet, and a Dragon could pull ships down into the sea. Was it possible?

Vincius mused for only a second. Then he realized that the cunning priest had revealed these words to him for that reason alone—so that in a moment's contemplation he would be lost.

Now the other priests had crept up behind, and Lupus screamed. The Reaper wheeled, to see three priests stab at the short man's unprotected throat. Roaring, Vincius slashed out. A head rolled to the floor, to stare up Medusa-like from a pool of serpentine rilling blood.

Again the sword leaped and fell, parrying a stabbing thrust and coming down on the arm of the second priest. He dropped, howling as he clutched a jerking stump of shoulder.

And then a half-dozen priests were at his back. Vincius leaped, dodged, smote. They pressed forward, while the slim bearded leader urged them on.

"Into the pool!" shouted the Vate. "Food for the Primal One! Take him—by the Three and Thirty Tests, I command ye!"

They fought grimly, though two fell. The Reaper's arm was tiring under the weight of the heavy blade. He all but slipped in a sticky red pool, and was forced to give ground again. Now he was forced back to the brink of the terrible black chasm where inky water lapped. The Druid swords were everywhere. Vincius tried to round the stone on which the gigantic tongue rested. They pressed him back against it—one blade shot out under the Reaper's waist. His quick duck brought the Druid against him, and they grappled. Locked in deadly embrace, they reeled against the stone.

Then Vincius knew. His sword-arm jerked free. He plunged his weapon to the hilt in the great spongy red mass upon the altar-

stone. It gave, and something green and wet spurted onto the blade. Vincius tore the sword free and sought the enemy's back. At the first thrust the Druid stiffened and fell.

And Vincius swung. One swordsman after another felt the terrible point, felt the poisoned tip of the steel bite into his veins; fell in writhing death. The Vate piped wildly.

The last man he beheaded completely, then rethrust his weapon into the envenomed organ. He raced after the fleeing Vate, who ran frantically back toward the tunnel entrance. The Reaper was swift. His blade was swifter. With a scream of anguish the last Druid priest went down in final agony.

Vincius turned. The black pool loomed. Beyond it was a dark slit in the rock—and poor dead Lupus had said that it led to the sea.

He must still warn the fleet, Dragon or no Dragon. Into the gelid waters, then.

Murky, clinging, slimy depths enfolded him as he leaped, sword tucked into his belt. The dark waves were sticky and warm, as though befouled. Vincius swam quickly, making for the orifice beyond, where he fancied he could detect a faint glimmering of starlight. A few strokes now . . .

Then horror came. From directly ahead the water spouted and inky jets spurted upward. A boiling froth arose, and great waves bubbled from the depths.

Suddenly a head appeared—a gigantic head, born only in nightmare delirium and the realms of insane myth. Great, green, scaly head, red eyes glaring from behind huge, dripping jaws—and then a thrashing body; reticulated jade, gilled, slitted, winged, with a tremendous lashing tail.

The mad head rose and undulated above the waves on a long barrel-neck; then the great scarlet jaws drew back to disclose simitar fangs—and a great empty cavern that was red, bleeding, and *tongueless!*

It was the Dragon of Druid lore.

Vincius saw it tower above him in the slimy black water; heard the brazen bellow, and felt the carrion wind that was its breath.

Its tail was curving toward him, its clawing appendages reached out, its neck swooped down so that the cruel, tremendous maw yawned to engulf him.

It was true then. This was the Beast of Myth which the ancient, evil priests had summoned to destroy the fleet upon the morrow. By some magic power they had lured it here, prisoned it in the pool, and ripped out its tongue for venom to use in their archery warfare.

Vincius thought this, but felt fear. The enormous horror had seen him. It thrashed toward his puny, swimming form, loomed larger than any ship. From depths of dread it had come, and on the next day it would drag down the armies of Rome to those drowned realms of dread.

Now the mouth rushed on, churning and bubbling as it cut the waves and reached to swallow the struggling man. No use to fight. Or—

Vincius remembered. His sword—the venom upon it! He groped, drew, raised the blade.

The gigantic teeth ground in his face, then raised. Another swoop and he would be drawn between those fangs. He raised up out of the water, threw himself forward.

As the throat opened, he jammed the blade into the bleeding, tongueless maw of the monster. A shrill scream blasted his eardrums as the beast reared back, sword jerking like a silver sliver in the open jaws. Titanic thrashing sent waves surging across the pool. The Dragon roared with pain; a great green body reared out of the black waters, then fell back to squirm in mad, thunderous pulsations of pain.

With a single moan of gigantic, convulsive agony, the hideous head sank beneath the waves, red eyes glazed in death. The nightmare's own poison had destroyed it.

Vincius trod water until the bubbling from below subsided, then stroked for the slit in the stone without glancing back into the chamber of fear. He entered the narrow opening, swimming on.

Ahead he saw starlight, paling into dawn. A few moments brought him out into open water. He swam slowly out toward the nearest vessel; nor did he even turn to gaze at the dark cliff-wall which shielded this side of Anglesey.

His mission was done. Now, with morning, the Romans might land freely; leaderless, the Druids would give way before the legions. They and their cursed barbarian sorceries would be blotted out forever.

Vincius smiled as he neared the ship's side. Then he frowned at the final memory of the dying dragon, going down with the Reaper's blade wedged in its throat.

"I'll need a new sword for the morning," he growled.

Flowers from the Moon

(*Strange Stories* August 1939) as Tartleton Fiske

ONE MINUTE THERE WAS NOTHING IN THE CLEAR BLUE DEPTHS of the sky. The next, streaking across the far horizon like a silver comet, the great ship appeared, roaring down to earth.

With anxious eyes I watched it fall as the roaring intensified. With a sense of relief I heard the sound diminish, even as the speed of the dropping space-ship diminished. They had shut off the propulsion successfully. The last danger had passed!

Now the vessel seemed to drift toward earth. I ran back to my car, raced the motor, then shot down the road toward the west. The ship would land in the plain about three miles distant, I calculated. As I sped toward the spot my eyes scanned the silver hull, and I sighed with relief as I noted that it seemed undented, unblemished.

Cars behind me hooted horns, for the reporters were here, too. I pressed my foot down hard and shot up to eighty, then ninety. Ahead of me the ship was purring to rest, easing gently down upon the smooth turf of a meadow. It landed.

I put on the brakes and the car screeched to a halt; then with my heart thumping and thundering in my chest, I ran across the grass toward the ship—toward the silver door.

"Edna," I murmured. "Edna!"

Of course my voice could not be heard through the insulated duraluminum walls of the space-ship—but it was almost magic to see the door slowly open in response to my cry, and it *was* magic when she stepped into the doorway, lovelier than the images of my dreams during the past two months. She hesitated, blinking in the sun that flamed through her auburn hair; gazed at the ground six feet beneath the base of the doorway.

Then I held out my arms, and she leaped, and we were locked together in an embrace that freed me of all the anxious longing and heart-sick worry of the past eight weeks.

“Edna, you’re safe—alive,” I whispered tenderly.

“Oh, Terry, I knew you’d find us.”

“Your father—Charles—the captain—are they all right?”

Her blue eyes clouded in momentary confusion. “Yes,” she whispered. “But—”

The sentence was never finished. The reporters were on us; literally *on* us from all sides. The cars straggled in. Cameras clicked.

“Story, Miss Jackson? . . . Picture. . . . Hold it, please. . . . Your father safe? . . . Get to the moon, Miss Jackson? . . . Gonna marry this young man?”

Edna’s white hands tugged at my shoulder.

“Terry, do something. Let Father and the others get away from these men. They’re—they’re too tired to talk now. And, besides, Charles isn’t well.”

For answer I fought my way through the struggling swarm of reporters and climbed into my car. Deliberately I wheeled around and drove straight at the babbling horde. The reporters scattered as I skidded to a stop directly under the ship’s doorway. By this time a rope ladder had been let down from this ship, and now Professor Jackson appeared.

His tired eyes blinked nervously, and one hand went to his white head as he took in the scene. He descended the ladder and seated himself in the car. Then the captain appeared; not the fat Captain Zurrit I remembered, but a thinner, haggard looking man. He carried a great satchel in one hand. He paused in the doorway to shout into the depths of the ship. He scowled, then slowly descended. Halfway down he paused again and reached up to shut the door. But the door opened. A figure appeared then. It was Charles DeVeaux, my rival; Charles the suave, Charles the laughing, the debonair, the black-haired, sleek, handsome scientist. So I remembered Charles.

But this man was different—horribly different.

His face was dead white, and his black hair bristled down almost to his eyebrows. His features seemed oddly altered—the shadows of the sun seemed to have lengthened his nose and chin. His hands went to his face, and they seemed thin as claws, and when the hands came away I saw his red eyes. They glared. And his mouth grinned.

That mouth! It hung open, working, a crimson maw of drooling imbecility. Charles DeVaux was mad!

The captain looked up.

“Go back!” he shouted. “Charles—go back!”

Charles opened his mouth and snarled. I have never heard such a sound from a human throat. The yelling reporters quieted about the car, and then Charles came down.

He didn't climb down. He leaped.

“What's wrong with him?” shouted an excited little man, who climbed on the running-board as the captain took his seat. “Hey, buddy, what's the matter?”

Charles leaped and landed—not on the running-board, but on the shoulders of the little man.

With a sound I can only describe as a *growl*, Charles bore the small reporter screaming to the ground. His hands clawed at the little man's throat, and his mouth gaped open, and then he snarled and put his mouth to the reporter's throat and *bit*.

Edna was shuddering at my side, and the professor was screaming something in a high, hysterical voice.

The reporters were tugging at Charles, pulling him away. I tried to free myself, but Edna clung to me, sobbing. The captain acted. With a single gesture he pulled out a revolver and fired. There was a moan, and Charles fell backward, hands clawing the air; fell backward from the bleeding horror of the little man's torn neck.

And then the captain heaved the crumpled figure of Charles into the car and snapped, “Drive, Terry—drive like hell!”

I did.

We were safe at last in the laboratory. Safe from the screaming headlines:

JACKSON RETURNS FROM MOON

JACKSON'S DAUGHTER RETURNS FROM MOON VOYAGE TO WED
MADMAN IN JACKSON'S LUNAR PARTY ATTACKS REPORTER

We were safe in the laboratory, and Captain Zurrit had gone back to remove the party's effects from the space-ship. The pro-

fessor and Edna sat beside me in the room, while upstairs Charles DeVeaux tossed and moaned with a bullet through his shoulder.

"Tell me," Profession Jackson began, "have you kept the charts?"

I nodded, a bit ruefully, I must confess. It was something of a sore point with me—those charts and records of the voyage I had astronomically recorded while they were away. It dated back five years ago to my college days, when I worked with the professor in his laboratory; became his intimate and then his assistant.

During those years I met and learned to love his daughter, Edna, and during those years my life, like his own, was centered about his plans for a voyage to the moon. We had gone over the construction of the vessel together.

Then Dr. Charles DeVeaux had come as assistant. He designed the actual space-ship while I plotted the course by astronomy. Edna had helped me, and we had all worked with but a single goal for years—that voyage to the moon and return.

When the trial ships we sent up exploded, or disappeared forever, we had suffered the keen pangs of disappointed dreams. Then Captain Zurrut had come from Moscow to perfect our plans and finance the venture. The voyage was about to begin.

But when it came to selecting the passengers, the professor omitted me. The captain, Charles DeVeaux, Edna and himself had gone. I was forced to stay behind and keep the records—a book-keeper of astronomy, I reflected bitterly. Up there in the solar blue my future bride rode with my nearest rival, while I could not share her perils.

It had been a bitter pill for me to swallow! To wait, to gaze each night in agony at the cold moon; wondering, wondering where she was, whether I'd ever hold her in my arms again. It was hell on earth those eight anxious weeks.

The papers had scoffed, called us all mad for our scheme, despite the validity of our plans we gave them. That had added to my worries. Was it, after all, an impossible scheme? I wondered, wondered through sleepless nights.

But now they had returned. There were a thousand questions I must ask. What had they found? Was there life on the moon, as the professor had always staunchly maintained? What was the temperature, the nature of the soil, the effect of gravity?

And what had made a drooling madman of Charles DeVeaux?

I asked those questions now. And the professor answered, while Edna sat at my side, her eyes alight with a strange, unspoken fear.

The voyage had been calm enough as planned. Captain Zurrut handled the ship nicely, the propulsion devices had worked

smoothly, the insulation had been perfect and the air-conditioning sound. Food capsule supplies had held out. The speed had been calculated properly, the automatic direction steering had proved practical.

The actual voyage took a little over three weeks each way. They had spent four days actually on the surface of the moon. The figures, exact detailed reports, were all here. The instruments were to be unlocked and their findings checked and recorded. The voyage had proved a brilliant success.

But why was Professor Jackson so haggard? Why did his hands tremble so when he spoke of the voyage home? Why didn't he begin, with his old time enthusiasm, to recount the story of his days on the moon? Why did Edna draw closer to me as though in fear?

These questions flashed through my brain.

"But your actual experiences on the moon, Professor?" I asked. "What did you bring back with you?"

"Terry, I'd rather not go into that just yet. I'm tired, my boy." The professor's words came too hastily.

"Don't ask about that, dear. It's—it's something you'd better not know," Edna whispered.

"But I've a right to know," I snapped angrily. "You made me sit here and eat my heart out, my heart that belonged to you and to the plan for years. Now I've a right to know what happened on that voyage—to know what made a lunatic out of Charles DeVeaux!"

"Lunatic!" The professor breathed the words. "Lunacy—madness caused by the moon. The old definition was right. Yes—and that *other* definition.

"Father—please—" Edna begged.

The professor looked at me.

"No, Edna. He has a right to know, as he said. He must know about what we found—and about Charles. Because we'll have to do something right away."

He rose to his feet as I watched him, and went over to a table on which rested the big satchel the captain had brought with him.

Without a word he opened it and motioned me over. I went to his side and looked down at what he drew forth.

His hands were filled with flowers—white, orchid-like flowers, waxen as the face of Death, and lovely as pearls. The ivory petals hung open on scarlet depths unblossomed, and as the professor stroked the thick, white cups they seemed to tremble, rising and falling like the flesh of a woman's throat as she breathes. And they were lovely, lovely past all imagining.

"We brought these back to earth," the professor said. "We found them on the second day when we descended into the crater. We had seen no life in the barren soil, but we descended into this deep crater and found them growing at the bottom, near the mouths of the caves."

I listened, but scarcely heard, so intently was I studying the white and scarlet blossoms.

"We plucked them. Charles carried them back with him, and he put them away." His voice sounded from a great distance. "We didn't know, then. But that night, as they lay on a shelf in the ship, we had the dreams. And we heard the howling. Waking, I realized for the first time that these flowers had a scent."

A scent! Abruptly I jerked myself into awareness. That was it—that was why I couldn't hear, couldn't see. These flowers had a scent!

It was a scent so subtle, so delicate, I had not known that I was inhaling it. And it was a scent so powerful that I could scarcely stand. It was a scent so strong that my olfactory nerves blotted out consciousness of other faculties; I could only smell, could no longer hear or see or feel.

It was an indescribable scent—but terribly sweet; so sweet it hurt my eyes and throat and burned in my brain with lovely white fire.

I fought to awaken as I stood there, reeling before the strange white flowers from the moon, and then I saw once more—*saw that my breath was coming in rhythm to the pulsing of the flowers.*

"Terry!" Edna's voice called from far away. "Wake up, Terry!"

But I didn't want to awaken. I wanted to drown in that sweetness, let that scent flood my veins and surge up in white fire. My closed eyes saw waving blossoms, and I was suddenly in a deep, black pit on the surface of the moon where flowers nodded in the darkness and bent toward me blossoming, their hungry red mouths like the avid ruby lips of vampires. I was bending toward them—

"Terry!"

Edna's arms, her voice, brought me to my senses.

"What are these accursed things?" I gasped.

The professor shook his head gravely. "I do not know. The odor affects one strongly at first. I'm used to it now, I think. But that first night we all had queer dreams, and I remember waking from my slumber to stare at the glass door of the ship—the glass temporary door we affixed after landing. I could see eyes in the doorway—great red eyes, like the eyes of a wolf.

"And then we all awoke and heard the howling, the dreadful,

wolfish howling. God, I'll never forget the way—"

"What's that?" I shouted the interruption.

The ghastly sound rose on wings of nightmare dread, sweeping down from the rooms upstairs. It was a sound that made the short hairs rise on my neck, that caused my throat to go dry with sudden, unnamable fear. It was the sound all men instinctively dread—the horrible, deep-throated baying of a wolf.

And it came from within the house!

"Charles!" shouted the professor. "Come on!"

He raced from the room and plunged up the stairs, which I pounded at this heels. Edna tried to hold me back, but I brushed her arm away.

The professor, his face frantic with alarm, ran down the hall and jerked open the door of a bedroom where Charles had been placed. I followed swiftly, entered behind him. Too late.

For as the door opened, the horror sprang.

The professor went down, and then the thing was at his throat, tearing and tearing, with that monstrous growl rising from a fanged maw as it bit and snapped.

I staggered back, my eyes blurring at the enormity of the dread I saw before me. It was not Charles DeVeaux attacking Professor Jackson. DeVeaux had disappeared; he was not in the room.

There was no Charles DeVeaux any more. There was a wolf. . . .

The face I thought lengthened in the sunlight's shadows was now completely gone. It was a snout, a furry-rimmed, gleaming muzzle with wicked red jaws from which the long yellow fangs protruded. The clawlike hands *were* claws, and the naked body was furry and shaggy as a gigantic wolf's body is shaggy.

That nightmare metamorphosis had occurred—and now this *thing* tore at the professor's helpless throat, and then it looked up at me and snarled, and sprang. I flung up my arms to shield myself from the ripping talons. One hand struck against the coarse hair of the beast's shoulder, and the lupine creature yelped with pain.

My hand had touched the wolf's shoulder where it bled from a bullet wound which Charles DeVeaux had sustained. Whining with pain, the animal swerved aside and sprang past me, out the door. It scuffled down the stairs and I raced after it. Edna was in the laboratory.

I signed with relief as the thing continued on out the open door. In my daze I didn't realize that the horror was escaping, loosing itself on the world. My only thought was for Edna's safety.

I turned back up the stairs, but it was too late. One glimpse of

the fallen professor and I knew that it was all over. Mercifully I covered the torn features and hurried down the stairs. Edna, sobbing, fell into my arms. I tried to speak.

"Oh, Terry—I know, I know," she murmured. "Father's—gone. And it was Charles. Did he get away?"

I nodded. And then Edna showed the stuff that she was made of. Her eyes cleared, her voice became firm.

"We must act at once," she said. "Terry, you're the only one who can save us from *it*."

I held her close.

"It was my fault. I should have made Father tell you everything at the first. I will tell you now."

She spoke swiftly, urgently.

"Those flowers—I have a theory about them, Terry. Have you ever read those old books in Father's library? Those ones on witchcraft and demonology he collected?"

I looked up, comprehending. "Yes."

"He was a serious student of occultism, remember? You used to argue with him as to whether there weren't actually distorted scientific truths in old superstitions and legends that strangely persisted in every age and every country. He said that perhaps these legends had a basis in truth, and a scientific meaning men just hadn't learned to interpret yet. And I think he was right. Because of this."

She paused for breath, then hurried on.

"Those books speak of werewolves. Remember? The legend that men sometimes alter their shape to that of beasts? Under the influence of some drugs, the books say, the minds of men change. That's true—it's regularly accepted science. Opium, various narcotics do that to your mind. They are made from flowers, remember.

"And the old books say that there are *other* drugs, rarer ones, that alter not the mind but the body. They say that in certain valleys of the Orient, where the moon shines always, there grows a curious white flower which blossoms under the full moon. The books say that those who breathe the scent of this flower change their bodies and become wolves. *Werewolves*.

"Only a silver bullet slays them, once they breathe the scent of these strange, rare flowers that legends say grow from seeds that drift in space—seeds that come from the moon."

When she paused for breath, I spoke hesitantly.

"You mean that—"

"Yes, Terry. Don't you see? And those other medical theories of olden days about lunatics, people who go mad when the moon is full. The moon influenced their minds, those ancient savants believed. The moon is a strange thing, Terry. It's a weird world, that controls much on earth. It affects our tides, influences our seasons—why not our minds? The old faiths that worshiped the moon were aware of long-forgotten truths. These white flowers that grow on the moon; you smelled them and you know what happened to your own mind. It's true."

"But Charles DeVeaux? What did he do?"

"We were asleep that first night after plucking the flowers. Their scent filled the ship, although we didn't know it then. And the howling awoke Father. He saw the wolf outside. It howled. And Charles began to howl in return!

"It was horrible. Father and Captain Zurrit knew at once that he had gone mad, somehow. We strapped him to the bed, but he was raving about flowers, about how he had sat there poring over them all evening. We didn't listen to him, then, thinking that he babbled in delirium brought on by some strangeness in the lunar air, or by the rigors of the trip. But the wolf howled outside, and Charles raved about the white flowers and a change within his blood, and how he felt his body going wrong. That was the worst, Terry—Charles guessed what the truth was. And we didn't heed.

"The wolf vanished. Father went back to the craters again, though I begged him to leave at once. But he was so excited by the possibility of life on this dead planet—particularly such a high form as canine life. He theorized as to how this particular form managed to maintain its existence.

"He searched for hours. When he came back he was pale; stricken and aged. Charles was worse, straining at his bonds, and howling continuously. We put the flowers away, still not believing in their potency. And we started back.

"The return voyage was terrible. Charles began to change visibly. And Father and the captain argued, until they hit on the truth. The wolves on the moon must have once been men, but the flowers of lycanthropism had changed them into wolves who howled in pits, just as poor Charles howled for blood.

"We landed, hoping to keep Charles confined until we could move him secretly. Father wanted to study his lycanthropy as a disease—cure him, if possible. But Charles knew. Even though he could no longer speak, he knew. And he gnawed through his bonds and tried to escape. When he bit the reporter, Captain Zurrit shot

him. But ordinary bullets won't kill a werewolf. And now he has killed Father—"

Edna laid her head on my shoulder and shuddered.

"We must find him, Terry! He's loose on the world now, and he'll seek blood wherever he goes. Those things live on and on, and the flowers will change others, too. We must destroy those flowers first of all. All the blossoms must be burned until that evil scent is gone forever."

"No, you don't!" a deep voice barked through the room.

Both of us turned to see the set face of Captain Zurrut. I looked at that face, then into the staring muzzle of a revolver.

"Lucky I arrived in time," the captain said. "Just listen to what I say, and keep your hands at your side. I don't want trouble."

Edna looked curiously at the captain.

"But the professor is dead," she faltered. "Charles escaped."

"That's no concern of mine," snapped the captain. "I'm interested in the flowers—not saving a few worthless lives. This flower cluster came from the moon. Don't be fools. It has incalculable scientific value. It is a form of lunar life and must be studied. Science can learn much from it that should be known. You must not destroy it in childish, superstitious dread."

"But DeVeaux is out, and he'll kill," I argued.

The gun waved to silence me.

"Stop talking like a schoolboy. What if he is? He'll be captured in due time, and captured alive, too. He must be studied now, as well."

"You're mad," I shouted. "Crazy, a fanatic! Science or no science, there's a horror in these blossoms that must be destroyed to save humanity. His bite will kill many, but it will merely infect others—like rabies from a dog, it will work in their blood until they too become living-dead animals that raven to kill. The world will be filled with snarling horrors, werewolves. They'll destroy all men. You saw what happened on the moon; it can happen here. Whole cities of baying wolves, howling at the moon. You can't want that!"

"I don't care. I'm taking these flowers, now."

I glanced at the windows. It was dark outside, and the moon was already rising. Night was falling, and somewhere in the blackness that loping thing waited to kill, red tongue lolling, gleaming jaws agape.

"The papers from the ship, the instruments?" I asked, stalling for time to think.

"I brought them here," said Captain Zurrut. "They are safe in

the house, all your precious secrets. The vessel has been checked over, too—you will find it in readiness for a return voyage, if you like. That doesn't interest me. I stalled off the reporters and the police about the shooting this afternoon.

"They won't be around till morning. I didn't want anything to hinder my plans.

"These plants leave with me tonight for Moscow. I shall study them at my leisure, with my own staff."

Edna moved away, but the captain saw her.

"Don't try anything foolish, girl. I'll shoot without hesitating, I assure you. Now—I'll take the flowers and go."

He scooped them up from the table and for a moment one great hand clutched the mass of white, evil blossoms. His nostrils flared as he inhaled the cloying scent. His eyes narrowed.

"Exquisite," he murmured, half to himself. "They bring me dreams. I dreamed on the voyage back, dreamed of them. Now they shall be mine, their perfume mine to breathe. I shall inhale all beauty and all strangeness—"

"He's mad!" Edna whispered to me. "He's mad! His story is insane; he doesn't want the flowers for scientific reasons, but because they've begun to bewitch him, the scent is starting to change him, as it did poor Charles. He'll become a—"

"*He is!*" I hissed.

And he was. In the wan twilight I could see it. The evil fingers of moonlight clawed at the windows, then entered in long, bony webs of luminance. They seemed to strike at the blossoms in the captain's hand, and a white fire blazed forth. The odor, that unhallowed effluvium, seemed to strengthen in the lunar rays. I could not shut my nostrils to the increasing scent, the sorcerous scent that rose from my breath to my brain.

The captain held the flowers and I could see him change, now. His nose was a snout, and his eyes were red. Faint hair bristled on his face, coarsened in his beard and on the shadowed neck. His arms were long.

He inhaled deeply, holding the gun steadily enough. Yes, it was true! He must have succumbed later than Charles, his stronger will had resisted longer, but now the flowers were winning; the wolf-taint was in his blood, his lungs, his flesh.

His shoulders slumped as he turned away. "I'm going now," he mumbled—and it was dreadful to hear his deepened voice, his growling, slurring tones. "You can go out and catch your werewolf whenever you please. I shan't care. My plane leaves at once."

He left the room, stooping in a monstrous way. I wondered

how long it would take for the change to be completed; how soon he would howl like a thing of darkness in the night. And how soon the world would howl with him, a nightmare world of shaggy wolves that tore away at the throats of all humanity and plunged earth into a barren horror akin to the shining moon above.

"Edna, we have to stop him!"

She nodded. Together we ran out into the hall, toward the open door. And there in the garden twilight we saw him running across the lawn. The night was still, but a faint breeze stirred, and on it was the strong, almost overpowering scent of the lycanthropic moon-flowers. The vine trailed from the hands of the mad captain as he sped away. It filled the garden as the moonlight filled it; under a full moon the full scent rose in a world of white light, white perfume, white horror.

Even as he crossed the lawn the captain's body seemed to change. His coat sloughed off, his form bent closer to the ground. His hands, holding the blossoms, were dark and hairy. Moonlight performed a dreadful acceleration of his condition. The scent was so strong that Edna reeled in faintness beside me. I smelled that damnable odor everywhere.

Another smelled it.

A long howl sounded from the bordering bushes near the walk.

It was Charles. He had waited here, drawn back to the house by the scent of those maddening evil-scented moon-blossoms.

The captain turned halfway. Charles saw him, crept from the bushes, shaggy body crouching close to the ground. The captain held up one hand as though to shield himself, and the blossoms glistened sickly in the pale moonlight.

Then Charles leaped forward. The wolf-head dipped, raking talons hurled the captain to the ground. With a triumphant baying, the wolf was at his throat.

And—the captain bayed back!

"Terry," Edna moaned, clinging to me.

There before our eyes two wolves fought and snarled in the moonlight, fighting with fang and claw, leaping and slashing with bloody muzzles. Back across the lawn they raced, the captain still clutching the ragged flowers in one paw—one paw that should not, could not be real; yet was.

The yelping rose in our ears. Champing jaws grated on bone. Two wolves fought to the death, and through the growling came an abominable, throaty voice.

"I must—have the blossoms—Charles."

And then it happened. The flowers slipped from wolf-paws as the two rolled in a rending embrace. I raced silently across the lawn, caught up the scented moon-flowers, and sped back to Edna. "Come on," I whispered. "Let's get out of here."

She turned and ran at my heels as I made for the car, clutching the handful of demonic blossoms. Behind us the baying rose to the cold moon.

"What—where?" gasped the girl.

"To the ship," I panted. "Put these things aboard. Zurrit said it was ready. Going to send them up in the ship, let them plunge back into space, back to the moon, perhaps—anything. Must get them off the earth."

I suppose I was a little delirious. But the notion fastened to me. It was the only way to cleanse the world of the terror, the scented terror. I raced the car.

"Terry—look!"

Down the silvery white road that gleamed in the moonlight behind us, two figures loped. Two fully formed wolves! Charles and the captain had discovered the theft of the blossoms, and now they pursued.

It was a mad race through midnight with two creatures of myth howling at our heels, the scent of doom welling in our nostrils as I shot the speed up, up. We turned. The running forms vanished from behind us. Yet they were coming, coming.

And I was in a garden, a cool, sweet garden, and the air was a white wine that I breathed richly, intoxicating myself with the deep fire of strange new life. I was in a garden, and Edna was beside me, eyes closed, lips opened to inhale the magic perfume of rapture. . . .

No. I wasn't in a garden. I was in a car, doing seventy miles an hour down a moon-blazed road, while between my face and Edna's rested the damnable cluster of vampiric blossoms, their scent sucking our souls out with every breath. The cursed things were getting at *us!*

I dared not throw them away. Those things behind would catch up, find them. I dared not. I had to fight, fight to keep awake, to keep speeding down the road toward the ship.

Yet I didn't want to fight. I wanted to sleep, to rest, to forget everything except the beauty of perfumed dreams. Now I understood the enslavement of opium eaters, of hasheesh addicts, who sought strange worlds of the mind at the expense of their bodies.

Edna must not be exposed to this scent any longer! I shot up

to a hundred, screaming down the road toward the plain where the ship rested. Edna lay white and still, her bosom rising and falling, rising and falling in rhythm with the weaving blossoms that coiled out as though to touch her milky, moon-white skin. Edna!

We jarrd to a halt before the great gleaming bulk of the ship. I wanted to rest. I could smell the scent, and I wanted to rest. The moonlight hurt my eyes. So easy to close them, to forget. . . .

Blinking painfully, I threw the door open and jumped to my feet. I shook Edna into wakefulness. She moaned.

"Come on—come on," I panted. "Hurry!"

The ladder still hung, although the door was closed. I forced Edna to mount before me, placing the blossoms in her hands. It was awful to see her fingers close lovingly about the stems of the leprous growths, awful to see the cataleptic stare in her eyes, the way those eyes slanted in the moonlight. But I had to have my hands free to support her, to urge her upwards. We scrambled up the ladder, and I prayed that the door was unlocked. It was. The captain had left in haste. We pulled ourselves into the darkened cabin of the ship. I fumbled for lights.

Edna crouched on the floor, clasping the flowers to her face. I had to tear them away from her. In the little cabin the scent rose strongly, compellingly. We had to get out of here. I fumbled with the panel controls. Impossible, of course, to chart a course; to plan. Just throw the switch with a half-minute's delay, catch hold of Edna, and hurry out in time to be clear of the ship as it left—taking with it in its plunge those damnable blossoms. That was the only way. Get those things off earth before it was too late!

I studied the panel for a moment. There must be no hesitation. We were in danger from the scent ourselves; or was it a danger? It was so pleasant, that odor, so peaceful. Why not surrender?

And then, from without the door, from the ground below, a long dreadful howling from two throats. They had found us and they were waiting!

That was the end. We couldn't escape. I knew it then, knew that the things that waited would rend and tear if we ventured outside. And here, within the cabin, the flowers still rustled as though filled with alien, moon-given life. The scent rose stronger on the air. Edna lay still, beside the blossoms, breathing, breathing.

Howls rose from the outside.

I found pen and paper then. Had to, to keep from going mad. Had to concentrate on something, anything. Anything but the howling outside and the quiet horror of the scent within.

So I scribbled this. I don't know how long I've been sitting here. There is no howling any longer, but low whining sounds proclaim that the waiters are patient. My task is finished, but I cannot step outside to face those ravening fangs, those fangs set in what were once human throats.

Nor can I stay inside. The air is close. No, there is no air any longer. There is merely the scent. For a while it weakened me while writing, but now it seems to be easier to breathe. I can hear myself breathing, quite hoarsely, but easily enough. I feel a little better, a little stronger. Perhaps I'm immune. Edna is still asleep, but she's stirring. Maybe she, too, is immune. I pray that this is so. She is waking, now. The flowers still move, her breathing is attuned—and so is mine. Perhaps there's nothing to worry about. But what shall we do?

It is difficult to write these last words for some reason. The labor makes me glance down at my hands. And I read the answer there.

My hands are growing darker. There are hairs sprouting on them. The fingers are curling. The dark hairs are sprouting.

I know what I must do, now.

I thought we'd throw the switch and leap out, and send the flowers back to the moon, or back into space. But we cannot leave. That was the problem, but it has been solved, dreadfully solved. We shall have to go with the flowers, now, out into space. *My hands are hairy.*

Sitting here in the close confines of the cabin has done it. I have breathed too many fumes. No wonder I don't mind it any longer, don't try to resist that cursed scent. I'm—changing.

How soon, I wonder? Better start the ship, now.

Edna mustn't know. I pray to God she doesn't know. The knowledge would kill her. Just start the ship and pray she doesn't suspect at first. Good idea. If she doesn't know, then she'll trust me. She is smiling at me now, bravely. Her blue eyes, so frank, so trusting! And still she breathes in rhythm with the white blossoms.

I won't tell her. Because then, when I get hungry enough—why do I get hungry when I look at her now?—I can approach her. She trusts me. She doesn't know what the flowers have done to me. And the pulse-beat in her white neck moves up and down, and I'm hungry. When we're plunging out there in the spatial darkness all alone it will be too late to think of my hairy hands when I do tell her. When I tell her, and take her.

I will throw the switch now, and throw this manuscript out of

the ship. I'm hungry. That perfume from the white flowers is making me hungry. Well, there will soon be a feast.

Yes, very soon. And yet, I wonder. Edna is standing at my side now, trying to read what I write. She still isn't afraid, and has just laid one hand on mine. And I see something else.

There will be a feast soon out in space, but perhaps I will not be the feaster.

Edna's hand is growing hairy, too.

He Waits Beneath the Sea

(*Strange Stories* October 1939) as Tarleton Fiske

DAVID AMES TOOK JEAN IN HIS ARMS AND KISSED HER. IT WAS quite characteristic of Ames that he did this efficiently, expertly, and very thoroughly. The result was a scientific kiss, typical of Ames' scientific mind—but it seemed to please the girl. She closed her eyes. So did Ames.

Together the two of them tried to imagine the peaceful waters of the South Atlantic all about them, with a soft tropic moon silvering the waves. It was not a great stretch of the imagination—merely a matter of focusing their minds three thousand feet above them. For, after all, they were in the South Atlantic, and there definitely seemed to be water all about them. But no moon penetrated these depths. David Ames and Jean Banning kissed in a submarine on the ocean floor.

Somewhere in one of the forward compartments Jean's uncle, Ronald Banning, was working with the crew. The men were checking figures on the charts, estimating and calculating and theorizing in many technical ways which neither Ames nor Jean cared to think about at the moment. All thoughts of the expedition, even the consciousness of their peculiar situation here on the bottom of the sea, did not seem to matter as they embraced again. In their minds, researches in marine biology held no attractions comparable to the quite human biological research of a kiss.

Then came the shock. For a moment neither of them realized that the submarine was lurching. Abruptly, they stepped apart.

"What's up?" Ames muttered.

The ship was moving forward along the ocean floor; not steadily, as a submarine glides, but with a dragging motion that bumped and scraped the bottom. Ames' blue eyes steeled with sudden apprehension. His long legs quickened in hasty strides as he made for the door.

"Wait here, dear," he cautioned the girl. "I'll see what's happened."

Before he crossed the threshold there was a terrific shuddering in the entire submarine, followed by a series of excited shouts from the forward compartments, the sound of tinkling glass and falling instruments. Ames leaped forward just in time to see the iron hatch above the doorway descend with a brazen clang, barring his exit from the compartment.

"David!" The girl clung to him.

And constantly the submarine was dragging, dragging across the rocky bottom. Then a terrific swoop and the ship tilted upwards. An audible roaring from outside proclaimed that the craft was being drawn downward.

Downward?

But there was nowhere to go! They were on the ocean floor, three thousand feet below the surface. The ship had been dragged ahead into what—an ocean fissure? And by what?

There was no time to think. Jean shuddered in his arms as Ames endeavored to keep his footing on the shifting floor. The roaring grew louder. The submarine plunged; down, down, through inky, chill waters.

"What is it?" Jean whispered.

Ames' lean face darkened, his tall form tensed as he held the girl more closely to protect her loveliness from a danger he could not name; a question he could not answer.

Twisting, turning, a chip in a black maelstrom, the vessel hurled down.

"Uncle Ronald and the men," Jean murmured. "They're outside. And the oxygen tanks are in here—"

Ames staggered across the slanting floor, beat vainly at the fallen iron door. He could not lift it, nor would the levers raise the barrier. It was as though some gigantic force held it fast; some gigantic force that was sucking the very submarine itself into the depths.

Gasping, Ames crawled back to the girl. They lay on the tilted floor, clinging tightly as the rocking vessel swung up-ended.

"I—can't—breathe," she gasped.

With a hoarse sob, Ames fought his way to the oxygen outlets. He turned the valves. Life-giving air flooded the stuffy compartment. And they gasped, as still the ship plunged down.

"This is the end," whispered Jean. Her dark eyes rested without fear on Ames' face. "I'm glad we're together."

The supply of oxygen was giving out. And the steel walls were bending like the sides of a paper boat. Ames' temples throbbed as the pressure glued him to the floor. But he smiled as he returned Jean's gaze. They kissed again, and the kiss mingled with the blackness about them.

And then it stopped. With a final tremor the submarine righted itself. The roaring ceased. There was only stillness; deathly stillness all about them. The walls, bent inward, did not collapse. Half-choking, Ames rose to his feet and stumbled to the iron door.

His hand hesitated on the lever. It might not rise. If so, they were trapped in an airless room, countless thousands of feet beneath the sea in some strange fissure in the ocean floor.

Or, then again, it might rise—rise upon a crushed shell beyond, where the submarine had bent inwards due to lack of oxygen to neutralize the tremendous pressure of the depths. In that case, the open door would admit a current of flooding waters.

Ames gripped the lever. And then he smelled air. Air seeping through a tiny crevice at the side of the door near the grated hinges on which it lowered. Air from a little crack which during their descent had trickled only water!

But it was incredible—to find air down here. Still, they could not exist much longer in this stifling cell. Ames made his decision. He pulled the lever, breathed a silent prayer as the door rose.

No water entered. But both Ames and the girl uttered a simultaneous gasp.

From the opening, light came. Light at the ocean bottom! Drawing Jean to her feet, Ames moved forward, into . . .?

The rest of the submarine was a wreck. Twisted and battered, the steel sides were bursting in a dozen places. Smashed instruments littered the floor. But there were no bodies. Whether they had floated away or simply had been crushed out of existence, Ames could not say, but he was thankful that the girl had been spared a sight of them.

Only a moment did he glance about, for there was more strangeness ahead.

Through the opened sides Ames saw that the submarine rested in a gigantic cavern, a place totally free of water. From this cave the air blew in salty and of the sea, but definitely air.

The cavern was lighted; dimly enough, to be sure, yet radiance undeniably poured forth from some unknown source. The light was faintly green, and it cast eery shadows over the rocky walls. There was something ghastly and unnatural about it all, but Ames had no choice. He took Jean's arm, and together they stepped out of the ship.

"Where are we?" the girl whispered.

"In Davy Jones' Locker," Ames answered, and grinned. "But whether it's the Sailor's Snug Harbor or Hell itself, I don't know. I suggest that we investigate."

There was something very strange about all this; the inexplicable wreck, and a descent to a lighted airy cavern miles below the ocean floor. The sea is large, and water covers three-fourths of the earth's surface. Men have not begun to plumb the secrets of the ocean; science has not fathomed its final mysteries. Ames wondered.

But there was rock beneath their feet, air to breathe, light to guide them. They stepped into the cavern, arm in arm.

It was massive, with high, domed walls which seemed to have no apertures or fissures in the piled rocks. But on all sides, at a distance, stretched little corridors leading off into depths of green twilight. They did not appear to be other than natural formations, yet their design as corridors hinted horribly at the presence of alien life, or intelligent minds which had constructed them.

As Ames and the girl drew near to one cave mouth, Jean drew back, hands brushing her dark curls as she pressed her forehead.

"I'm afraid," she whispered. "Let's not go in."

"We can't stay here," Ames answered. "No food. We must explore; see if there's a way out of here; or if not, how we can remain alive if we must stay."

Jean tried to smile, but she clung to his broad shoulder very tightly with one small hand as they entered the long green corridor that led deep under the rocks.

They walked forward in utter silence; the silence of the depths; the silence of the dead and the drowned. There was coldness and dampness in the air about them, as if it, too, were dead and drowned. But the green light mocked and beckoned from ahead, and they went deeper into the unnerving stillness.

"What's that?" The girl's brown eyes widened with sudden fear. "I heard something."

Ames halted. Yes, the silence had been broken. From ahead came a sound—a soft, shuffling sound as though something were being dragged over the rocky floor of the cave.

"Here!" Ames whispered. He drew the girl into a niche between the rocks of the wall, then peered out ahead. And suddenly he saw what was coming—saw that which was never meant to be.

"Good God!" he muttered.

"David—what is it? What's coming?"

David Ames stared with wild eyes into the passageway.

"David, tell me. What's coming?"

The man still stared. "I don't know," he whispered hoarsely. "But I think it's—*Death*."

Along the corridor the three dragged their way. One was tall and bony, wearing the uniform of the U. S. Navy. It had no face. The second was dressed in rags and finery commingled, with a buccaneer's cap resting on a head of hair matted with seaweed. The third wore iron over a ghastly frame—ancient Spanish breastplates above white nothingness; for it was truly a skeleton in armor.

The three figures walked along stiffly, jerkily, staring straight ahead; one with dead glazed eyes which did not see, the second with red orbs peering from beneath strings of kelp, and the horrible third leering out of no eyes at all—just two black sockets in a skull.

They passed, marching down the corridor into further gloom. Ames drew the trembling girl out as they hastened up the passageway.

"David, what—" she faltered.

"I don't know, dear."

The horrible memory of the marching dead bit into Ames' brain. "Just a little research expedition in marine biology," old Ronald Banning had promised.

To a young scientist in love with a girl whose uncle was bringing her on an expedition, the trip had sounded quite attractive to David Ames at the time. And now—it had led to this. Banning and all the men were dead, the ship had been dragged into a strange, lighted cavern, and he was alone with Jean in a submarine world where dead men walked.

Yet there was nothing to do but go ahead. Go ahead and—

Ames almost stumbled on what lay at the side of the passage. Jean drew back with a shudder of terror.

Two bodies rested in the shadows. The first was dressed in a flowing robe with leather harness. On its sagging head rested a

helmet—a Roman helmet, unmistakably. Across the chest, which neither rose nor fell with breath, rested a gleaming sword, a sword of the legion.

Ames gazed incredulously. Then he glanced at the second figure. It was blue and bloated, swollen with water so that the purpling face had thickened. He glanced more closely at the features.

“Steve Bascom!” he muttered, “Steve Bascom!”

“What do you mean, darling?”

“Steve Bascom—I knew him. Eight years ago he died; his boat was sunk by a Government ship. He was a rumrunner; smuggled liquor from Havana to Florida. It’s Steve all right—but he’s dead!”

For a moment longer Ames stood there, then stooped and with an impulsive gesture pulled the sword from the chest of the Roman.

“I don’t get this,” he said. “But something tells me we’ll have a better chance of finding out if I hang onto this sword.”

The two turned down the path. Suddenly there was a sound from behind. Ames stood still, then hastened back along the path to where the bodies lay.

They were gone!

And in the distance, that ghastly dragging sound. . . .

Suddenly, without warning, a scream sounded from the bend ahead; a horribly familiar woman’s scream.

“Jean!” Ames shouted.

Sword in hand, David Ames rounded the corner. Jean was crouching against the wall, and confronting her with outstretched talons, were three new figures from the depths of nightmare.

The first was a gigantic black, nude and gleaming, swinging forward on ape-like arms—for the creature had no legs; merely twitching stumps that hung from his barrel-waist. The second creature wore a yachting costume, green with slime, and its face was covered with mossy growth on which snails has feasted. The third horror was merely bones—a partially articulated skeleton with remnants of flesh clinging to talonlike hands. They were closing in on the girl as Ames dashed forward, his sword swinging in a silver arc.

The blade swooped and descended, and the skeleton fell. There was a clicking sound as the bones collapsed into a jumbled heap. The corpse in the yachting outfit turned to confront this unexpected opponent, only to meet the point of Ames’ weapon as it thrust full into the moldy horror of the rotted face. The sword sliced through to the neck and tore out the shoulder, and the monster fell. But the legless, gigantic black grasped the girl in mighty

arms, and the snarling African face leered upward as Ames confronted it.

The sword slashed out, but the black dropped Jean and dodged.

Then its great arms rose swiftly and it moved forward, swinging the helpless torso from side to side as the sword missed, lunge after lunge. The bestial countenance seemed to watch Ames as he wielded the blade, and the scientist fancied he saw derision in the queerly dead eyes. All at once the mighty arms rose upward.

Ames felt the limbs close about his neck. The hands dug into his throat, and they were cold with the leanness of death. He felt his body crush against the slimy chest, felt the life-blood oozing through his bursting veins. The sword slipped from his fingers, and he went down into buzzing blackness.

Then came release. The grip relaxed. Jean, brave girl, had pierced the black back with the sword. Now it rose again, and the frantic girl brought it down on the ebon giant's neck. It sliced through the throat and cut the head as though it were a black apple on a brittle branch. The head rolled across the floor. There was no blood—not from the dead.

Ames rose. Sobbing, the girl went to his arms. Ames stood there, quieting her panic as best he could. But his eyes were watching the shambles about him. He saw the skeleton bones still moving on the rocks, saw the green horror in the yachtsman's outfit clawing blindly at its ruined face. He stared at the black, severed head which still leered up at him, just as it had during the silent struggle.

Ames stared at the dead head. And as he did so, black eyelids rolled back, red lips parted, and the head grinned. Then a red mouth opened. A voice came from a throat which should not speak; a deep, blurry voice from far away.

“Go forward, fools. The One Who Waits expects thee.”

Blind panic ruled. Turning with insane revulsion, Ames and Jean fled down the corridor while the derisive head grinned after them, its mad, cackling laughter ringing in their ears.

Ames raced through nightmare. Along the twisting emerald-litten corridor he ran; then halted as the girl gasped for lack of breath. They stood huddled together, two tiny figures in the green gloom.

“Oh, David,” whimpered Jean.

The tall, blue-eyed man put his arms around the girl, but he maintained a tight grip on the Roman sword. And his mind retained an even tighter grip on reality—if it was reality that he faced here.

"I know," he muttered. "It's awful, but we must face it. Somehow we've landed in a place where dead men walk. All I can piece together seems to hint that these men are—were—sailors of various times. They must have been wrecked and in some way dragged down here throughout the ages. There were skeletons, remember, and a Roman corpse. That means men have been trapped here for thousands of years; are still being trapped, because Steve's body shows it. And someone, or something, animates the bodies; gives them a will to walk and obey commands. *The One Who Waits*. That's all we know."

"It's too awful," Jean whispered faintly. "Let's turn back, David. I can't bear more of this."

"No, dear. We must find out. It's our only hope. I think we had better interview Mr. *One Who Waits*, and if he proves to be hard to persuade—well, I at least have a chance of putting up a sharp argument." He smiled, fingering the sword, but there was no mirth in his voice.

Together they walked, and now the way widened. The brilliance of the green light blossomed about them, coming from ahead. And together, they emerged from the corridor.

They stood inside a vast bubble in the rock—a great cavern with stone walls egg-shaped on all sides against the sea. At intervals other cave mouths like their own gaped in the rocks. Apparently the coves in the spot where they had landed all led inward to this central chamber.

The vaulted dome was high, and the light seemed to emanate phosphorescently from the murk above. Its actual source was not visible, but it undoubtedly originated in some peculiar gaseous phenomenon actuated by the same freak which had blown this mass of rock into a sealed cavern at the bottom of the sea. For a moment David's scientific soul burned to investigate these submarine marvels, but necessity turned his thoughts elsewhere.

For the cavern was not empty. The vast floor was a charnel-house, littered with bodies. Ames and the girl stared at a world of horror.

Vikings in armor, savages in feathers, sailors in dungarees—the whole burial ground of the sea lay exposed to their eyes. Roman galley slaves rested in a final sleep; pirates slumbered after walking the plank of death. There were bodies in the uniforms of Nelson's days; bearded giants from whaling fleets, swarthy corsairs from the Barbary Coast; clean-shaven men of the modern merchant marine.

All were sprawled together in a shambles, rank on rank, in hundreds and thousands they answered the roll-call of the ocean's

dead. Here kings and cabin boys, admirals, captains, and common seamen, explorers and pleasure cruisers, cutthroats and missionaries rested in the sea's sleep.

Some of the bodies were skeletal cadavers; others were blue and bloated with water; some bore wounds and many had given ghastly feast to the fishes. Piled helter-skelter like broken dolls in a toy factory, they lay unmoving, weapons at their sides. Ames thought of the legends of the Sargasso Sea.

Here was the real Port of Lost Ships; the haven of the *Flying Dutchman*. What stories of wreck and battle and storm these men could tell if only they were living!

But—perhaps they *were* living. The terrible memory of those encounters in the coves seared into Ames' brain. These men lay still in death, but they could be revived by *The One Who Waits*.

And *He* waited here!

Beyond the pile of bodies stood the black box. In the center of the chamber it stood on end, like a Chinese coffin. It was closed, sealed, but Ames knew instinctively that it contained Life.

Jean clung to him as he faced the center of the chamber, and her grip tightened as a voice came. It was a voice from nowhere, echoing through the great cavern. "Ye have come at last," the voice whispered, "After ages, ye have come, just as I have dreamed. I have been lonely here, and ye have come."

There was triumph in the whisper, and a hinted dread.

"Approach me, so that I may look upon ye," the voice droned. "Fear not—I shall clear a path."

And as the two hesitated, the path was cleared. The dead rolled back. A long, shuddering groan swept through the cavern, as though the slumber of many dreamers had been disturbed. Rows of bodies turned on their sides, opening a horrid pathway through the sleepers.

"Come on," Ames whispered. "We must."

He drew the girl with him, and together they walked down the terrible aisle. Ames held his sword in readiness. Jean's eyes never left the bloated bodies of the drowned on either side. Then they stood before the black box.

"Ye need not fear," came the whisper, softer this time. "They cannot harm lest I command it."

"Who are you?" Ames demanded. He controlled his voice only by effort, for his reason tottered. Addressing an empty black box in a hall filled with drowned men was madness, yet it was true. "Who are you?"

The voice came solemnly and softly. "I am The One Who

Waits. I am not of your world—the tiny world above the waters. I come from the sea, from the depths below where once all life began. Ye of the animal world rose to walk the land, but life began in the sea and here it has remained. Here it has developed, and evolution has progressed infinitely further than in your world above.”

The voice paused, then continued. “I find it hard to put into words ye can comprehend. But this I can say—after a time, we below evolved so highly that our bodies disappeared. Only Intelligence remained; an Intelligence so great ye could not begin to understand it. And carrying out the full cycle of Evolution, that Intelligence finally began to die. I am the last survivor; The One Who Waits.

“I was the wisest. I knew the fate in store for me, and so in these final years I have planned. During the past few thousand—ye cannot understand, but such passage of time is comparable to a few of earthly days to you—I have thought and planned and worked to find a way of surviving the doom which lies ahead.

“Long ago, in the days when Atlantis still rose above these waters, our people had achieved a science greater than anything ye know. But as we disembodied, such knowledge became worthless. And ambition died. So that all forgot the secrets we once cherished, all but myself. I remembered.

“And I used them in my plans. With their aid I protected myself when Atlantis sank, survived the earthquake which sent a continent crashing. This hollow cavern saved me, though it destroyed our cities here below. Here I have dwelt and worked. For I evolved a plan of survival.

“There were many bodies in the water when Atlantis fell. Some of these, using the science we had long since discarded as worthless, I reanimated. This I achieved by sending a portion of my intelligence into their dead brains. Once given life again, I set these creatures to work, building this cavern against all future disasters. Then I built the magnet. Ye have not seen that, but ye felt it. It is set above this cavern, directly under the fissure leading to the ocean floor. It drags down every vessel that passes overhead, drags it into the fissure, and to the cavern.”

“So that’s what pulled our submarine here,” Ames muttered. “No wonder the iron door fell and wouldn’t raise.”

“Precisely,” the voice answered, as though reading Ames’ thought. “From all these ships I took the bodies of the men. This I have done for centuries. Why, ye ask?”

The voice rose to a passionate crescendo. It was ghastly to hear such emotion rising out of nowhere.

"Because I discovered the way to survive—by putting myself, my intelligence, into a human form! Once that is accomplished, I can rise to the surface of the earth. And then I shall live again—live and rule.

"It will all be so simple. Ye have seen my army here. Stout fighters all; crippled and disabled as they are, they cannot be conquered unless blown to bits, for they are already dead and will not die again. I shall master the tiny upper crust.

"But one thing has halted me. Of all the bodies brought below the surface, none has retained perfection. I shall not enter a drowned or a wounded, or a crippled shell, with my entire intelligence. I waited, knowing sooner or later that a perfect body would be caught. And now—ye have come!"

Unconsciously, Ames raised his sword. A laugh rang out, then silence.

"Strange! I have never laughed before. I know no emotions that ye understand as such. Perhaps it is a symbol of my approaching humanity. Ah, well—I but mean to warn ye that resistance is futile. Ye cannot harm me, for I do not exist in a physical state. Do not trouble to hold the thought any longer. I want one body and I shall take it. Everything is arranged. My army has builded well. In the cave beyond rest many thousand conveyors—akin to the torpedoes ye use at present, and similar to these—submarines, I believe they are called.

"Ye see, I know thy world. Each of these vessels can hold many men. Once I assume my human guise and send my intelligence forth to animate the others, we shall embark in the vessels and rise to the surface. This world will be destroyed as we pierce the rocky shell and enter the fissure, but no matter. We shall not return. We will conquer the outside earth and resume dominion. I am The One Who Waits—and I need wait no longer. I have chosen my body."

The voice subsided into a dreadful silence.

And then hideous life rose all about Ames and the girl—life rose from Death. A dozen bony arms reached out. Corpse-cold fingers clawed. A score of the dead men stiffly hobbled to their feet. Ames was already swinging his blade, and it descended in a pendulum of destruction. As fast as the cadavers approached, his sword sheared out, lopping limbs, slicing throats, ripping bloated bellies. Somewhere behind him Jean fought silently, but Ames was lost in the red fury of this silent, hideous battle with the dead.

And then they were upon him, bearing him down by sheer weight of numbers with their cold, drowned limbs. With a mighty effort he hurled them off, only to go down again. They were all about him now, and he smelled their horrid stench as they gripped his arms and legs, swarmed over him until he was hidden from sight. He would be done for in a moment—

Then the weight relaxed. He was lying only under dead. Dazed, he rose to his feet, comprehending. The Intelligence in the box had thought him finished off, and left, relaxing the will which animated the bodies. Why had it left in such a hurry? Where had it gone, and for what purpose?

Ames whirled.

Jean!

The girl was gone. The cavern was empty, save for the bodies of the dead stretching in waves over the floor.

It had taken Jean away to the chamber where the vessels waited; taken Jean to exchange bodies and summon this horde of drowned to rise upon the earth! For a moment utter panic swept over the young scientist. This was the end. He turned at a sudden sound.

The dead were rising again.

No; only three had gained their feet. Ames grasped the sword, then watched as the three sightlessly staring figures ignored him and walked across the cavern floor. He understood then, and breathed a blessing.

The One Who Waited was summoning these three to his chamber, wherever that might be. Possibly they were to assist him in whatever final arrangement must be made.

Silently, Ames followed them. He had no idea of the Intelligence's powers; they might be so great that It was watching these dead progress.

Consequently, David Ames walked stiffly, like a resurrected corpse. His face assumed an immobile stare. But he never dropped his sword, and within his brain a small voice called, "Jean—Jean—where are you?"

Down a short corridor he followed the three corpses. One was short and squat like a Frankish galley slave; the second wore the uniform of the French Navy; the third was dressed in modern garb, but the head dangled loosely. The neck was broken and the lolling face swung almost backwards in a ghastly fashion, and there was something evilly familiar about the horrid figure. Ames gasped as he realized.

The once kindly and wrinkled face was now contorted in a

grimace of death-agony, and the horrid jaws lolled open—but David Ames realized that the corpse before him was that of Jean's uncle, Ronald Banning, marine biologist!

This was no time for thinking of such things. The walking dead men were turning the corridor. Swiftly Ames moved forward. The sightless eyes did not even notice him, since the Intelligence behind them was not directing them for that purpose. Ames reached the first man, the one in the uniform of the French Navy.

He was of Ames' height and general build, though his hair was darker. Ames did not bother to ponder such details. His sword flashed. The figure fell, twitching. The scientist leaped upon it, jerking off the naval coat and the cap. Hastily he donned the disguise, then raced to reach the other two figures just as they entered a rocky cave set back from the walls. The green light burned strongly within. Ames followed the animated body of Ronald Banning into the small cavern.

In the distance, row on row, stood the vessels. They were, to all outward appearances, submarines; yet they were pointed nose upward, straight at the stone ceiling. Ames noticed that they had peculiar torpedolike attachments at the snout—undoubtedly explosive agents to blast the vessels out of the cavern. The foremost one was open, and a light gleamed within, an electric light!

Ames followed the two figures that moved without hesitation toward the open door in the side of the vessel. Then he stood in the cabin.

The black box lay on a table, and before it stood Jean—Jean, terrified, her black hair hanging in disordered loveliness about her piquant face. A thing without a head was holding her—a thing that was scarred and torn by a dozen gaping wounds, yet it gripped her in a steely grasp.

And from the box a voice spoke.

"So. Now, my child, let us begin. The vessel is ready to start. Within a few moments I can summon the rest and fill the other ships. We shall leave at once—my plans are laid. All that remains lies between myself and you."

The girl sobbed. Ames looked ahead in agony. He dared not betray himself. The voice purred on.

"Do not feel badly. I know how emotion affects human kind, but I assure ye, it is nothing. Ye are participating in something far greater than has ever occurred before; ye are lending thy body to the most astounding service ever rendered in the Cosmos. Believe me, it is greater thus to die. In no other way could thy life be

rendered so worthy. But enough of words—I must act now.”

There was a moment of silence, and the headless thing held the girl quite tightly. Suddenly Ames, watching, saw the color draining from Jean's face. Her eyes grew glassy, fixed in a black stare. They were riveted on the black box, and now the room seemed to whirl as it hummed with unseen power.

A terrific force seemed to be rising from the black box, as though *It* were emerging. There was nothing to see or hear, but the feeling grew. And Jean's face faded. *Another* face was peering through.

The One Who Waits was taking Jean's body!

Then came surcease. Life gradually returned to the girl's face. And from the box came a murmur.

“No—I am not strong enough yet. Never have I permitted myself utterly to enter a single body. It is as I feared—the strain is too great. I must make another attempt, work up to the ordeal more gradually. That is why I summoned these three. They are dead, and a portion of Intelligence has animated them. They have no will of their own, and I can enter into such shells more easily. I shall allow myself to enter one of them as an experiment, and thus strengthen my will for a second experiment with ye. And I shall not fail.”

Jean stood half-swooning from her struggle. The voice in the black box paused, then went on.

“I shall choose this one—with the broken neck. He came with ye, and has never known domination before. Therefore he is stronger than my other servants, and will provide a better final test.”

The voice ceased, and for the first time Jean recognized her dead uncle with a look of startled horror. The hideous head dangled, grimacing in her face, and then turned on its stalk-like neck.

The force flooded forth, fiercely. For a moment the room was filled with a pulsing that seemed to shake the walls of the submarine. And then—

“I have triumphed!”

The voice came, not from the box, but from the dead lips on the dead face of Ronald Banning. It came, not from a stiff, unseeing corpse, but from an actual living dead man. The deep voice brought life from dead lungs, breathed horribly as it walked across the submarine cabin.

The girl shuddered. Ames still stood silent, but his legs were trembling, and he felt the sweat of utter dread upon his brow.

The man with the broken neck, the man with Ronald Banning's face, the man who was not a man but One Who Waits, walked and spoke.

"A human body. Remarkable! I feel life once more—form, corporeal existence. I shall like that. Ye are but a woman, but thy body shall suffice. This one is a broken reed. Ye are young, and strong, and healthy. And I have the strength to enter. Why delay?"

A horribly inhuman chuckle burst from the swollen purple lips.

"I shall hold ye in my arms and breathe my soul into thy form. And then—arise to power!"

The corpse advanced. And Ames acted. His sword thrust upward. At the instant, the figure turned.

"An impostor!" The thing that was not Ronald Banning darted to one side. "Kill him!" he shouted.

And the other two corpses acted.

The galley slave rushed in, arms swinging. But Ames was already lunging with deadly precision, and swept his sword through waist and belly alike with ripping thrust. Jean rushed across the cabin and slammed the door fast. The creature in Banning's body vainly clawed at the handle.

Ames went after him, but slipped and fell. The remaining corpse was on him from the rear, together with the awful headless creature. The three went down together, but Ames held the sword upthrust, and as the headless being fell forward it was pierced. Rolling to one side, Ames again slashed the crippled galley slave. The two bodies lay twitching madly as the scientist rose to his feet and confronted the body of Banning.

"You can't be touched, eh? Disembodied Intelligence?" he grated. "You're alive now, and in a human body! The One Who Waits? Your waiting is—ended."

The sword came down. There was a shearing sound, as grasped in both hands, the blade cleft through head and neck. Something red and bleeding fell to the floor and lay still. It looked not unlike a human brain.

The pulsing vibrations that had filled the room were ceased. The thing was dead. And Ames turned to look for Jean.

"Jean!" he cried. "What are you doing?"

The girl was fumbling at a panel at the end of the room.

She turned to him with a determined smile.

"We're getting out of here, and right now," she answered.

Her slim hands pulled levers. Suddenly, with a roar and a lurch, the submarine rocketed upward. There was a single grinding shock

as the vessel exploded through rocky walls, then merely a steady humming as the righted submarine arose.

From below came a deep, sonorous rumble.

"The cavern is filling in," the girl whispered. "We're going up."

Silently, Ames took her in his arms. Their kiss was long. It was not interrupted until the vessel lurched again. Ames' eyes followed the wall until they reached a periscopic mirror. He nudged the dark-haired girl with a slow grin.

"Look through there," he said. "I can see the stars."

Together, thankfully they gazed on the blue heavens above the South Atlantic.

Power of the Druid

(*Strange Stories* June 1940)

TIBERIUS CLAUDIUS NERO CAESAR WAS BORED. HIS SACRED MAJESTY, Augustus, Protector of the People, Emperor Tiberius stared moodily at the blue Caprian waters and heaved a scented sigh. He was heartily sick of living. Ten years ago he had become sick of Rome and the cares of empire. He abandoned all government at that time and retired here to Capri.

He built the twelve villas in which he lived. He peopled them with his German bodyguard, his staff of Greek professors, his friend Nerva, and the astrologer Thrasyllus—all as a safeguard against further boredom.

But he tired quickly enough of island exile, and so had come to him the loathsome Spintrians, the abominable practitioners of the arts alluded to in the book of Elephantis. And Tiberius built torture chambers in the villas, to amuse himself in still more curious ways. But now, even these strong diversions no longer titillated his aging senses.

Tiberius could no longer escape from himself, from his own aging body and jaded senses. He was growing quite old now. A tall, bony man with a thin, pitted face and a high, bald pate. His physicians were forever at him, cautioning him against his addiction to drugged wine, and myrrh.

He sat, stiff-jointed, on the cliff overlooking the beach at Capri, alternately staring at the waves and fingering the fifth volume of *Elephantis* in his lap. He sat alone, and he cursed under his breath in round, imperial oaths.

"Caesar!"

The harsh voice echoed from below the cliff at his feet. Tiberius sat up, his bony legs stiffening with apprehension. No strangers came to this, his island. Tiberius feared assassins.

"Caesar!"

Peering over the edge of the cliff, the Emperor descried a boat, moored to a rock in the waters below. The voice came from the throat of someone clambering up the steep cliff, through the bushes.

Suddenly the bushes parted at one side, and a weird figure appeared. It was a disheveled man, ragged and soaking with sea water that glistened on his tanned skin. He had a wild, bearded face that bled from the scratching of the thorny bushes, encountered during his climb. His yellow teeth were bared in a grimace of fatigue.

But Tiberius scarcely noticed these details. His eyes were focused on the long knife the stranger carried in one hand. It was a sharp knife, a glittering knife. It was the kind of blade that could be easily plunged into a neck, even an imperial neck.

Tiberius looked wildly to either side for his German guards, who always waited near by. But the man approached, grinning. And now Tiberius perceived that he carried a great sack.

"A gift for you, Majesty," panted the ragged stranger. "I caught it just now, saw you sitting here on the cliff, and wish to present you with my catch."

He smiled through his tangled beard, through his scratched, bleeding face. Opening the sack, the man drew out a great barbel, still squirming in life. The stranger gestured with his knife.

"A gift, O Caesar."

Tiberius did not look at the catch. His lean hands fumbled for the golden whistle on the cord about his scrawny throat. He blew frantically.

"Guards! At once!"

From either side guards appeared. Great, blond, brawny warriors in armor, with barbs protruding from their iron helmets. They moved in, holding *assegais* in readiness.

"You would kill me, then, under pretext of presenting me with this object?" Tiberius sneered.

"But, Caesar, I speak truly. I caught it only a few moments ago and brought it as a present to you, Divinity."

"The knife?" snapped Tiberius, his face set in a cold frown.

"To cut my way through the thorn bushes," wailed the fisherman.

"Rub the barbel in his face," commanded the Emperor.

In a flash, one of the Germans had pinioned the helpless rustic. Another hacked a piece from the fish and rubbed the scaly bits in the squirming man's face.

"Mercy, Caesar!" gasped the captive.

"See what else is in the sack," Tiberius commanded.

A third German dug into the sack and drew out an enormous lobster, alive, as its great pointed pincers showed.

"Mercy, Tiberius."

"You'd frighten me, you boor?" whispered the Emperor. "Guard, rub his face with this. Rub it well."

The German advanced on the tightly-held fisherman and drew the giant lobster across his contorted face. He drew it forward and back, scrubbing.

Tiberius stood looking on.

"That's it." He smiled. "Again."

The huge pincers tore the flesh from both cheeks.

"Caesar! Mercy—please—"

"Capital!" Tiberius cackled, his senile laughter rising. "Prove his innocence to his face, guard. Again!"

The struggling fisherman screamed, but the German drew the lobster down, pressed it tightly into the victim's face. The pincers settled into the hollow ridges of the fisherman's eyes. There was a mad shriek of pain, and the lobster came away. But its pincers were no longer empty.

The man's eye-sockets were. From their red, streaming emptiness even the Germans recoiled in horror. But Tiberius still laughed, a bleating laugh which rose even above the screams of the blinded man.

"Release him," commanded the Emperor. "You may go, loyal and faithful subject."

The blind man raced screaming about the edge of the cliff. His clawing hands clutched empty air as he tottered on the brink, then fell forward from the crag to plunge down into the rocks a hundred feet below. His body crashed, cutting off the wild madness of his death-cry. Tiberius squinted over the edge of the cliff and shrugged as he turned away.

"So," he said. "You may go, guards." His eyes lighted on the cut fish at his feet.

"Perhaps one of you will carry this to the villa," He suggested. "Tell the cook to prepare it for this evening's feast. I am fond of fresh barbel, very fond of it, and this one's a beauty. Besides, we should be ungrateful did we not enjoy the fellow's gift. He was put to such pains in the giving."

The Emperor chuckled as the Germans bowed and withdrew. Then Tiberius resumed his place at the edge of the cliff and picked up *Elephantis* once again. After a moment he sighed deeply.

For the Emperor Tiberius was bored.

The sun was sinking in the center of a cloud that hung over the western sea. It peered out from the round blackness of the cloud like the red eye of a Cyclops swimming away across the waters. And the red eye fell upon Tiberius as he turned the pages of his book, fell upon him and bathed his face with bloody light.

The night breeze was rustling in the bushes, whispering in a chill voice of mourning that the day was dead. Tiberius felt clammy cold steal over his thin limbs, stepped briskly to the edge of the cliff for a final glance into the waters below.

"Jove's Curse!" exclaimed the emperor.

The boat of the dead fisherman was still anchored there below. But that did not disturb His August Majesty.

It was the sight of what lay beside it in the dusk. Another boat. A long, queer-looking craft was anchored there. And it had no oars, though it was plainly some sort of barbarous shell.

The rustling in the bushes took on a new and menacing meaning.

Tiberius clutched at his whistle.

The rustling was louder. Was it the ghost of the dead fisherman coming for vengeance?

Tiberius blew frantically.

And then the bushes parted.

A ragged man with a tangled beard, his face bleeding in the sunset.

It *was* the fisherman!

But no, the light alone caused the face to look as though it bled. And this man's beard was white. His rags were white, also, and his skin. Moreover, he had eyes.

Tiberius could not escape those eyes. They burned more redly than the sun, and with a deeper, more compelling fire. They smoldered from that face in the dusk as the man slowly advanced.

Tiberius screamed.

"Guards! *Schnell!*" He babbled frantic German commands, and still the figure approached.

The Germans appeared, running through the trees.

The man did not appear to notice them. He advanced on Tiberius, a slow smile on his face.

"Guards! Over the cliff, quickly!" the Emperor screamed.

They were on the stranger in a rush, bearing him back. He did not struggle. One of the Germans picked up the great lobster that still lay on the sand and ground it into the captive's face. It pressed pincers into his reddened eyes, but no sound came from the victim. And then they hurled him from the cliff, hurled him down upon the rocks below, as Tiberius screamed in fear and rage.

There was a faint splashing from the beach, then stillness.

His Imperial Majesty motioned the guards away in silence, then slowly turned and followed them up the path.

The appearance of this second, frightening stranger was too much for him. Henceforth he would entertain no visitors. All would be thrown from the cliff, just as he tossed the favorites of whom he tired. Tiberius could not brook assassination. He was soon to die, and no one should hasten that horrid end.

But who was this man with the disturbing eyes?

Well, no matter. He was dead, and those red eyes were ground out forever. The wind rustled strongly at Tiberius' back. Too strongly.

The Emperor knew suddenly that he was being followed. In a panic, his hands again went to the whistle about his neck.

But other hands reached it first.

Two slim white hands rested on the cord, on the golden whistle. Two slim white hands came over his shoulders. Tiberius, speechless with fear, turned his head.

He stared into the red, burning eyes of the eyeless dead stranger he had thrown over the cliff!

"Hail, Caesar!"

The deep voice penetrated his being, though it was soft as a whisper.

"Go away! You're dead. I killed you," Tiberius gasped. He felt that he was going mad.

"I would speak with you, Caesar."

"Stop staring at me! You have no eyes. I killed you."

"Aye, Caesar. You killed me, and tore out my eyes, and threw me from the cliff, just as you threw that poor fisherman earlier in

the day. But I am not a fisherman, Caesar. I cannot be blinded, or killed."

"You're his ghost," wailed the Emperor.

"Nay, I am not a ghost. But I have powers greater than the supernatural. You saw me die, and now you see me live again. Such powers should be of interest to you, Caesar. It was to tell you of them that I came."

"Yes."

"I allowed you to have your will, though I could blast your Germans with a glance—and I could blast you, too, Tiberius, my friend." The red eyes compelled.

"Yes, you are right. Come, be my guest at dinner tonight at the villa. We shall talk then."

The Emperor's couch was soft. The Emperor's table was filled with delicacies. The Emperor's slaves, servants, musicians, and guests were attentive and solicitous.

But the Emperor paid no heed to comfort, food, drink, or entertainment. He sat staring at the white-bearded man, his ears open only to his whispered words.

The stranger sat stiffly at the great board. He did not loll beneath the fannings of slaves, nor did he partake of the viands before him. Instead, he drank wine from the special flagon placed at his side, draught after draught of wine from the great goblet he constantly refilled. Yet never did his even tones falter. The stranger could not get drunk!

Tiberius listened long. At last he ventured a whispered reply above the chattering of the others at the table.

"You say, then, that you are a Druid who came here in a stone boat from Britain."

"Aye. I have been ovate and bard in the great Druidic college you call Stonehenge. And I was archdruid, too, of all Britain."

"I have heard of your cult. It is known throughout Britain, the Celtic isles, and even Gaul. You Druids are wizards, are you not?"

"Not wizards, but students of Nature. We worship Tanarus, the god of primal life, who dwells in the sacred oak. And we accord homage to Mabon, the white bull of the sun, and to Primal Nodens, serpent of waters.

"The true secrets of Druidism are guarded by the initiate. Only a few of the many who pass twenty years in study and trials of endurance ever manage to become admitted to our secret priest-

hood. One must learn strange magics and discover the secrets of Nature in order to be worthy.

"I am one of the few true initiates. I rule over the thirteen clans of Druids, and I know the real truths behind Life and Death."

"You boast of such powers?" Tiberius sneered.

"Did I not come from Britain in a stone boat without oars?" the Druid returned with a slow smile. "Primal Nodens guided me here. Did you not kill me and tear out my eyes? Am I not therefore master over Nature and Life and Death?"

Tiberius nodded.

"But then, what would you have of me? Why did you leave your powerful offices in Britain to seek me out?"

"That, O Caesar, I shall explain. I tired of my leadership because of its restrictions. I am human! I have never known the love of woman, and all common men feared me for my powers, even my priests. Well, love of woman is denied me now, and friendship too. But I am still human enough to long for wealth and riches and adulation.

"I know magics that bring all riches, but dare not use them in my sacred office. If I desired any pleasures my priests would sacrifice me as a violator of my trust. So I decided to leave my post, before it was too late. And I bethought myself of the greatest man in the world—you, Emperor of Rome. I would come to you. Surely there would be a way to serve you and in return gain reward. So I came."

August Tiberius smiled, and under cover of his guests' babblings, he leaned forward to reply.

"There is a way to serve me."

The Druid smiled.

"In the spring the trees blossom and the flowers bud. They die in autumn but next year are reborn. Their life is eternal, but their forms change. And that is the secret of human existence. Life lies in the soul, and the soul moves from body to body without ceasing."

"But what has that to do with me?"

"A great deal, O Caesar. We of the true Druids have learned how to govern the soul, and Life. We can take the vital force before it dies and transplant it. And you, I know, want to escape death. So, Tiberius, I can help you. I will place your soul in another body, transpose the soul of another to your own dying body. Thus you can live again."

Tiberius trembled.

The Druid took a long gulp from his wine glass.

"You cannot make me drunk, you see," he smiled. His red eyes became points. "That ought to prove something." He smiled again, staring straight at Tiberius.

"You can't even kill me."

The Druid drank deliberately again of the wine.

"What do you mean?" Tiberius quavered.

"I told you I knew all things." Again the Druid drank slowly. "And of course I know that this wine you set before me is highly poisoned. A glass of it will kill a man in half an hour. Yet I have been drinking all night." The smile was terrible.

"But Druid, I did not know, I could not suspect! If you can do what you say, if you can give me another lease on life in a new, young body, I shall reward you as richly as you desire."

Druid eyes gleamed.

"You're an evil man, Tiberius. I've never seen worse. As a Druid I should not prostitute my powers to serve you, lest I incur the vengeance of my gods. You must reward me well."

"I shall, I promise! As I love my life."

"That oath is convincing enough. Now, to find you a body."

Tiberius extended a thin finger and pointed at his nephew.

"That is the body," he murmured. "Put me in his place. That young man is to be my heir, the next Emperor of Rome. He is young, healthy. The people love him as much as they hate me. That is the body I desire to inhabit."

The Druid nodded, staring down the table at the thin, serious face of the Emperor's nephew, Gaius Caligula.

It was done!

Tiberius Caesar returned to the mainland. At Misenum he fell sick, and called Caligula to his side. The old man, wheezing and gasping in his bed, gave Caligula the Imperial ring.

Caligula put it on gravely, there in the darkness of the bedroom. He was alone with his imperial uncle, and he sobbed with deep emotion at the thought of this terrible old man, for all his power, dying alone and friendless after a final debauch. Where was the Druid?

But he did not sob long. And he did not wonder where the Druid was for long, either, because the white-bearded old man rose in the darkness behind the bed and advanced with blazing eyes. One hand held a staff of yew, with a serpent head.

Caligula rose from the bedside, turned.

The serpent head darted out of the Druid's hand. It hissed.

The wood hissed, and moved. A great snake coiled about the throat of Caligula, strangling his screams. The young man fell across the bed where the Emperor lay, with the snake tight against his neck.

Then, slowly, the tail of the snake rose and coiled in turn about the neck of Tiberius, who did not resist. Both men lay side by side on the bed now, the great green serpent coiled at either end about their throats. Their faces blackened.

And the Druid chanted there in the darkness over the bodies of the two dying men.

"Oh Great Typhon, Great Set, Great Nodens!" whispered the Druid. His voice slurred into Celtic, into ancient Phoenician.

The Druid whispered long, and at his words the candle flames in the chamber sickened and died. The two men died. Only the Druid and the serpent were alive—and the horrid voice, uttering strange words that somehow caused the air to tremble at their utterance.

Now, swiftly, a flame seemed to course through the wriggling coils of the serpent. It came from both ends. The one from the tail about the neck of Tiberius was a dim blue flame. The other, from the head about Caligula's throat, was a strong red flame. They met and mingled in the serpent's body, seemed to pass and seek opposite ends.

Suddenly the candles flared up, the serpent hissed again and then uncoiled from the young firm throat and the wrinkled old throat. Both men began to breathe once again. The young throat moved regularly, while the old one wheezed and rattled.

The serpent wriggled from the bed and retreated to the Druid's slim hands, seeming none the worse for its experience. Then, as the Druid caught it, it suddenly became a mere shaft of wood once more. The Druid smiled and turned to the bed.

"It is done," he announced.

"Yes. It *is* done!"

The triumphant voice of Tiberius rose—from Caligula's lips.

"What have you done?" The feeble quaver of Caligula came from Tiberius in the bed. "What has happened? Where am I?"

With renewed vitality, born of utter dread, the body of aged Tiberius sat up, and Caligula's dazed eyes stared from its face.

Caligula's body caught up a pillow. Gently Tiberius pressed it against his own former mouth, saw his own body sink back on the mattress and struggle feebly as it slowly strangled.

"Ah, it's over." The new Caesar stood erect.

The Druid chuckled, and they left the room. The black face of Tiberius leered behind them in the darkness, its swollen tongue protruding as though in sardonic derision.

The new Emperor was announced to the people.

"Caligula! Hail the Young Emperor! Hail to the Little Boot!"

The crowds cheered lustily.

Caligula entered his private chambers while the cries of the mob still echoed from without the palace below. He paced to the windows and shut them against the clamor, then turned to face the smiling Druid.

The Druid wore velvet now, and his beard was curled and scented. Rings adorned his fingers, and the lines of fasting and privation were gone from his face. But his face held new wrinkles more unpleasant—wrinkles of evil about his eyes, craftiness etching his lips. His smile was no longer omniscient, merely humanly avaricious.

"Well, Caesar?" he said. "Satisfied?"

"No." The Caesar scowled. "This is a ghastly mess, Druid. I've leaped from bad to worse, it seems. As Tiberius, I could do what I willed, since it was expected of me. They hated and feared my every act. Therefore, I was not constrained in following my nature. But as Caligula, I have a part to play. I am a public hero. I must be good, and kind, and merciful. The weight of convention is great, Druid. I cannot escape from doing what is expected."

"Why not be good?" suggested the Druid. "If such elementary concepts as good and evil occupy your philosophy? I am giving you a new chance, a new life to live, so to speak. Why not atone?"

Caesar laughed.

"What, Druid? Do you then prove craven?"

"Not I. Do as you like." The Druid hastily corrected himself.

"But I can't. I want my Spintrians again. By Neptune's trident, man, I have a young body again. It is fit for pleasures, and for reveling. That is why I desired my youth. But as Caligula I cannot use it without excuse."

"There is a solution," the Druid conceded.

"What? Tell me? I'm going mad with boredom."

"You could perhaps—fall sick."

"Yes."

"And when you become well you accept divinity. Your forebears did. Augustus is worshiped as a god. You can be one too,

alive. The common people know that a god has different moral standards, just as Jove had in the myth. And your intimates here in the palace will accept your change as madness resulting from your sickness."

"Druid, you are right! Ah, how fortunate I am in your counsel!"

The Druid smiled.

"Sicken for a month," he advised.

Caligula was ill for a month.

When he rose again, all Rome fell sick.

The god, Caligula, reigned in a hell upon earth. Rome was his hell, and all souls felt the torment of his lordship. As a divine figure, his antics were unquestioned at the first—and then it was too late. He killed his son, and killed the old captain of his guards, substituting a figurehead he could easily command. Once the army was in his power he wantoned unquestioned. He took brides, one after another, in a steady stream, and killed them. In disguise he and his companions roamed the city, rioting and burning at will.

In secret rooms the Spintrians revelled. Magicians and wonder-workers plied their spells for his delight. It was a fresh youth, at the expense of Rome—Rome's fairest women, Rome's finest men, Rome's money, Rome's honor.

Ever the Druid was at his side, "You're getting sleek and fat," the Emperor observed one day. "This life agrees with you, too, my friend."

The Druid smiled grimly.

"You're sleek and fat, too. Caesar. And you're stupid, too."

"What's that?"

In his new-found, intoxicating power, the Emperor was beginning to resent these caustic comments from his servant. The Druid was much too familiar these days, irking in his reminder of superiority. But he had advice to offer. Best to listen.

"What's that?" he repeated, his face growing ugly.

"I say you are stupid, Caesar. You are supposed to be mad, remember. Here in the palace there are strange rumors, already current, comparing your antics to those of old Tiberius. Quash those rumors, I say. Quash them by diverting attention elsewhere—to your madness. Be mad!"

Then the Druid began to whisper, and as he whispered Caesar smiled, unpleasantly.

Caesar went mad the next day.

His favorite horse, Porcellus, was taken from the stable. In the robes of priesthood, Caligula made him a citizen and a senator.

With holy oils he christened the steed anew—"Incitatus" the "swift-speeding."

When the crowd was summoned to attend the ceremony at this strange caprice, Caligula quickly went on with his ceremony. And "Incitatus" became a consul of Rome, one of the three rulers.

Caligula was mad enough for Rome now.

The money was scarce, so he sold public offices and killed the criminals in the prisons to save their keep. Thriftily, he used their bodies in the arena for feeding the wild animals in the shows. He raised more money for his excesses with actors, charioteers, and his crew of chosen intimates that attended him on his debauches. The city was openly in revolt by now.

"Madder still," warned the Druid.

Caligula built a bridge of boats across the bay of Baiae. Four thousand boats were commandeered from merchants. At the head of his guards he rode across the bridge, throwing coins to the populace who appeared at this public festival. Then he charged back, scattering the mob and killing them, pushing hordes to drown into the water as he fought the sea and defied Neptune.

"Madder still," warned the Druid. There was talk of rebellion.

Caligula became a god in person now. He wore the robes of Jove and appeared as high priest in all temple ceremonies. He took the heads from all statues of the other gods and substituted his own.

"Madder still," warned the Druid. Mutinies were breaking out on the borders of the Empire.

Caesar frowned, this time.

"I'm mad enough right now," he declared. "After all, Druid, there are limits to human endurance."

"Perhaps." The Druid nodded. "But if they ever let their minds wander to your personal life—"

The Emperor's youthful face took on a dreadful darkness, and it hideously resembled the face of the dead Tiberius. Surely the eyes of Tiberius blazed as he roared:

"Eternal damnation to the people! Yes, and to my evilness as well! Druid, it's no concern of yours what I do. I fulfilled my promise. I gave you money and comforts and power even over me.

"But my life is my own. I've always hated my people, just as they hate me. Now they shall suffer. I find a deal of pleasure in their suffering. You know, at Capri, I had torture chambers, discovering in my old age that there are peculiar pleasures in inflicting pain. Now I profit by that knowledge and inflict pain while young. Let

me have my people to play with, Druid, and do not question me in that. Ah, would but that all Rome had a single neck for me to hack!"

The Druid's fattening face fell with alarm.

"Caesar, such talk tempts my gods whose gift you bear! Stop such blasphemy, I pray you!"

"Ah!" The Emperor spat. "Think you I care for your gods? All I need fear is the people—the stupid, silly people. As long as I give them plenty of holidays, plenty of shows in the amphitheater, they will not rebel. As long as I import wild beasts for fights they will be satisfied. And I like the shows. I like the blood. I like the fierceness of the combat. Come see our next show tomorrow, Druid. It will be very interesting."

The Emperor smiled at the Druid. There were secrets in his smile as he watched the plump, unsuspecting face of the wizard.

The wizard smiled at the Emperor. There were secrets in his smile as he watched the plump, unsuspecting face of the Emperor.

The Druid knew the plot. Tomorrow, when Caesar left the arena, he was to be stabbed to death by conspirators in the guards. Men were sick of his tyranny. His smile was knowing, indeed. Well, let Caligula-Tiberius die. He was sick of the cruel master he had taken.

The use he had made of his new life offended the Druidic gods. This the Druid knew from oracle and divination in secret. He longed to return to Britain now and do penance for his sin. Otherwise, it was written in the stars, there was a vengeance awaiting the Druid—a vengeance coming soon. So the Druid smiled, for tomorrow Caligula would be dead.

Caligula smiled, for tomorrow the Druid would be dead. He was sick of the sly, bearded man's tyranny. Besides, he was the only one who knew his secret, and should be destroyed for safety. Now this soft palace life had fattened him, dulled his senses and powers. He no longer feared treachery, and probably did not guard against it. It would be easy to rid himself of this leech, and rule as he desired.

Caligula smiled that night as he poured the powder in the Druid's wine at table. This time, he knew, the Druid was unprepared. There would be no mystic power against poison, no resistance.

And it was true. After a few minutes the bearded Briton suddenly slumped forward in his place. His eyes were glazed in paralysis.

Quickly the guards carried him out. Caligula had arranged it all.

The next day the Emperor took his place in the box at the arena. It was a public holiday. The pleasure-seeking people of Rome crowded the gigantic amphitheater as the trumpets blew for the gladiatorial bouts. It was a splendid show and the crowd cheered, but Caligula-Tiberius waited, brooding, for the moment of his triumph.

Then the arena was cleared of bodies, the floor was sanded, and the cages at the far end opened. The lions!

Women—vestals who had profaned their office—huddled in the center as the tawny beasts bounded forward with ripping claws and rending fangs.

The Emperor's nostrils flared at the scent of blood.

The bugles blew. He leaned forward in his box. This was the moment!

The bulls entered. The wild bulls, the horned bulls, the great bulls that killed lions and tigers here in pitched battles. The bulls that killed not for hunger, but out of sheer savageness. The gigantic bulls with the slashing horns that gored and gored their victims into bloody rags. The bulls!

The crowd roared acclaim, and the bulls bellowed and snorted, angered by the noise. The smiling Emperor rose and dropped his baton.

From the entry-way beneath his box proceeded a lone figure, an unarmed, white-bearded man, pushed into the arena by the guards. It was the Druid. Still weak from the paralyzing potion, he stumbled into the ring.

The Caesar laughed. What a jest! He'd feed this foe to the bulls, rid himself of an enemy and enjoy the sport at no expense. The Druid was too dazed for tricks.

The unarmed old man faced the bulls at the farther side of the arena—faced one great white bull that saw him now and began to lope purposefully towards him as the crowd cried out. And the Druid shrieked in a voice rising above the crowd's tumult.

"Mabon! It is Great Mabon come to me in vengeance!"

Caesar heard the words with a chill of recollection. Mabon? Yes, the bull-god of the Druids. One of the gods the Druid had feared to offend with wickedness. Caesar laughed again. How apt a death!

"You seek vengeance, Mabon?" screamed the Druid. "Ah, I deserve to die. But not this death, Mabon. I'll take the other, awaiting *him*. Let he that defamed his new life take this death in my stead. Let *him* take it!"

Caesar heard the words above the roaring. And then, he saw the Druid deliberately turn his back to the loping bull—turn his back and face Caesar in the imperial box. His eyes were on Tiberius-Caligula, and for a moment they gleamed, despite weakness, as red and powerfully as of old. They were redder, stronger. The Emperor felt the gaze press him, gripped his baton of office firmly in his hand to give him strength in resisting the terrible pressure of that stare.

Then the Druid whispered swiftly. Caesar saw his lips moving. His own brown eyes fell before that glance and he gripped the baton.

But it was not a baton. It was something cold, and alive, and moving, that crawled about his throat like the stick the Druid had held that day when Tiberius exchanged souls with Caligula.

Red eyes blazed up, and a thing crawled to move with weird swiftness over the Emperor's throat.

Those in boxes near Caesar saw him clutch his neck once. They gazed into the ring and saw the red eyes of the Druid flicker and go out.

A single scream from the old man, muffled by the crowd's howling. But it was the voice of the Emperor in his throat. And then the form of the Druid seemed to crumple for a moment and rise again.

This time the Druid did not stand still.

He ran, shrieking insanely, as the great white bull charged down. He ran, yelling for mercy toward the imperial box. And the bull caught him and hurled him high in the air, so that he twisted as he fell to be caught by the cruel, hooking horns. The horns tore and tore, and the hooves slashed out, and then the bull snorted and stamped on what was left.

All the while the figure of the Emperor remained standing as though whispering a prayer. He no longer clutched his throat, but seemed to smile.

But the Emperor rose suddenly and left his box. He knew where the assassins waited, but did not seek an alternative route. Instead he advanced slowly down the aisle, muttering to himself in a low, strange voice. On-lookers later recalled that he spoke in a peculiar hissing tongue, unknown to men. Others whispered that he murmured over and over, "Thank you great Mabon. Thank you, I shall atone." There is some confusion on this point.

All, however, agree on a strange thing. As the Emperor left the amphitheater they could see that his eyes had changed from their usual dark brown to a *deep, blazing red*.

Be Yourself

(*Strange Stories* October 1940)

— Chapter I —

Fair Exchange Is—

F. THATCHER VAN ARCHER SAT BEFORE HIS TYPEWRITER FEELING more and more like Eddie Thompson. As a matter of fact, F. Thatcher Van Archer *was* Eddie Thompson, but that was something F. Thatcher Van Archer did not care to think about. It had taken years for F. Thatcher Van Archer to materialize, resplendent in a purple dressing gown. Years of pulp writing, slick writing, ghost-writing, hack writing, newspaper writing, scenario writing, book writing, and just plain hard slavery before a desk.

Every time a story appeared bearing the byline "F. Thatcher Van Archer," the name of Eddie Thompson grew a little paler behind it. The magic pseudonym acted as a sort of charm, conjuring up a figure beside which the reality gradually faded. And now, on the very pinnacle of the literary heap, wearing his best purple dressing gown, F. Thatcher Van Archer sat in his study and felt just like plain Eddie Thompson again. It was hard.

It was unusual, too. Eddie Thompson had almost forgotten about himself by this time. Ten years of writing, steady work since

leaving college, had caused him to identify himself completely with his pseudonym.

Eddie Thompson, on graduation, had been a beardless youth with a pleasant, ordinary face, and a completely self-effacing manner. But in his writing, he was F. Thatcher Van Archer, man of the world, cosmopolite, raconteur. An adventurer, a swashbuckler, a sophisticated, distinguished-looking fellow. At least, that was the impression his stories would convey. And strangely enough, as his success grew, Eddie Thompson gradually adopted the outward characteristics of his literary masquerade.

Eddie Thompson grew a short Vandyke beard. He brushed his hair back from the temples, and eagerly awaited the time those temples would turn aristocratically gray. Eddie Thompson bought the kind of clothes F. Thatcher Van Archer might conceivably wear—English tweed, drape models. He used a cigarette holder and smoked a vile pipe.

When he began making money he moved into the type of “dig-gings” the worldly Van Archer would naturally live in. By this time he was so wealthy he could carry a cane on the street and get away with it.

And Eddie Thompson learned to talk like F. Thatcher Van Archer, too. After all, he had written like him for ten years. He knew what Van Archer would say and do. He wouldn't act like a timid local boy.

Thompson had got away with it, too. His wife, Maizie, had fallen in love with the worldly, bearded author. She probably didn't know that a real Eddie Thompson existed. F. Thatcher Van Archer did all the love-making, and if he plagiarized himself from Eddie Thompson's stories, nobody knew the difference.

F. Thatcher Van Archer was helpful to Eddie Thompson's social life. He made friends a lot easier than the shy ex-college student. Certainly, when he stormed into a publisher's office with his beard bristling, he got better results than a dub author ever could hope for.

Yes, F. Thatcher Van Archer was a great success, and by this time Eddie Thompson had almost forgotten himself, or so he thought. But once in a great while Eddie came back. When F. Thatcher Van Archer sat down at the typewriter and got stuck in the middle of a story, Eddie Thompson came back—to help.

He had come back tonight. Eddie was very much himself as he sat wondering how the devil he ought to finish this confounded mystery. It was scheduled for magazine publication in two months,

and he had already pocketed an advance. It was a mess, and Author Van Archer wasn't up to any solution.

So Eddie Thompson had gradually taken shape again, and sweated over the plot difficulties. Eddie Thompson had taken off the necktie that F. Thatcher Van Archer wore, and loosened F. Thatcher Van Archer's belt, and even removed F. Thatcher Van Archer's elegantly polished shoes. In no time at all, Eddie Thompson, by sweating in a most undignified fashion, had worked things out in his crude, blundering way.

And now it was time for F. Thatcher Van Archer to come back, to take over the notes Eddie Thompson had scribbled down, and type them up into the story, using his own familiar, inimitable style. It was time for F. Thatcher Van Archer to snap into existence once more.

But he didn't.

Eddie Thompson just sat there, feeling like Eddie Thompson. A rather foolish feeling, too.

"What the devil is the matter with me?" he muttered. "Heebie-jeebies, I suppose."

His hand went out to the whiskey decanter, then halted. When F. Thatcher Van Archer was nervous, he drank. But Eddie Thompson didn't drink. He ruffled his hair.

Eddie Thompson ruffled his hair. "Maybe it's overwork," he said. "Maybe I need a rest, a vacation." He started down the dim expanse of his beautifully appointed study and shook his head. "Yes, that's it. Maybe I need a vacation."

"Why don't you take one, Eddie?" said a voice.

Eddie Thompson whirled around in his chair as though a bomb had just exploded behind his back. And then he realized he hadn't heard a bomb explode. He had just heard the ticking. Right now he was staring at the bomb explosion.

The bomb explosion was an image of himself, but the image was not the reflection from any mirror.

It was himself that sat there in the chair across the room; himself complete with beard, cigarette holder, purple dressing gown, and gleaming expensive shoes.

"I've got 'em!" muttered Eddie Thompson hoarsely. "The heebie-jeebies!"

"Must you speak so crudely?" said the apparition, with a slight frown of distaste. "Your choice of words astounds me."

Eddie Thompson was not a little astounded himself. He stared at the hallucination and, still staring, reached for the whiskey decanter. He didn't bother with a glass.

The apparition stared back. Eddie Thompson took a deep drink that made him blink, but when he opened his eyes the vision had not disappeared.

"Heebee-jeebies," mumbled the stricken man again.

"You haven't got the 'heebee-jeebies', as you so inelegantly put it," said the voice. "I'm quite real, you know."

"I *don't* know," said Eddie Thompson.

"How about offering me a drink?" continued the manifestation in the purple dressing gown.

"Sure—help yourself," said the author. "I—I'd pour for you, but my hands are shaking." And they were, violently.

The vision poured a drink. Eddie Thompson watched carefully. He saw the whiskey trickle into the glass, saw the glass raised to the lips of the apparition, saw the whiskey disappear with an ever so genteel gulp which moved the Adam's apple. Then he stared at the whiskey decanter and saw that its contents were indeed diminished.

"I am real," repeated the hallucination.

Eddie Thompson's teeth did a tap dance. He had seen the whiskey go down. Now he got up. This—this thing was smoking a cigarette in a holder, the exact duplicate of Eddie Thompson's holder. Cigarettes are real, and cigarette smoke is a palpable thing. Eddie Thompson got up and stuck one trembling finger through a smoke ring. The ring broke. So did Eddie Thompson's nerve.

"Who are you?" he gasped.

The apparition arched its eyebrows.

"So?" came the voice. "We get on. Your question admits that you believe in my reality, that I am actually somebody, and not a figment of your imagination."

Thompson nodded. "Yes," he quavered. "But *who* are you?"

"I?" said the man in the purple dressing gown. "Why, I am F. Thatcher Van Archer."

Eddie Thompson's natural pride rose to the surface. He bridled.

"Like hell you are!" he grated. "I am F. Thatcher Van Archer." The apparition smiled.

"You mean you *were* F. Thatcher Van Archer," the voice corrected. "But I am he now. You are just Eddie Thompson."

"But—but—"

"Look at yourself and see," suggested the bland voice.

Eddie Thompson rose and lurched to the mirror. There the second bomb went off.

Eddie Thompson, the man with the beard in the purple dressing gown, was no more. Instead he stared at a picture from ten years

back—a picture of Eddie Thompson, the clean-shaven college graduate. The features, unadorned by chin foliage, were much the same, but they wore a fresher, more youthful look.

“It can’t be—”

Eddie Thompson was staring at his clothes. The Kampus Kut clothes of a college boy, *circa* 1930.

“My clothes—where are my clothes?” he muttered.

“I’m wearing them,” said the voice. “Why shouldn’t I? They’re F. Thatcher Van Archer’s clothes!”

“Mad as I am, I couldn’t have traded clothes with you without knowing it,” said Eddie Thompson. “And I couldn’t have shaved off my beard.”

“Now you’re being sensible,” said the figure in purple.

Eddie Thompson turned and subjected the speaker to an intense scrutiny.

“Yes, yes—you are me,” he sighed.

“I am F. Thatcher Van Archer,” corrected the other. “What’s up?”

For Eddie Thompson, ruffling his hair into a dust-mop thatch, was spluttering incoherently.

“I untied that tie,” he gibbered, “and I unlaced those shoes five minutes ago. And now they’re tied and laced again.”

“Of course,” said F. Thatcher Van Archer. “You untied them. But Author Van Archer doesn’t do things in that sloppy fashion. So consequently, they are rearranged.”

“There is no F. Thatcher Van Archer,” Thompson insisted, despairingly. “You’re me, and I’m talking to myself.”

“I was you five minutes ago,” said the stranger. “But I’m not you any longer, my friend. In those five minutes I’ve been created, just as out there”—and he gestured grandly toward the stars beyond the window—“new worlds have been created in the last five minutes and old worlds have died a flaming death.”

Again Thompson blinked. He recognized in these words his own grandiloquently literary style. Van Archer’s style, rather.

“But how?” he said weakly.

“How? Who knows? How were those stars created in that time? What is the secret of your own creation? Who understands the life force, the creative urge?”

“But I can’t be two people,” objected Eddie Thompson.

“My dear boy, of course you can’t. That’s just why I’m here. You have been trying to be two people for ten years, and it doesn’t work. Sooner or later we had to separate. It happened five minutes

ago. Now you're what you always were—Eddie Thompson. I am what you created—F. Thatcher Van Archer."

The bearded man smiled.

"Oh, it sounds strange, I admit, but don't take it so hard. After all, you have created me, you know. I suppose you might say I'm a product of your psychic forces. For ten years you've tried in every way to make yourself into a different man. You've lived, breathed, thought in terms of that man. F. Thatcher Van Archer has been on your mind night and day. You even changed your appearance to look like him, changed your habits and personality in accordance with what his tastes would be. To the world you were that person, and not yourself.

"Who wrote all your stories? F. Thatcher Van Archer. Who made your money? Van Archer. Who made your friends? Van Archer. Whom did your wife marry? Author Van Archer. Who worked fourteen hours a day, intensely; who did all your actual living, you might say, for ten years? F. Thatcher Van Archer! Is it a wonder, then, that there is such a person? The real miracle is that there still exists an Eddie Thompson."

"Oh, now *I'm* not real? snapped the baffled man. "Not content with stealing my body and my soul, you've even got to deny me the right of my own existence!"

"No," Van Archer said slowly. "No one can be denied that right. I suppose that's why this happened. You were denying yourself, by pretending to be me. We had to become separate identities, before your true self was lost. Another drink?"

Eddie Thompson poured his drink, and took one himself. F. Thatcher Van Archer drank slowly, with an appreciative smile.

"The creative impulse is a strange thing," he mused. "Who can say exactly what goes on in the mind when it creates? What forces are really invoked when a man makes a picture out of canvas and oils, when he plays music, or writes a novel?"

"That's merely assembling things," Eddie Thompson was forced to say. "You don't really create anything except a picture in the minds of those who are affected by your work."

"What is reality?" snapped Van Archer. "You, yourself, are just a picture, an image in the minds of your friends, your public. You are no more real than a character they read in a book. And in ten years you've made F. Thatcher Van Archer more real than yourself. He is stronger than you are. Look."

He tossed the bankbook on the table. F. Thatcher Van Archer had a bank account in his name.

"Look."

He indicated the row of books by the distinguished author, F. Thatcher Van Archer. He tapped F. Thatcher Van Archer's monogrammed stationery on the table, the calling cards. He pulled out a handkerchief and delicately blew his nose, indicating the lacy initials of "F. T. Van A."

"Oh, I'm real, all right," he concluded.

"Yeah," said Eddie Thompson. "Yeah, I guess you are." He was seized by a sudden thought. "But look here, this whole thing must be stranger to you than it is to me. Why aren't you excited?"

Van Archer smiled. "Haven't you forgotten that I'm a man of the world?" he reminded. "I'm a sophisticate. Nothing startles me—thanks to you. No, it's you, my boy. You're the callow, unsophisticated one. The college boy. And that's my problem now."

"What problem?"

"Why, what to do with you, of course. Obviously, you can't go on living here, you know."

"What?"

"Well, look, Thompson. From now on, I'm you. I've got your beard, your clothes, your name. I'm the author, am I not? I'm the one your public reads, your publisher consults with, your wife knows, your friends are familiar with. And you're now an ordinary college lad. Why, nobody knows you! This is my house, don't you see? I bought it and paid for it, and I can't have you hanging around."

"*Thatcher!*"

"Good Lord, my wife!" said Eddie Thompson, and no revue blackout gag line was ever more enthusiastically delivered.

"*Your wife?*" said Van Archer. "*My wife!*"

He didn't have time to say more, because Maizie entered the room.

— Chapter II —

No Robbery

Maizie Van Archer was a blonde with brunette eyes and a redhead's temper. She was the kind of woman Eddie Thompson would have liked to marry, but couldn't. The kind of woman who was attracted by a sophisticate like F. Thatcher Van Archer. Eddie Thompson had always been Van Archer to her.

Secretly he was afraid of Maizie. But now, surely she would stand by him when he explained. Surely, after ten years of married life, she would recognize her own husband despite his disguise.

With an imploring look in his eyes, Eddie Thompson watched the pretty woman as she entered the room.

"Oh, Thatcher, I've been so worried about you," she cooed.

And walked straight into the arms of the man in the purple dressing gown!

"Did you work out your story?" she coaxed, snuggling up against the beard coyly.

"Well, not exactly," said F. Thatcher Van Archer. "You see, darling, I've had company."

"Oh!"

Maizie whirled around and stared at Eddie Thompson. Thompson braced himself. Surely she would recognize him. She must!

But there was no comprehension in her eyes. She regarded him quite coolly.

Was this Van Archer creature really going to do it? Was he actually in a position to throw Eddie Thompson out of his own home? That was the question.

Eddie Thompson smiled inwardly. Well, here it was. It would be rather awkward for this imposter to explain who he was, and how *he* came to be here.

Van Archer was speaking again.

"Yes, I've had company, dear," he repeated. "He sneaked around the back way to surprise me. Darling, I want you to meet my brother Steve, from California."

"Your brother?" Maizie's blue eyes opened.

"Of course. My kid brother. Don't you notice the family resemblance?"

Eddie Thompson winced. What a brain this fellow had! Thought of everything, even a possible resemblance. He himself could not have doped that out, might have concocted a weak story about a "friend." But Van Archer was clever. Of course he was. Hadn't Eddie Thompson made him that way?

"So you're Thatcher's baby brother, are you?" Maizie advanced upon him with a charming smile. "Came up to surprise him, did you? Of course you'll be in town for awhile?"

"As a matter of fact, Thatcher has invited me to stay here," said Eddie Thompson. "Of course, if its convenient."

He flashed a covert grin of triumph in the direction of Van

Archer, who scowled and turned away. Good! He had played that one right, anyway.

"Certainly we can put you up," Maizie said promptly. "We have lots of guest rooms, haven't we, dear? Where is your luggage?"

"Haven't got any luggage," said Eddie Thompson, desperately. "You see—I'm bumming my way around the country." It was lame, but necessary.

"Oh, like Jim Tully! You write too, I suppose? Thatcher has such interesting friends, I think—and I just knew his family would be that way too!"

Maizie seemed delighted, although Van Archer scowled.

"I'll wear Thatcher's clothes," said Eddie Thompson. "They always used to fit me. Eh, Thatcher?"

"Unless I've outgrown you," said the author, acidly. "I might have, you know." There was pointed irony in his tones.

"We'll see," said Thompson.

"Well, you must be tired," prattled Maizie. "I'll put you up right away. You're tired too, Thatcher. We'd better turn in early. You have to see your publisher tomorrow, you know."

She led the men down the hall and into a guest bedroom, indicating the conveniences to "brother Steve," who hated that damned guest room, hated to use guest towels, and was more than a little worried about F. Thatcher Van Archer and his wife. If only he could get Maizie off alone somewhere, and explain! Surely he could make her understand.

But Van Archer was too clever for that. He flung a pair of pajamas at his "brother" and herded Maizie out of the room.

"Good night," called the woman, from the doorway. "Hope you sleep well."

"If there's anything I can do for you," said Van Archer, "just let me know."

"Drop dead!" said Eddie Thompson under his breath, but they had closed the door.

He could hear the two sets of footsteps receding down the hall, and he heard them all night, even through his troubled dreams. Eddie Thompson did not sleep well that night, but then, as he later remarked, he wasn't feeling quite himself at the time. . . .

Thompson was at the mirror the moment the sun entered his room. It had all been a nightmare, a lobster-and-ice-cream fantasy. Of course it had.

But as the image met his eyes, hope left them. For there was bare-faced Eddie Thompson, the young college graduate, goggling at himself with a look of stupefied resignation.

"It's true, then," he muttered, turning away from the baffling reflection, and ruffling his hair a la Harpo Marx.

As he bathed and dressed, his mind worked swiftly. Surely there was something he could do about this, strange as the situation was. He had to do something—had to get rid of Van Archer before Van Archer got rid of him. Because that was what it amounted to. The author had as much as told him he was going to stay, and that meant Eddie Thompson was going out on the street very shortly, unless he could manage things otherwise.

There must be a way to expose Van Archer for the fake he was. Thompson scowled. He had built up his outer personality so completely and so cleverly, with so few weaknesses—but he had to discover a weakness somewhere. Van Archer was clever and would lose no time. So it behooved Eddie Thompson to hasten in out-smarting him.

It was with this resolve that he went down to breakfast, entering the dining room to find a smiling Maizie already seated at the table, doing things to toast. She looked up and greeted him, and Thompson half bent down to kiss her before he remembered.

"Hello, Steve," she called.

"What—who—huh?" said Thompson, baffled. "Oh, sure. Hello, hon—I mean, hello, Maizie."

Maizie's blue eyes clouded in sudden concern.

"Aren't you feeling well?" she asked solicitously. "You're not having one of your spells, are you?"

"My what?" muttered the perplexed man.

Maizie colored. "I'm sorry," she said. "But Thatcher told me last night. You needn't worry about my knowing."

"Knowing?" Thompson dropped his spoon.

"Why, yes. He explained everything. About how you were—were dropped on the head by that awful nurse when you were a boy, and how ever since you get those—"

Maizie paused to pat the man on the back, for he was strangling over his egg.

"He told you I was dropped—*hack-hack*—on my head, did he?" sputtered Thompson. "He did—*hoop-hoop*—eh?"

"Of course," prattled the woman. "It's all in the family, isn't it?" Maizie was not the tactful type. "He said that's why you wander around the country so much by yourself when these spells come on, and sometimes you sign those checks."

"I sign checks, do I?" parroted Eddie Thompson, grimly.

"Oh, I'm not blaming you for it," consoled Maizie. "I'm sure that if I was dropped on my head I might get to thinking I was

Admiral Byrd sometimes, myself. Or Major Bowes, or Tyrone Power. You know"—she favored him with a dazzling smile—"you do look something like Tyrone Power at that. I wonder how Thatcher would look with his beard shaved off."

Eddie Thompson tore a piece of toast into forty-six irregular pieces.

"Though how you ever got the notion you were Father Divine I just can't imagine," continued the artless Maizie. "Perhaps your face was grimy at the time. You must tell me all about it when we have more leisure."

"I'm sure my dear—ah—brother will be more than glad to slip you the details," said Thompson, savagely. "Just what else did he speak of?"

"Oh, nothing, really. He was just explaining these things to me in case you did happen to have one of your spells. He said nothing was impossible—that you might even start thinking you were *him*, for example."

"I might start thinking I was him" muttered the man. "I see."

"Of course you needn't worry, now that it's all explained. I wouldn't take you seriously, of course."

"I'm sure you wouldn't," said Eddie Thompson, spilling his coffee.

"My, you're nervous today," Maizie observed. "You aren't having much breakfast."

"I'm having it, all right," sighed "brother Steve." "Having it all over my lap."

Maizie laughed, and favored him with a ravishing glance, under which Thompson colored and turned away.

So that was it! Thatcher hadn't wasted time. Knowing Thompson might try to convince his wife of the facts, he had concocted the insanity angle quickly and adroitly. Very neat. Damn it, why had he made F. Thatcher Van Archer so clever?

"Now I know how Frankenstein must have felt," he whispered.

"Ooh!" squealed Maizie. "You say you feel like Frankenstein? How thrilling!"

Thompson looked on his wife with something akin to awe. What a woman! Why did she have to be so credulous, so *interested* in everything? Still, that was one of the reasons he had married her. Or rather, one of the reasons F. Thatcher Van Archer had married her.

"Where is my dear brother today?" asked Thompson.

"Oh, he's in his study, I suppose, getting things ready to go in to town. He has to see his publisher today, you know."

"Yes, the new novel contract," said Thompson, absent-mindedly.

"What?" Maizie's eyes opened wide. "But that's a secret! How did you know that?"

Thompson decided to play a long chance. He stared at his wife intently. His lips curled in a knowing smile—the kind of thing F. Thatcher Van Archer would have found beneath his dignity, but which plain Eddie Thompson could do with a certain reckless abandon.

"Because I'm crazy," said Thompson, grinning. "You see, when I was dropped on my head, I became psychic."

"You mean you can read people's minds?"

"Yes, exactly." Thompson allowed himself a burning gaze. "For example, by looking at you I can tell that you like to wear pink lingerie, only that booby brother of mine thinks it's too commonplace, and makes you buy black. I know that you like Benny Goodman, but my brother insists that you listen to Prokofieff and Stravinsky. I know that you have wanted to go out to the beach and ride the roller coaster for the past three years, but my brother makes you stay in town and ride penthouse elevators to stupid parties."

Thompson smiled.

"It's true, isn't it?"

Maizie stared, entranced.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, it's true—but you really shouldn't talk about Thatcher that way. He—he's a genius."

"He's a horse's neck," said Eddie Thompson, pressing his advantage. "And you know it."

A look of sudden pain creased the woman's face.

"I don't know," she said, suddenly serious. "I don't know. When I married Thatcher he was a little different. Younger, somehow—more like you. Of course he never showed it, with that beard and dignity and all, but I was hoping—I thought—once we were married, he'd relax, and be human. He is human underneath all that front, I know he is! Only it never came out, that's all. He just got stuffer and stuffer, and he wears that silly cane and prances up and down in a purple dressing gown, and all the while I wish from the bottom of my heart he'd shave off that stupid beard and just be himself.

Maizie leaned forward toward Eddie Thompson.

"I know I'm just a plain, dumb female," she said. "I don't understand geniuses or authors or writers or anything like that. But what I want is a husband, not a—what you might call a screwball!"

— Chapter III —

A Common Need

Eddie Thompson sat aghast. The way this woman talked about him was dreadful. But in another sense, it was just what he wanted. He had never dreamed that Maizie felt that way, but if she did—

“Maizie,” he purred sweetly. “Maizie, it’s not too late. You’re young, beautiful. You have many years of happiness yet. I’d like to share them with you, Maizie. I think we could have fun together.”

And casting dignity to the winds, Eddie Thompson crawled up on the dining room table and lay there, putting his arms around the startled woman’s neck, and kissing her most violently, without impediment of beard. He hadn’t kissed a woman without his beard for ten years, and Maizie had not been kissed by a beardless man in that time. Both of them found it a definitely pleasant experience.

But F. Thatcher Van Archer did not.

“What goes on here?” snapped the eminent author, entering the room.

Eddie Thompson got off the table so quickly he broke three dishes. He stood up with some dignity and wiped a piece of toast from the seat of his pants.

“Maizie got something in her eye,” he hurriedly explained. “I was just trying to work it out for her.”

“Through her mouth, I should suppose,” observed Van Archer. “Maizie, will you please wipe that butter off your elbow and get my briefcase? I’ll be late.”

“Yes, dear.”

Maizie stepped contritely to the floor and, casting Thompson a covert but ardent look, vanished from the room.

Eddie Thompson faced his Nemesis with conflicting emotions. He felt triumphant, yet defeated. He hadn’t enjoyed kissing his wife so much in ten years, but he didn’t like the idea of her willingness to deceive him behind his back, even though she was deceiving him with himself. It was a peculiar feeling, but as he observed Van Archer’s ill-concealed wrath, he felt amply repaid.

“I’m one up on you,” he said.

“So I see.”

The cigarette in the author’s hand trembled briefly, and for a moment he seemed hard put to control his emotions. Then a look of apprehension came over the bearded face.

“But say now, Eddie, there’s something I wanted to ask you.”

"Yes?"

"About this contract I'm signing this morning. I rather need your advice, you know."

"Need *my* advice?" said Thompson, with elaborate astonishment. "But you'd hardly want the opinion of your little kid brother Stevie, now, would you?"

"Quit clowning," said Van Archer. "You know I'm not good at this sort of thing—business, and all. I need your mind, just as you need my appearance, my sophistication. We have to stick together on these matters."

"Do we?"

"You'll come along in case I need help, won't you?" pleaded Van Archer.

"Well, I don't know about that. After all, I'm mildly insane, and if I suddenly got the idea I was Shakespeare, or something, you might have a bad time of it. Why I might even say I was F. Thatcher Van Archer and insist on signing the contract myself. Of course you couldn't blame me. I was dropped on the head when I was a baby."

"Oh, I can explain that," said Van Archer, hastily.

"Never mind," said Eddie Thompson. "I'll go with you. After all, I'm as much interested in the contract as you are."

"Thanks."

Together the two men left the room. Van Archer received the briefcase and a brief kiss from Maizie. Eddie Thompson winked at her behind the author's back. It hurt him to act against himself that way, but her answering smile sent a flood of inexplicable warmth through him. Damn it, this wasn't fair—making him fall in love with his own wife!

Thompson thought about that on the way to town in the car. Van Archer babbled complacently beside him on the seat.

"You know, Thompson, I've changed my mind about you. Let's be friends and work together. After all, that's practically what we did when I was you, you know."

He lowered his voice as the chauffeur blinked.

"We've got to get a contract for the novel out of old Grovel today. Grovel's a pretty tough customer, and it's up to both of us to handle him properly. Now you've always relied on yourself—on me, rather, that is—to put up the kind of sophisticated front that impresses him. I'll work that all right—the cane, the beard stroking, the erudite conversation. Don't worry, I'll do my part, just as I always have.

"But when he starts talking figures and royalties, that's where

you come in. Remember? You—I—we used to sit back and think, then. Eddie Thompson has the brain for those matters, and Van Archer relies on that. We need each other. Let's stick together."

Thompson nodded. But there was a secret smile on his face. He had a hunch. Perhaps there was a way out of this after all. Perhaps. . . .

Petronius Grovel was a solid man. He had a solid body, a solid face, a solid opinion of himself, and plenty of good solid cash in the bank. Also, he was a bit solid behind the ears, but this didn't bother Petronius Grovel very much. He was a publisher, and it was his business to buy brains, not use them. He handled brains, publicized brains, exploited brains. To him brains were much the same as kidneys to a butcher. You sold them to other people and never stopped to think about your own.

Petronius Grovel's office, therefore, was something like a stockyard. A place where brains were herded in, roped and hog-tied by the adroit Mr. Grovel, and then sent forth branded by the seal of his publishing house. A place where brains were bought at so much the square inch of cortex; where gray matter was spattered on paper at so much an ounce.

Today head butcher Grovel stood ready, axe in hand. F. Thatcher Van Archer was a pretty big steer in any publisher's corral, a prize bull who would yield many fat beefsteaks of profit. Petronius Grovel was ready to slice one off the rump once he could tie Van Archer down with a contract.

He therefore opened the door to the luxurious abattoir of his private office, and his teeth gleamed in a dazzling yellow smile as the author entered, followed by a younger man.

"Good morning, my dear sir," said F. Thatcher Van Archer, with a courtly inclination of his distinguished head. "How fares the Pharaoh of all scribes?"

"Pretty fair," answered Grovel, blinking rapidly.

"My brother Stephen," said the author, with a nod toward Eddie Thompson. "Dauphin to the literary throne."

"Yeah—yeah, pleased to meet you." Grovel seemed ill at ease. "Won't you come in."

"Certainly, certainly. Ah, wait here if you will, Stephen?"

He disappeared into the inner sanctum with Publisher Grovel, and Eddie Thompson sat down on a bench in the outer office.

For the first time, he began to think determinedly. He was on the spot. He'd had a hunch when he had come down in the car, an inkling that there was a way out of this baffling mess, but now it

refused to come to him. His pseudo-personality was in there, signing a contract in his name. His pseudo-personality would then go home to his wife, live in his house, and that seemed to be that. Eddie Thompson cursed the fate which had prompted him to obliterate his true self so completely. There was no one in the wide world to whom he could turn. His own wife accepted this *poseur* as his real self; his publisher, of course, was too stupid to detect any change. What a situation!

Thompson's musings were interrupted as a figure entered the outer office. It was Arthur Keel, Thompson's best friend. Keel, like Van Archer, was a prominent writer, and as such they had much in common. They met frequently—at least twice a week—and Thompson entertained a keen affection for the man.

"Hey, Art!" said Eddie Thompson.

The bespectacled author turned around with a start. As he did so, Thompson realized just who and what he was, and quickly buried his face.

"Somebody call me?" asked Keel of the office stenographer.

"I didn't hear anything," answered the girl.

"Oh, sorry. Must have been my imagination. Say, how's chances of seeing Mr. Grovel?"

"Not right now, Mr. Keel. He's in conference wit the Mad Genius."

Eddie Thompson perked up his ears.

"Not old Van Archer, the beard king?"

The girl laughed. "Oh, Mr. Keel!"

"I suppose he's signing the elder Smith Brother to another contract. Well, I'll wait. One mustn't intrude upon the presence of genius."

Keel sat down next to Thompson.

"I thought Mr. Van Archer was your friend?" said the girl.

"He is, he is," Keel said, hastily. "I like Thatcher a lot. He's a good fellow when you get to know him. But that's just the trouble—it's hard getting to know him. He hides under that spinach and behind his ridiculous clothes, and whenever you get near him you think he's liable to snick at you with his cane. I wish he'd cut out those affectations, for his own good."

"You know, confidentially, I think you're right," confessed the girl. "Mr. Van Archer frightens people. He's always so serious, and he talks so highbrow. I see a lot of authors come in here, and there's some pretty quaint sketches, begging your pardon, but Mr. Van Archer takes the prize."

Eddie Thompson's ears burned. Then they pricked. For the inner door had opened and Van Archer's beard waggled through the crack.

"Oh, Steve, won't you come in here a minute," he called. "I'd like you to speak to Mr. Grovel." He caught sight of Arthur Keel. "Oh, greetings, fellow philologist! A word with you, Sir Oracle." He popped out to meet his friend, and as he passed Thompson he whispered, "For heaven's sake, talk to Grovel. He's got me worried."

Eddie Thompson entered the inner office and closed the door, then turned to face Petronius Grovel. The publisher crouched behind his desk, sweating foolishly.

"Sit down, young man," he boomed. "Van Archer tells me you've just become his business manager."

"Oh—yes," Thompson answered. "I have."

"Well, he certainly needs one," Grovel rejoined. "He certainly needs one. Needs an interpreter, too, if you'll pardon my frankness."

"Go right ahead."

"Now I'm a fair man, my boy. I've been doing business with Van Archer for years, and let me tell you it's been no picnic. He's a good writer, and a smart one, but there's just no talking to him. I can't seem to understand his line, that's all. Comes in here and pulls at his beard, and spouts out a lot of high-faluting phrases until I get all confused."

Again Eddie Thompson blinked. Then his resolve strengthened.

"Of course you don't understand Van Archer, you ignorant baboon!" he said. "In order for that to come about he'd have to come in here and talk baby talk."

"What—what's that?" spluttered Petronius Grovel.

"You heard me, Pete!" declared Thompson. "Why should you understand Van Archer? You don't know anything about the man. You've never even read his books."

"I have, certainly I have," insisted the publisher, indignantly.

"You lie through your teeth, which are false!" thundered Eddie Thompson. "You read nothing but the reports on his book sales. The sales are good, so Van Archer is good. That's your duck-brain idea. Why don't you read what the man writes and find out something about him? He's a genius! No wonder you can't understand what he's talking about. Do you expect him to waste his valuable mind in conversation with a money-grabbing, skin-flinted moron like you who can't read a comic paper without moving his lips?"

Petronius Grovel had a face which would have pleased the composer of "Deep Purple." He made wild sounds in his neck.

"But never mind that, Grovel. I don't care what you think of Van Archer, and I don't care what you think of me, either. All I care about is what you think of the way he sells his books, and I know that pleases you. So will you sign that contract, or won't you? That's all. Will you sign, or won't you? There's plain, understandable talk for you. That's what you want, isn't it?"

Publisher Grovel stood up and took a deep breath. For a moment he looked as though he were about to huff and to puff and blow the house in. Then his pudgy face relaxed into a broad grin. He held out his pudgy hand.

"You know, Steve," he said, "I like you. You have guts. Yes, sir, I wish that old Van Archer would climb down off his high horse and talk to me like that, man to man. I guess you're right—I am pretty thick, and I got no business dealing with geniuses. But I can recognize guts when I see them, and by George you've got 'em! Sure, I'll sign that contract. Call him in!"

Eddie Thompson stepped to the door and in response to his wink, F. Thatcher Van Archer stalked into the room, tapping his cane along the floor.

"Sign here," said Petronius Grovel, genially. "I've changed my mind. You know, I never did quite understand you, Thatcher, and I don't mind admitting it. But your brother, here, put me wise. If you're anything like him underneath all your—your—your genius—then I'm a fool. By the way, I'd like to read the manuscript of this new book of yours before we go to press on the first edition. The readers tell me it's pretty good; and I think I'll take a whack at it."

F. Thatcher Van Archer allowed his eyebrows to meet in a delicate arch. Eddie Thompson nudged him as he signed, and then led him from the room.

— Chapter IV —

Dissolve into Clinch

Outside, in the car, Van Archer was voluble.

"I don't know how you did it," he confessed. "I talked and talked until I was blue in the face, but the old ogre just stared at me and mumbled that he wasn't sure about the contract."

"I'll handle my affairs and you handle yours," said Eddie

Thompson, wisely. "Right now I'm anxious to get home to our wife."

Van Archer smiled.

"Our wife is a charming girl, isn't she?" he remarked.

"She certainly is," Thompson answered.

"You know"—Van Archer coughed delicately—"I've been meaning to speak to you about that. Now that the contract is signed and settled, I was thinking that perhaps it might be well if you were to—go away."

"Go away?" muttered Eddie Thompson.

"Why, yes. You see, I don't really need you any more, and it might be rather embarrassing, both of us in the same house with Maizie, and all that."

The car rounded the drive of the Van Archer home, but it wasn't the curve that jerked Eddie Thompson bolt upright.

"Listen, you blackhearted scoundrel, you can't take my wife away from me!" he shouted.

"Your wife? Why, my dear boy, you have no wife. She's my wife."

Van Archer was equable, but there was an evil glitter in his eyes as they stepped from the car.

"And come to think of it, what I said last night was true, you know. This is my house, and my home, not yours. They're my friends, and my readers, not yours. And that contract you just assisted in getting is my contact—I signed it. Certainly, I do all the writing. So, I think, really, that the decent thing for you to do is to clear out. I—I don't like spongers."

"You're going to kick me out of my own house?" Thompson demanded.

There was a sudden sinking feeling in his heart. He knew it would come to this sooner or later; of course, it had to. He might have suspected Van Archer's overtures of friendship. Van Archer had needed him to get that contract. Now everything was settled, and Van Archer could throw him into the street. He dragged his feet leadenly after the strutting author as they entered the house and mounted the stairs to the bedroom.

"But listen, pal—" he quavered. "What'll I do, where will I go?"

"That's of no concern to me," snapped Van Archer. He sensed his advantage, and pressed it. "You're my younger brother Stevie, and you just wander off, understand?"

Van Archer changed into his familiar purple dressing gown, lit a cigarette and slid it into the elaborate holder.

"But suppose I won't go," whispered Thompson, desperately.

"Then they'll take you," the bearded man replied.

"Take me?"

"Of course. To the asylum. You're a little crazy, you know. You've even admitted it yourself, to Maizie."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"I'd dare anything. And after all, it's no risk. You did this thing yourself, you know. You created F. Thatcher Van Archer, and now he's real. He owns your house, and your body, and your writing, your career, your wife."

"Not Maizie!" yelled Thompson. "I don't care about the writing, and the money. It can go to hell, do you hear me? It can go to hell, you can have it. In a way this has been a good experience for me. It's taught me how little all that silly elegance really means, how stupid I was to make a jackass out of myself in order to get it. Take the name and the career if you want. But I want Maizie!"

"So do I," said F. Thatcher Van Archer. "And I'm going to keep her."

Eddie Thompson lunged forward threateningly.

"You touch my wife again and I'll kill you."

"She's my wife, not yours."

"Well, she married me!"

"All right, but it's me she loves. I found that out today."

"It won't happen again, I assure you," said Van Archer. "I don't care if she married both of us or not."

"You can't accuse my wife of bigamy," snarled Thompson. "Don't you dare call Maizie a bigamist, you—you pseudo-nobody!"

"What's that?" gasped Van Archer.

"The hunch!" Thompson muttered to himself. "Yes, that was it! The hunch!"

"What hunch?"

"Listen, Van Archer." Eddie Thompson pushed the author back on the bed. "Listen, and listen well. You're pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Why not?" said the bearded man defiantly. "I know where I stand."

"You stand with one foot in the grave," said Thompson, savagely. "And you don't know a thing. You think you have money, career, friends, a loving wife, don't you? Well, you haven't. They're mine—all mine."

"What do you mean?"

"Your wife doesn't love you. She loves me. I found that out this

morning. She hates your silly beard and your stupid, outlandish clothes, and your posing all over the house. It's me she loves—the little of me I've ever shown her. I thought I was winning her with that senseless masquerade, but I was wrong. Maizie hates you and all you stand for.

"And your friends. You know what your friends think of you behind your back? They call you the 'Mad Genius'. Why the very office girls laugh at your absurd posing. Somewhere, deep down, buried under that chin foliage and those polysyllables, they can sense me, and that's why they manage to tolerate you. But at heart they despise all the melodramatic professional author hokus-pokus that you stand for."

"I—I—"

"Shut up and listen. You think you can get along without me, do you? Why, you wouldn't last ten minutes. You can't write without me. Whenever you get in a tough spot I have to help you out of the jam. And if it wasn't for my brain you couldn't even get a contract writing Silly Symphonies."

Eddie Thompson drew himself up to his full height.

"I've found out something," he declared. "You can't get along without me, F. Thatcher Van Archer, but I can get along without you! I was a fool not to know it—to deceive myself, and the world, all these years, trying to be something I'm not. I can be myself and get along very well. I know that now. Because you're the helpless one—you're the creation of my own brain, and by yourself there's no personality, no initiative, nothing. Just a big cardboard front, a fake. A lot of clothes, a beard, and windy talk. You haven't any guts! Throw me out? Why you poor stupid piece of make-believe, I'm going to throw *you* out!"

Was it fancy, or did Thompson see Van Archer turn pale? The bearded author seemed thinner, almost transparent.

"Why you're just a figment of my imagination," Eddie said. "When I forget about you, you cease to exist. You admit I created you—very well, I can destroy you, too. Tear you up as I would a bad manuscript!"

"Yes?" The voice was thin, but it held a terrible intensity. "Perhaps so. But you'll never have a chance. I'll kill you first!"

The pale figure on the bed moved swiftly. Thin hands locked around Eddie Thompson's neck, and the two went down in a tangle on the floor. Thompson clawed at the purple bathrobe, pulled at the beard. He was fighting for his life, for his sanity—for Maizie. The thought gave him courage.

An overwhelming hatred of this thing overcame him. He hated

the mincing body, the pointed beard, the exotic costume; hated it with a clean, healthy disgust. For the first time he saw clearly what an incubus this artificial creation had become—and he put all his thought behind the muscle that smashed at the thin jaw of the apparition before him.

"I'll tear you up like a bad manuscript," he grunted. "Take that, Mr. F. Thatcher Van Archer, and—*ugh*—that."

"Thatcher!"

The voice cut through his consciousness and stabbed him to his senses.

He looked up, panting. Maizie stood in the doorway, blue eyes filled with wonder.

"Thatcher, what are you doing, groveling on the floor like that?"

Thompson blinked. She was addressing not the author, but himself!

He looked down at the figure in the purple dressing gown.

There was no figure.

The purple dressing gown lay on the floor and it was quite empty. There was no man with a beard, nothing but the rumpled gown he still wrestled with.

"Thatcher, what's come over you?" Maizie stepped into the room. "What are you doing with your clothes?"

Eddie Thompson rose to his feet with a slow grin.

"Just throwing this damned thing away, honey," he said. "Want to get rid of some of these old clothes."

"And—Thatcher, you've shaved off your beard!"

Thompson wheeled toward the mirror. Yes, he was still beardless, still young-looking. He smiled as he remembered Maizie's remark of the morning, that he resembled Tyrone Power. Well, he was rather good-looking at that! He turned back toward the woman.

"Just a celebration," he said, and smiled. "I'm starting life over, darling. Because I've just signed a new contract."

"You got it?" Maizie exclaimed happily.

"Of course I did," said Eddie Thompson, drawing her close. "Now, how about a kiss?"

"Why—"

Eddie Thompson smothered her remark most efficiently. It was a long time before she spoke again.

"You remind me of Steve," she giggled, as last. "You know, Thatcher, you look like him. . . . Say, where is he?"

"Oh, he just wandered off again, in town," Eddie said, adding

reassuringly, "He'll be all right. I don't think he'll be back, but he'll be all right."

"He was nice," sighed Maizie. "But then, you're nice, too." She smiled. "I'm so glad you're getting rid of those awful clothes, darling. I've always wanted you to. And now I can buy you an electric razor, and everything."

"Sure. But come on. We're going out and celebrate tonight. Get on your beach pajamas."

"Beach pajamas?"

"Of course. We're going down and ride the roller coaster."

"Thatcher! You mean that?"

"Sure I do, honey."

"I like you this way," confided Maizie, happily. "I—I wish you were like this all the time."

"I will be," said Eddie Thompson, a faraway look in his eyes. "Yes, honey—from now on I'll always be myself!"

A Sorcerer Runs for Sheriff

(*Weird Tales* September 1941)

ALLAN WANDO WAS ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR MEN IN TOWN. He belonged to all the clubs, all the fraternal organizations, and all the civic movements. He attended more social gatherings than the rest of the Four Hundred put together. He knew everybody by their first name. He threw the most unusual parties in local society.

I hated his guts.

Perhaps that takes explaining. Maybe most men enjoy being slapped on the back in public places until their spines crack. Maybe most men like a glad-hander whose laugh splits their eardrums. I don't, that's all. And when Allan Wando got up in a banquet hall and trumpeted about "public service and helping one's fellow man," I could only remember that Mr. Wando paid the lowest wages in town to his factory workers, and was notorious for his political grafting in business.

Hence my dislike of Allan Wando's internal organs. I might as well go whole hog and admit that my hatred embraced Wando's external organs as well. He was too fat, and the smile that spread over his three chins was too oily.

When I saw that fat body and oily smile looming ahead of me in the corridors of an office-building, I wanted to dodge, but it was too late. Wando had seen me, and he was striding forward with one

hand outthrust as though it were a bayonet poised to plunge into my stomach. That meant he wanted to shake hands. So I offered my fingers, and got them back in much worse shape after about thirty seconds of mauling.

"Well, well, well—good to see you—come on in—"

I mumbled that I had an appointment, that I just happened to be in the office building on business, that I hadn't time—and before I was finished he had pushed me into his office.

Bewildering business. Wando evidently knew how I felt toward him, and reciprocated heartily. Why did he want a fly like myself in his spider's den?

But there I was, standing in his mahogany-panelled private room, with its big glass-topped desk, and the fluorescent lights gleaming upon the "*Service*" mottoes adorning the walls. And no sooner was the door closed behind me than Wando got to the point.

"I'm thinking of going into politics," he announced, portentously.

"Too bad for politics," was my thought, but I didn't say it.

"Yes, my friends about town have been urging me to do my duty as a citizen and run for public office."

It would be pretty hard for a guy like Wando to do both. I could see him running for office all right, but in order to do his duty as a citizen he'd have to drop dead. I didn't mention this thought, either, but waited for more revelations.

"So," smirked Allan Wando, "I've just about decided to announce my candidacy for sheriff in the coming election."

"Sheriff?" I echoed. "That's a surprise." It was, too. But at that, he might make a good one—if he could shoot off a gun as much as he could shoot off his mouth.

"I thought you'd like to know. Naturally, I expect my friends to support me in the race."

Probably he meant he'd be too drunk to stand alone.

"And when I saw you," concluded the would-be candidate, "I said to myself, there is just the man I need. How'd you like to write a few speeches for me? You're a writer, aren't you?"

"Well—" I began.

"You know, just knock together a few planks for my platform."

I'd much rather have knocked together a few planks for his gallows.

"Got to kid the public along, isn't it so? Just knock me out a few patriotic phrases, wave the flag a little, and I'll do the rest. I've

got my financial backing all set, and the boys will be around passing out the beer—the usual campaign. So what do you say?”

What I had to say I was polite enough to say under my breath. Still, I needed an excuse to change the subject.

“Give me a while to think it over,” I told him. My eyes roamed the room, seeking an opening to switch the conversation.

I found it.

On the table next to Allan Wando’s desk was the most incongruous series of objects encountered in a business man’s office.

Item number one, the cover of a horror story magazine. It showed the hands of a witch, sticking pins into a tiny wax doll.

Item number two, a newspaper clipping dealing with witchcraft.

Item number three—and here was the startling one—a dozen crude, tiny wax figures, standing in a row.

“Say,” I blurted, “who are you trying to hoodoo?”

“Hoodoo?”

“Yes. Who are you planning to kill with those witch dolls?” I asked.

Allan Wando turned on his triple chinned smile. “Come to my party tonight and find out. It’s going to be a very unusual affair, I promise you.”

I did, and—it was.

2

“What have we here?” Wando murmured in a solemn voice, holding up the magazine cover in a dim light.

The dozen guests seated around the big fireplace in his apartment craned forward to stare at the picture of the witch-hands stabbing pins into the wax mannikin. The shadows, Wando’s deliberately assumed air of mystery, and several stiff highballs had put them into the mood.

“I’ll tell you,” said the host who gave the unusual parties, with the triumphant air of a host who knows damn well he gives unusual parties. “This is a picture of a poppet.”

“Like Pinocchio?” asked Myrna Weber, giggling with all the girlishness of her forty years.

“No, not at all. This is not a puppet, but a *poppet*—a little doll made out of wax melted from church candles. In the old days the witches and wizards used to steal holy candles, melt them down, and fashion images of their enemies. Then, with appropriate

ceremonies, they would plunge needles into the wax bodies—and the real persons represented by the wax figures would sicken and die. That was witchcraft.”

“How interesting,” simpered Myrna Weber, running one hand nervously through her blondined locks.

“I’ve heard of the superstition.” It was Joe Adams who spoke. “Didn’t William Seabrook mention it in his latest book?”

“I’m glad you mentioned him,” Wando said. “Because we’re coming to that point right now. Yes, he did speak of poppets in his book, and there are hundreds of treatises on sorcery and demonology that echo it. Savages practice those rites today—and they are suppose to work. Psychiatrists tell us that the power of suggestion can kill—if a man knows he’s under a curse, he will sicken and die. But the wizards called it sympathetic magic, and it is known as Black Magic to us today.”

“What about Seabrook?” persisted Joe Adams.

“I’ve got a clipping here referring to him.” Wando held up the strip of paper I’d seen on his desk that afternoon.

“Here’s a newspaper story that appeared a few months ago. A couple of people who read Seabrook’s book on witchcraft wrote him letters asking whether it wouldn’t be possible to ‘wish’ a victim to death. He had written in his volume about the power of thought—how circles of sorcerers, chanting together and concentrating their hatred on an enemy, could actually kill him. And these people, getting in touch with Seabrook, were asking for a formula to wish an enemy to death. He gave it to them.”

“He did?” tittered Myrna Weber. “But if he was serious—if he believed it—he’d be helping to commit a murder!”

“True.” Allan Wando smiled mysteriously. “But he gave them a formula to chant and they got together in a party and all sat concentrating.”

“What happened?” asked Myrna.

“Nothing, yet. But it might—if they work it right.”

“Just who was this person Seabrook and these people were so anxious to wish to death?” asked Joe Adams.

Wando smiled again. “Hitler,” he said.

“Oh! Sounds screwy to me.”

“Here’s the newspaper clipping for proof.”

“Damned interesting,” I ventured. “But it didn’t work.”

“I’ve got a theory on that,” said Wando. “Seabrook invented a sort of chant for these people to use, but there was nothing genuine about it. Just a gag. Now I propose that *we* try our hands at the game tonight—but with an *authentic* sorcerer’s weapon.”

"What?"

"These."

Wando stepped aside. On the table behind him stood a dozen crude wax figures, roughly carved from candles. There was a pile of assorted cloth, some crepe hair, and a large box of pins and needles. We all got up and crowded around.

"Here are your poppets," said our host. "All made of genuine church candle wax. The game now is to take a figure, work the wax with your fingers until you get Hitler's face, put crepe hair on the doll, dress it according to your fancy, and then stick in the pins. Who knows, maybe it will work! At least it's better than Seabrook's idea, and we can all turn wizard for the evening."

So that's what Wando had up his sleeve! I could just see an account in tomorrow's paper—a nice facetious article, good publicity for a potential candidate!

But the others went for the idea in a big way. The women, led by Myrna Weber, cackled about how it was. "Just too cute! Imagine making dolls again!" And the men, even practical Joe Adams, took up the figures and grinned sheepishly as they turned talk to the progress of European affairs.

"Stop!" Wando held up his hand. "This is serious business, my friends. Let's preserve an air of dignity. We might be on the verge of a big thing here—we cannot tell. We are about to attempt to kill a man. That is a serious experiment. It may be one that has a scientific basis—at least, it is actual magic. And if we were performing this deed in medieval Europe three centuries ago, we would be burned at the stake!"

Half-seriously he rambled on, but his words took hold. So did the dim lights, and the grotesque spectacle of a dozen men and women holding tiny waxen dolls in their hands.

"Come, to work!"

Wando had the big table in his parlor laid bare. We gathered about it in chairs, each with his cloth, his crepe hair, his pins. A picture magazine had been opened to a portrait of Hitler, and it lay face upwards to serve as a model.

We took our seats in a silence that was almost ominous. As I held my wax doll in my fingers, I was half convinced that we *were* embarking on a murder plan in grim earnest. Hands began to mould and soften the wax. Fingers began to knead features. Faces frowned in concentration, and the dim light masked the room where a spell was being born.

Myrna Weber, hands continually running through her hair, was affected even more strongly than myself. She sat at my right, next

to Wando, and she was almost trembling as she whispered to me.

"You're a writer, Bob. You know about these things. Do you really believe—?"

"Who can tell?" I answered. "For hundreds of years, millions of human beings *did* believe. Behind what we call witchcraft lies a very strange and deadly primitive lore; a secret knowledge that extends back to the primal eons. God shaped Adam out of clay and breathed the breath of life into him. And ever since, men have shaped clay of their own in an effort to take away that life from enemies. The poppets are known to all ages and all places; the secret wizardry is as old as mankind. And when men believe, and have always believed, in facts which are not disprovable by any known science, perhaps those facts are true."

"What you're telling me is that sticking pins in these dolls can kill, isn't it?" Myrna whispered.

"I'm telling you I don't know," I said. And returned to my modelling.

Within a few moments virtually all of us had dolls. We began to dress them, cutting the thin strips of cloth with shears; pasting crepe forelocks and mustaches on with glue.

There was a good deal of laughter over some of the results; many of the wax figures bore no resemblance to Hitler or anything human, for that matter.

But the laughter was forced. Get a man to do something, and after awhile he'll take the task seriously. When Wando called for silence again, the laughter ceased immediately. Faces resumed their grim contours. The shadows flickered across the wall—shadows of hands holding tiny dolls.

How often had those same shadows flickered in witches' cots, and wizard's den? How often had dolls of death danced in black mockery across the walls of secret and forbidden places?

I was not alone in the thought. Myrna Weber's lips trembled. Even Joe Adams was scowling as he stared down at the wax visage of the dictator doll.

And Wando spoke.

"Now for the most important step of all," he announced. "I am going to pass around the needles. Be careful—they're very sharp. Sharp enough to reach the heart—if Hitler has a heart." He smiled. "I think it would be most—effective—if we all stabbed our dolls at once; and in the same place. I would suggest the head of our—victim."

Silence. Nobody dropped a pin, and nobody would have been

able to hear it, for all of us were caught up in a mood of earnest concentration.

"Select your weapons."

The needles were passed. Sharp and shining, tiny daggers for the death of a doll.

"Let us all concentrate for a moment upon our enemy." Wando's voice was low. "Let us muster our hate, our desire. And then, when my hand flashes down, let yours flash too—and plunge the weapon into the brain of the tyrant."

Poetry—and from Wando! But it was all natural, in the midst of enchantment.

Twelve wizards in a circle. Twelve dolls dressed for doom. Twelve sharp points to tear and slash.

Myrna Weber shuddered. I did, too.

And we stared at our dolls in the silence, stared and hated, and the shadows were filled with the hate, the room was filled with it. It spilled out of our souls, it ran down our arms, into the fingers holding the needles, into the needle points—

"Now!"

Allan Wando's needle flashed down.

There was a swish of air as twelve daggers sought twelve wax foreheads—pierced, slashed, tore.

Was it fancy, or did my very soul descend to tear the tiny features of the mannikin?

Was it fancy, or did the room throb with a single gigantic impulse that was our mass hate?

Was it fancy, or did I hear a gasp?

No—that wasn't fancy.

As the blades bit home, the gasp came from my side. Myrna Weber's body pitched forward onto the table.

"Hold it!"

I rose to my feet, bent over her. Wando, seeing me, switched on extra lights.

The mood vanished in a babble of excitement. I lifted Myrna's blonde head up. The eyes were staring, but—sightless.

"She's fainted," I said. "Too much excitement, weak heart."

Joe Adams was at my side. He reached for her wrist, held it. Then he turned. He didn't look at me, he didn't look at Wando. He talked to the wall.

"She's dead," he announced.

"Dead?"

"Cerebral hemorrhage." He indicated the bright red drop on the

table, fallen like a bloody tear from her eye.

"But that wouldn't be from cerebral—" I began, and stopped. It had to be. Excitement, too much of it. Joe Adams was Myrna Weber's doctor. He'd know. And it had to be that way.

"Get out of here, all of you," Adams said. "I'll certify it."

Of course he said a lot more, too, and so did everybody. There was enough silly gabbling and speculation and gaspings of horror to fill a small sized book, but Joe Adams herded them all out as quickly as possible.

He and Wando and I were left alone. We looked at one another. It was better than looking at Myrna.

Wando's face was white with fear.

"I knew what he was thinking. The black thought filled my own brain.

"Do you think we—what we were doing—had anything to do with it?" he managed, at last.

I answered for him. "Of course not. And, since it's all over and you won't try a silly sensational stunt like this again, I may as well tell you that you couldn't kill Hitler that way either."

"No?"

"No. Because you neglected the most important part of the sorcery. When you want to kill somebody with dolls, you must take care to have your church-wax candle moulded to include *part of the person it represents*. You must mix in a nail-clipping, or spittle, or perhaps a wisp of the victim's hair. That's essential. And you didn't have a hair of Hitler's mustache in the dolls, so it naturally didn't matter whether they represented Hitler or Charlie McCarthy. They wouldn't kill."

"But that hate—I felt it. And Myrna died."

"Forget it," Adams echoed. "Cerebral hemorrhage, I'll swear to it. And you heard just now that the dolls won't kill unless they have something from a person's body in them."

"I want a drink," Wando wasn't kidding, either. He went for it.

"Go on home," Joe Adams advised me, when we were left alone. "Forget this whole affair. I'm sure none of the others will ever mention it—they all swore not to. It would start a scandal, and the whole thing is ridiculous, anyway. I'll make my report and smooth it over."

"All right," I said.

My hands strayed over the table, picked up one of the dolls. It was the one Wando had been working on, at Myrna Weber's left side. I glanced blankly at the wax face. Didn't seem to be much of

an artist, did Wando. Not even a mustache on his Hitler. And wait—there was something caught in the wax at the head!

I picked it out.

Stuck into the moulded wax was a long golden hair. A long golden hair, from the head of Myrna Weber!

3

“WIN WITH WANDO!” screamed the billboards.

“VOTE FOR HONEST AL!” urged the window cards.

Why not? The “WANDO FOR SHERIFF” campaign was running full blast. I wouldn’t stop it. Weeks had passed since the unfortunate incident at Wando’s party. Joe Adams had kept his word and hushed matters up. Certainly none of the others present would talk about it—it was much too unpleasant a subject.

As for myself, I kept silent. What good would it do to tell Wando? I didn’t like the man, but even so it would not be fair to upset him. He couldn’t help it. While he had been modelling, one of Myrna Weber’s hairs had fallen, brushed by her hands, and it became imbedded in the wax.

Myrna Weber had died.

But of course, Wando didn’t kill her. We were all hating equally.

More than that, the whole idea was silly. Hate and wax dolls don’t kill a woman. Nervous excitement bringing on a cerebral hemorrhage—that can be understood. That’s sane and simple. It can kill. But wild sorcery, never!

At least, I hoped not. And I vowed that I wouldn’t put the question to any further tests.

So Mr. Wando began his campaign without my interference—but also without my help.

As a matter of fact, I was working on the opposite side of the fence. Believe it or not, Joe Adams had ambitions of his own.

The taciturn little medico confided in me after that strange evening. I’d never suspected he harbored a desire to run for public office, but he told me of his plans and they contained a great deal of common sense. It was my job to add dash and color to his ideas. Joe Adams had much the same thought as Wando—I must write speeches for the campaign. So, as fate would have it, I took the job and we automatically became opponents of our former host.

Adams was nobody’s fool. Honest, capable, a shrewd observer, he relied upon me to dramatize his public platform appearances. I

ferreted around in newspaper files to uncover facts on the present sheriff, and then played them up in speech form for campaign rallies and radio broadcasts.

Within three weeks Joe Adams had become the "Reform Candidate for Sheriff." His growing popularity was amazing.

Still more amazing, to me, was Wando's own campaign. I had automatically expected gladhander Wando to spend money like water, run around waving his membership cards and urge his fellow joiners to support him. I anticipated his free beer campaign, his lavish display of billboards and poster advertising.

Well, there were billboards and posters, but no Allan Wando. He held no public meetings. He distributed no campaign literature. He had no radio speeches. He didn't even bother to shake hands at church suppers. It was all strangely unlike the man—this reticence. I began to wonder whether or not the unfortunate episode at his party had shocked him out of his senses.

One rumor kept reaching me constantly—that Wando went everywhere with a group of unsavory strangers at his heels; foreigners or illiterate ward-heelers. That puzzled me more than all the rest.

Then I saw it with my own eyes.

On one morning the news broke that the present sheriff had entered the race for re-election, opposing Wando and my candidate, Joe Adams. I dashed for the Election Commission offices for further details—and ran into Wando there.

He stood at the desk, surrounded by the tall, dark strangers; three hawknosed men whose nasal voices twanged in a foreign tongue.

My entrance caused him to turn, and the men turned with him. Allan Wando gave me a single glance, and I knew that the rumors were correct, that my theory must be correct.

The man was mad.

The fat, triple-chinned face of a business man stared at me—but the eyes in that face fairly blazed. They burned with a life of their own, and they did not *belong* on that smug countenance. They were like the eyes of a serpent peering from the wooden sockets of a child's doll.

Wando stared, but gave no other sign of recognition save the deadly hate emanating from his unnatural eyes. Then one pudgy hand nudged the men at his side. His lips moved softly.

"That is one—remember him," he said. Or seemed to say.

And the dark men looked at me and grinned, and Wando grinned, and his grinning was worse than his hatred.

I'll admit I didn't hang around there. I left without accomplishing my mission, without taking a step further through the doorway. Of course I was foolish. Of course I was mawkishly melodramatic. Of course I was a coward. But I'd rather be a live coward than a dead coward.

I can't explain it. Wando looked at me, and the dark men looked at me, and I *knew* I had to get out.

It's easy to explain it now. At the time, it didn't take five minutes before I was cursing myself for a fool.

"So he looks at you," I said. "So right away you think he's gone crazy. That gleam in his eye might be indigestion."

I kicked myself mentally—but hard.

"So he's got three mulattoes with him for bodyguards. What does that mean? Let him walk down the street with Cab Calloway's orchestra and it still shouldn't upset you so."

Oh, it was a great job of reassuring myself I did when I got out on the street again.

But I didn't go back.

I went for a shave.

As I settled back in the chair at Tony's Barber Shop, I remembered that I ought to combine business with pleasure. After all, the sheriff himself had entered the race today, and I ought to feel out the public pulse on the matter—see how it would affect the election.

So after a few remarks on the weather and Europe and the current baseball standings, I steered Tony the barber around to politics.

"What do you think about the elections?" I began.

"Pretty hot, eh?" Tony ventured.

"Right. Particularly the sheriff's race. How do the boys feel about the sheriff coming out today and saying he's going to run again?"

"In the bag for sure," said Tony. "Sheriff, he's a gonna make it easy. He's a good man, sheriff."

"Really think so?" I wanted to ask about Joe Adams' chances, but Tony's eyes began to sparkle.

"You know, she's a funny thing. Every day, I shave-a sheriff right here in this chair."

"That so?"

"You betcha. Today I shave two sheriffs."

"Two?"

"Sure. First a real sheriff, he's come-a in, get shave. Then, right away after, I shave this fella Wando who's a run against him."

"Wando?" I played dumb. "Do you think he's got any chance in the race, Tony?"

Tony laughed. "No—he's what you call one crazy fella. You betcha," he chuckled. "One crazy fella. You know whatta he do?"

"What?"

"He ask me—he ask me right here, cross over my heart, was a sheriff in here today? I tell him sure. Then he say he want to buy the sheriff's shaving mug."

"Go on," I said, through the lather.

"I tell him it'sa all dirty yet—not cleaned out. But he say, swell, that's just-a what he's wants. So he gives me fifty cents for sheriff's mug and walks out. One crazy fella!"

"Dirty shaving mug—hair in it and all?" I said.

"You betcha! Crazy fella, Wando, he'sa no good."

"You're telling me?"

"What he want with sheriff's old hair? What he—*hey come back!*"

But I didn't come back. I went out of there, cut face and all, raced across the street, and dived into a drug-store phone booth.

I called Joe Adams.

"Joe," I panted. "Maybe I'm crazy, but I just stumbled across something big. Our friend Wando is out to—"

I should have seen the three of them following me, ever since I went into the barber shop. I should have seen them closing in on the phone booth now as I talked. But I didn't.

Consequently, as I uttered the opening words of my sentence to Joe Adams, my connection went dead.

Nobody cut the wires.

But somebody—*cut my throat!*

4

That's what it felt like. My last impression was of those arms tightening around my neck in the phone booth, of the cold steel that swept up across my face.

When I woke up at Emergency Hospital with Joe Adams at my side, I found my head wrapped in bandages.

"Just missed the jugular," Adams assured me. "Somebody spotted them, and I guess they got frightened. Cut your face open in a few places, but nothing serious. You'll be all right in a few weeks."

"Who were they?" I whispered. Maybe it was because I didn't want to hear the answer.

"Three dark strangers. Fellow behind the counter didn't notice them when they came in.

"Clustered around your phone booth, and when he looked up and started to say something, they ran. He found you, called the cops. They got away."

"Of course," I whispered. You don't talk loud through bandages.

Joe Adams bent over me. "What was it?" he asked. "What were you trying to tell me? Who were they, do you know?"

"They weren't supporters of Adams for Sheriff," I told him. "I'll explain later. Now we've got to get going."

"Get up? You'll have to stay in bed, take it easy a few days."

"Can't do it." I sat erect, fighting off pinwheels that rose in my brain. "That's why I called you. We must go to a political rally tonight. The sheriff is holding his opening meeting."

"But—"

"You can't see the look of grim determination on my face under these bandages, Joe," I said. "But it's there, and we're going. We must, I tell you."

We went.

The hall, on the west side of the city, was crowded. The sheriff was a popular man with the voters.

Joe and I arrived late. He was still trying to make me talk, and I wouldn't. He argued with me even as we took our places at the rear of the hall—and others turned around and grumbled.

"Shhh! Shuddup, willya? We wanta hear!"

We quieted down and stared at the lighted stage. The sheriff was already speaking.

His tall, commanding figure, topped by a mane of silvery hair, bent in animation as he delivered his address. Leaning on the table and bringing down his fist for emphasis, he launched into a flood of oratory calculated to drown his listeners in political platitudes.

I made no pretense of listening, at first. Then my ears caught a mumbling from the crowd ahead. Yes, right there.

Craning my head, I saw what I feared.

Seated down front, facing the stage, was Allan Wando. And next to him, three dark figures, heads together. The mumbling was coming from their throats.

Spectators tapped Wando on the shoulder as I watched. He shrugged, turned away, and continued to drone unintelligible sounds. It was as though he and his companions were in a church and—chanting.

Chanting! That was it. They *were* chanting!

The sheriff thundered on. He must have heard it, for his voice rose to drown out these "hecklers" in the crowd. He leaned toward the audience.

The chanting rose.

And I felt *it*. Amidst five hundred grimy citizens, packed like squirming sardines into the smoky, sweaty atmosphere of a political meeting, I felt the breath of ancient evil blow.

My bandaged face was bathed in perspiration. I half-rose. I had to stop it, crazy or not. I started down the aisle, as the chanting and the sheriff's voice rose to a crescendo.

I stared at his distorted, purpling face. He was screaming in unconscious apoplexy, hands upraised.

And then—voice and chanting vanished beneath a gasp from five hundred throats.

In mid-sentence, in mid-flourish, the sheriff halted. The tall body swayed, bent forward, and suddenly crumpled to the floor in a writhing heap.

A scream from the audience. Everybody rose at once. The campaign managers raced onto the platform, gathered around the contorted body of the sheriff.

I fought my way down that aisle, Joe Adams behind me. The crowd peered back toward the exits. It was almost panic. A man on stage was trying to placate the mob, bawling about "sudden heart attack" through the microphone system. It didn't mean a thing. They fled from the place in droves.

It didn't mean a thing when the police arrived, or the ambulance.

What really mattered was that Wando and his three chanting companions were gone with the crowd, lost in the swirl fighting for an exit.

What did mean a thing was that the sheriff, before they carried him from the stage, was dead.

Apoplexy.

I didn't hear the news.

I was bending over the seats Wando and his henchmen had occupied. Bending over and searching the floor with my fingers.

Something pierced my thumb. I picked it up. It was a long needle, the kind Wando had passed out at his fateful party.

Then I stooped again and got the other object. Joe Adams was at my side when I raised it to the light.

The tiny black frock coat, the striped trousers, and the little

necktie were covered with dust from the floor. But the devil's doll leered in the light, and its face was the face of the dead sheriff.

Buried in the heart was a long silver needle.

Buried in the wax beneath was a cluster of grizzled hair—grizzled hair from a human beard. The kind of hair one finds in a barber's mug, after a man has been shaved.

Joe gasped.

I didn't. I grabbed his arm.

"Come on," I snapped.

"Where?"

"To see a barber, first. And then—we're going to pay a visit to Mr. Allan Wando."

5

The squad car picked up the three dark foreigners in, of all places, the YMCA. Joe and I didn't offer many details; just hinted around that these men should be held on suspicion, because of their presence at the meeting.

Then we left the cops, and hurried along to Wando's apartment.

"Why don't we take them with us?" Joe asked. "Better still, why not send them to lock him up?"

I shrugged my bandaged head. "He'd be out tomorrow," I told him. "You can't convict a man on a charge of witchcraft."

"Witchcraft?" Joe's voice was tense. "It's all so strange—what you've told me, and what the barber said, and what he intends to do."

"He'll do it, if we don't hurry. Step on it."

Joe stepped on it.

I pushed the buzzer.

Wando opened the door.

Joe crowded in.

Wando's jaw dropped.

I got a look at the table and saw the two figures.

Wando stepped behind me.

Joe let out an oath.

Wando pulled the gun.

And there we were. Oh it was simple. Just like the movies. But not quite as pleasant. I remembered my thought about going into Wando's office—that spider and fly smile. Well, it was true now. We were two flies, caught properly in Wando's web.

A web of wax, and an insane spider to spin. To spin—and break the thread of life.

Joe Adams and I stood there in his apartment. His gun rested upon our breasts, and his burning eyes smoldered up.

"I might have expected this visit," he half-chuckled. "You have a very clever campaign manager, Mr. Adams. Unfortunately, your campaign is now ended."

Joe and I both stared behind him at the table—the table I had just bent over, staring down at the two wax dolls that stood upon it.

Joe and I both stared at our miniature selves—the tiny little fat figure of Joe Adams, with the incongruous wire spectacles, and the tall figure with the bandaged face that represented me.

Wando caught our gaze and smiled. The gun never wavered.

"I suppose you know what I am going to do," he said. "You must have, or you'd never have come."

"That's right," I answered, keeping my voice firm—just as firm as the muzzle of the gun trained on my chest. "I figured it all out. You *did* kill Myrna Weber intentionally, didn't you?"

"Right," acknowledged Allan Wando. "It was an experiment. And it worked."

"Then you went a little mad, I suppose."

"Mad? Who is mad? Witchcraft is a science, not the product of a diseased imagination. Witchcraft can kill, and by killing one attains power."

Wando's voice rose shrilly.

"Yes, but only a madman would have the supreme audacity of your enterprise," I said. "You got hold of those foreigners somewhere to aid you in your work. They helped you in chanting, in focusing your hate. Tonight, after making a doll of the sheriff and mixing in part of his beard, you went to the hall and killed him."

"Who would believe that?" Wando laughed. "If you told that story to the police *you'd* be the madman, not I! Of course, you will never tell that story, because your turn is next." He came nearer.

"Your image is finished," he told me. "It was so obliging of you to do what the sheriff did—go to the barber shop and get shaved. After my men failed to finish you off today, I went back for some of *your* hair."

"The barber told me tonight."

Wando smiled in acknowledgment. "Very clever. *Very* clever! But it will not do you much good, I fear. I must also thank you for bringing Mr. Adams to me. I have not finished his doll yet. I need a lock of his hair."

Wando's hand went to the table, and clutched a scissors.

Approaching Adams, he snipped at this forehead, holding the gun ready with his other hand.

Clutching a wisp of hair, he turned to the table. The free hand kneaded the wax figure of Adams. Wando sat there and moulded, kept the gun on me. We stood waiting.

It was *all wrong*.

As a writer, I felt it. Even in the face of death, I felt it. A sorcerer doesn't mould *poppets* with one hand and hold a gun with the other. A sorcerer doesn't get hair from shaving mugs in modern barber shops.

A sorcerer doesn't work under the fluorescent lights of a modern apartment and above all, a sorcerer doesn't run for sheriff.

Then Wando turned his face to me and I forgot it all. Evil is evil, through all the ages, whatever its outward guise may be. The fat face of the business man, the politician, the gladhander, was no more. The eyes of a necromancer lanced upwards, and the pale hand shaping its doll of death now groped for a needle.

The eyes, the doll, and the needle—these were all that mattered. Twentieth century, business, politics; what were such concepts but empty words masking an ancient horror? The dolls of death had killed in ages past, and they could kill again. The hair or skin or nail parings of a human, mixed with the wax of a church candle shaped in his image. The knife to the heart of the wax, and the death of the human—if the sorcerer hated, and believed in his hate.

That was reality, black reality, rising in waves that beat at my brain.

Those eyes, and the hand with the needle, and the little doll with the bandaged head which was myself.

Wando stared at me.

"Now you know," he whispered. "Call it madness or Black Magic if you like. Names don't matter. Deeds do. And I shall do deeds. Myrna Weber, and the sheriff, then you and Adams. I shall be the new sheriff."

Again he laughed, self-consciously.

"Silly notion, isn't it? This power for such a goal? But a man must crawl before he walks, and I'm merely experimenting as yet.

"You knew that, didn't you?" The stare was dreadful in its intensity.

"You knew that I'm not stopping here. Ways and means, my friend. I'll be sheriff, but not for long. Business rivals will be next. I can become governor, president, yes more than that! You think I'm mad, but I'm using sound sense. I'll rise; slowly but surely, and by proper means in the public eye. I'll move from office to office

as men die accidental deaths—but it will all be politics, just politics. The good old American way.

“The good old American way,” said this man, his fat hands clutching the little wax figure of doom.

“I shall have power, great power. And no one will know, no one will suspect. For you won’t be here to tell them—will you?”

“You’ll never get away with it,” I said. “They’ll find us here, and then—”

“You’ll be found at home, in your beds” Wando corrected me. “I’m going to take you there, in just a few moments. A *very* few moments. First you, then Adams. No, stand still—I’ll shoot if I must. But I prefer the dolls, my little dolls, and the needles that—”

“It won’t work” I sparred. “Nobody to chant, and I—I don’t believe it!”

Wando rose, holding the doll in one hand, the gun and needle in the other.

“You believe it,” he said, slowly. “For it is true. In a moment I shall plunge the needle into the waxen heart, and you shall die. And Adams shall die next. And others will die, many others. And so it ends.”

I didn’t hear. I stared at the hand holding the doll with the bandaged head, stared at the needle coming down toward the tiny body, stared at the waxen breast, stared at Wando’s hate-filled eyes.

“Wando!” screamed Joe.

But it was too late.

The needle plunged home into the wax image.

For a long moment nothing happened. The three of us stood there. Wando’s hand held the tiny figure, the long silver needle knifing its breast.

And then, slowly, a *look* came over his face. A look of horror, of fear, of burning agony. The hand dropped the doll. The other hand dropped the gun. Allan Wando clutched at his heart, eyes gazing at me in dreadful anguish. Then, like a scarecrow lifted from its pole, Wando sagged to the floor.

Joe stepped over to the body.

“Phone the cops,” I said. “He’s dead. Shock.”

Joe phoned.

I made a fire in the fireplace and as the flames rose I threw in the extra wax candles and needles I found, and the tiny doll that was Joe Adams. I took the hair out of it first, very carefully. Then I got ready to throw in the doll with the needle in it—the doll with the bandaged face that Wando stabbed when he died.

Joe Adams watched me.

"Too bad Wando was mad," I commented. "He believed so much that he was going to kill me by sticking pins in a wax figure that the excitement got him. What nonsense!"

Suddenly Joe Adams reached out. "Let's see the doll," he said.

I tossed it quickly into the fire.

"Damn you!" said Joe Adams. "You—"

The flames crackled up. We turned. The fire was closing over the wax, eating away the cloth bandages on the head. We saw the flames flicker over the revealed face.

It wasn't my face on the doll. It was Allan Wando's.

"So that's what you did," Adams whispered. "Went to the barber's again tonight, got some of his hair, made a doll, and switched dolls with his when we came in here at first. So that when he thought he was stabbing an image of you he was really stabbing himself."

I took the other doll out of my pocket and dug out hair, then threw it into the fire when Adams wasn't looking. Then I laughed.

"You can't believe such stuff," I chuckled. "Wando killed himself."

We both turned by common impulse and stared at the wax figure of the doll. The face was melting, coagulating into slime, oozing away. The features of Allan Wando had disappeared, and the body followed. There was only a shapeless blob.

"Trick of light," I assured Joe, confidently. "You thought you saw his face. But it wasn't any doll of him I made, and there wasn't any part of Allan Wando's body in it. Besides, what happens to a wax image doesn't affect a real person."

"All right if you say so," Joe Adams shrugged. "Maybe it's better that way."

And we turned away from the melted wax figure in the fire.

I'm sorry we did. I know it would have been better that way—if Joe Adams had believed me.

But he couldn't.

When we turned away from the fire we saw Allan Wando's body lying on the floor.

Something had happened to it, was happening.

Slowly the face disappeared. Melted away. And the body oozed into a shapeless blob.

By the time we had clawed open the door, there was nothing left of Allan Wando but a melted heap shining in the firelight.

He looked like the liquid, sticky remnants of a gigantic wax doll. And the fire burned on. . . .

Black Bargain

(*Weird Tales* May 1942)

IT WAS GETTING LATE WHEN I SWITCHED OFF THE NEON AND GOT busy behind the fountain with my silver polish. The fruit syrup came off easily, but the chocolate stuck and the hot fudge was greasy. I wish to God they wouldn't order hot fudge.

I began to get irritated as I scrubbed away. Five hours on my feet, every night, and what did I have to show for it? Varicose veins. Varicose veins, and the memory of a thousand foolish faces. The veins were easier to bear than the memories. They were so depressing, those customers of mine. I knew them all by heart.

In early evening all I got was "cokes." I could spot the "cokes" a mile away. Giggling highschool girls, with long shocks of uncombed brown hair, with their shapeless tan fingertip coats and the repulsively thick legs bulging over boots. They were all "cokes." For forty-five minutes they'd monopolize a booth, messing up the tile table top with cigarette ashes, crushed napkins daubed in lipstick and little puddles of spilled water. Whenever a high-school girl came in, I automatically reached for the cola pump.

A little later in the evening I got the "gimmie two packs" crowd. Sports shirts hanging limply over hairy arms meant the filtertips. Blue work shirts with rolled sleeves disclosing tattooing meant the unfiltered cigarettes.

Once in awhile I got a fat boy. He was always a "cigar." If he wore glasses he was a two-for-thirty-fiver. If not, I merely had to indicate the box on the counter. Ten cents straight, Mild Havana—all long filler.

Oh, it was monotonous. The "notions" family, who invariably departed with aspirin, Ex-Lax, candy bars, and a pint of ice cream. The "public library" crowd—tall, skinny youths bending the pages of magazines on the rack and never buying. The "soda waters" with their trousers wrinkled by the sofa of a one room apartment, the "curlers," always looking furtively toward the baby buggy outside. And around ten, the "pineapple sundaes"—fat women Bingo players. Followed by the "chocolate sodas" when the show let out. More booth parties, giggling girls and red-necked young men in sloppy mod outfits.

In and out, all day long. The rushing "telephones," the doddering old "five-cent stamps," the bachelor "toothpastes" and "razor blades."

I could spot them all at a glance. Night after night they dragged up to the counter. I don't know why they even bothered to tell me what they wanted. One look was all I needed to anticipate their slightest wishes. I could have given them what they needed without their asking.

Or, rather, I suppose I couldn't. Because what most of them really needed was a good long drink of arsenic as far as I was concerned.

Arsenic! Good Lord, how long had it been since I'd been called upon to fill out a *prescription*! None of these stupid idiots wanted *drugs* from a drugstore. Why had I bothered to study pharmacy? All I really needed was a two week course in pouring chocolate syrup over melting ice cream, and a month's study of how to set up cardboard figures in the window so as to emphasize their enormous busts.

Well—

He came in then. I heard the slow footsteps without bothering to look up. For amusement I tried to guess before I glanced. A "gimmie two packs?" A "toothpaste?" Well the hell with him. I was closing up.

The male footsteps had shuffled up to the counter before I raised my head. They halted, timidly. I still refused to give any recognition of his presence. Then came a hesitant cough. That did it.

I found myself staring at a middle-aged, thin little fellow with sandy hair and rimless glasses perched on a snub nose. The crease

of his froggish mouth underlined the despair of his face.

He wore a frayed \$36.50 suit, a wrinkled white shirt, and a string tie—but humility was his real garment. It covered him completely, that aura of hopeless resignation.

“I beg your pardon, please, but have you any tincture of aconite?”

Well, miracles *do* happen. I was going to get a chance to sell drugs after all. Or was I? When despair walks in and asks for aconite, it means suicide.

I shrugged. “Aconite?” I echoed. “I don’t know.”

He smiled, a little. Or rather, that crease wrinkled back in a poor imitation of amusement. But on his face a smile had no more mirth in it than the grin you see on a skull.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he mumbled. “But you’re wrong. I’m—I’m a chemist. I’m doing some experiments, and I must have four ounces of aconite at once. And some belladonna. Yes, and—wait a minute.”

Then he dragged the book out of his pocket.

I craned my neck, and it was worth it.

The book had rusty metals covers, and was obviously very old. When the thick yellow pages fluttered open under his trembling thumb I saw flecks of dust rise from the binding. The heavy black-lettered type was German, but I couldn’t read anything at that distance.

“Let me see now,” he murmured. “Aconite—belladonna—yes, and I have this—the cat, of course—nightshade—um hum—oh, yes, I’ll need some phosphorus of course—have you any blue chalk?—Good—and I guess that’s all.”

I was beginning to catch on. But what the devil did it matter to me? A weirdo more or less was nothing new in my life. All I wanted to do was get out of here and soak my feet.

I went back and got the stuff for him, quickly. I peered through the slot above the prescription counter, but he wasn’t doing anything—just paging through that black, iron-bound book and moving his lips.

Wrapping the parcel, I came out. “Anything else, sir?”

“Oh—yes. Could I have about a dozen candles? The large size?”

I opened a drawer and scabbled for them under the dust.

“I’ll have to melt them down and reblend them with the fat,” he said.

“What?”

“Nothing. I was just figuring.”

Sure. That's the kind of figuring you do best when you're counting the pads in your cell. But it wasn't my business, was it?

So I handed over the package, like a fool.

"Thank you. You've been very kind. I must ask you to be kinder—to charge this."

Oh, great!

"You see, I'm temporarily out of funds. But I can assure you, in a very short time, in fact within three days, I shall pay you in full. Yes."

A very convincing plea. I wouldn't give him a cup of coffee on it—and that's what moochers usually ask for, instead of aconite and candles. But if his words didn't move me, his eyes did. They were so lonely behind his spectacles, so pitifully alone, those two little puddles of hope in the desert of despair that was his face.

All right. Let him have his dreams. Let him take his old iron-bound dream book home with him and make like crazy. Let him light his tapers and draw his phosphorescent circle and recite his spells or whatever the hell he wanted to do.

No, I wouldn't give him coffee, but I'd give him a dream.

"That's okay, buddy," I said. "We're all down on our luck some time, I guess."

That was wrong. I shouldn't have patronized. He stiffened at once and his mouth curled into a sneer—of superiority, if you please!

"I'm not asking charity," he said. "You'll get paid, never fear, my good man. In three days, mark my words. Now good evening. I have work to do."

Out he marched, leaving "my good man" with his mouth open. Eventually I closed my mouth, but I couldn't clamp a lid on my curiosity.

That night, walking home, I looked down the dark street with new interest. The black houses bulked like a barrier behind which lurked fantastic mysteries. Row upon row, not houses any more, but dark dungeons of dreams. In what house did my stranger hide? In what room was he intoning to what strange gods?

Once again I sensed the presence of wonder in the world of lurking strangeness behind the scenes of drugstore and high-rise civilization. Black books still were read, and wild-eyed strangers walked and muttered, candles burned into the night, and a missing alley cat might mean a chosen sacrifice.

But my feet hurt, so I went home.

* * *

Same old malted milks, cherry cokes, Vaseline, Listerine, hairnets, bathing caps, cigarettes, and what have you?

Me, I had a headache. It was four days later, almost the same time of night, when I found myself scrubbing off the soda-taps again.

Sure enough, he walked in.

I kept telling myself all evening that I didn't expect him—but I *did* expect him, really. I had that crawling feeling when the door clicked. I waited for the shuffle of the Tom McCann shoes.

Instead there was a brisk tapping of Oxfords. English Oxfords. The \$40 kind.

I looked up in a hurry this time.

It *was* my stranger.

At least he was there, someplace beneath the flashy blue weave of his suit, the immaculate shirt and foulard tie. He had had a shave, a haircut, a manicure, and evidently a winning ticket in the Irish Sweepstakes.

"Hello there." Nothing wrong with that voice—I've heard it in the big hotel lobbies for years, brimming over with pep and confidence and authority.

"Well, well, well," was all I could say.

He chuckled. His mouth wasn't a crease any more. It was a trumpet of command. Out of that mouth could come orders, and directions. This wasn't a mouth shaped for hesitant excuses any longer. It was a mouth for requesting expensive dinners, choice vintage wines, heavy cigars; a mouth that barked at taxi drivers and doormen.

"Surprised to see me, eh? Well, I told you it would take three days. Want to pay you your money, thank you for your kindness."

That was nice. Not the thanks, the money. I like money. The thought of getting some I didn't expect made me genial.

"So your prayers were answered, eh?" I said.

He frowned.

"Prayers—what prayers?"

"Why I thought that—"

"I don't understand," he snapped, understanding perfectly well. "Did you perhaps harbor some misapprehension concerning my purchases of the other evening? A few necessary chemicals, that's all—to complete the experiment I spoke of. And the candles, I must confess were to light my room. They shut off my electricity the day before."

Well, it *could* be.

"Might as well tell you the experiment was a howling success.

Yes, sir. Went right down to Newsohm with the results and they put me on as assistant research director. Quite a break."

Newsohm was the biggest chemical supply house in our section of the country. And he went right down in his rags and was "put on" as assistant research director. Well, live and learn.

"So here's the money. \$5.39, wasn't it? Can you change a fifty?"

I couldn't.

"That's all right, keep it."

I refused, I don't know why. Made me feel crawling again, somehow.

"Well, then, tell you what let's do. You are closing up, aren't you? Why not step down the street to the tavern for a little drink? I'll get change there. Come on, I feel like celebrating."

So it was that five minutes later I walked down the street with Mr. Fritz Gulther.

We took a table in the tavern and ordered quietly. Neither he nor I was at ease. Somehow there was an unspoken secret between us. It seemed almost as though I harbored criminal knowledge against him—I, of all men, alone knowing that behind this immaculately clad figure of success, there lurked a shabby spectre just three days in the past. A spectre that owed me \$5.39.

We drank quickly, both of us. The spectre got a little fainter. We had another. I insisted on paying for the third round.

"It's a celebration," I argued.

He laughed. "Certainly is. And let me tell you, this is only the beginning! From now on I'm going to climb so fast it'll make your head swim. I'll be running that place within six months. Going to get a lot of new orders in from the government, and expand."

"Wait a minute," I cautioned, reserve gone. "You're way ahead of yourself. If I were in your shoes I'd still be flipping with what happened to me in the past three days."

Fritz Gulther smiled. "Oh, that? I expected *that*. Didn't I tell you so in the store? I've been working for over a year and I knew just what to expect. It was no surprise, I assure you. I had it all planned. I was willing to starve to carry out my necessary studies, and I did starve. Might as well admit it."

"Sure." I was on my third drink now, over the barriers. "When you came into the store I said to myself, 'Here's a guy who's been through hell!'"

"Truer words were never spoken," said Gulther. "I've been through hell all right, quite literally. But it's all over now, and I didn't get burned."

"Say, confidentially—what kind of magic did you use?"

"Magic? Magic? I don't know anything about magic."

"Oh, yes you do, Gulther," I said. "What about that little black book with the iron covers you were mumbling around with in the store?"

"German inorganic chemistry text," he snapped. "Pretty old. Here, drink up and have another."

I had another. Gulther began to babble, a bit. About his new clothes and his new apartment and the new car he was going to buy next week. About how he was going to have everything he wanted now, by God, he'd show the fools that laughed at him all these years, he'd pay back the nagging landladies and the cursing grocers, and the sneering rats who told him he was soft in the head for studying the way he did.

Then he got into the kindly stage.

"How'd you like a job at Newsohm?" he asked me. "You're a good pharmacist. You know your chemistry. You're a nice enough fellow, too—but you've got a terrible imagination. How about it? Be my secretary. Sure, that's it. Be my secretary. I'll put you on tomorrow."

"I'll drink on that," I declared. The prospect intoxicated me. The thought of escape from the damned store, escape from the "coke"-faces, the "ciggies"-voices, very definitely intoxicated me. So did the next drink.

I began to see something.

We were sitting against the wall and the tavern lights were low. Couples around us were babbling in monotone that was akin to silence. We sat in shadow against the wall. Now I looked at my shadow—an ungainly, flickering caricature of myself, hunched over the table. What a contrast it presented before *his* suddenly erect bulk!

His shadow, now—

His shadow, now—

I saw it. He was sitting up straight across the table from me. But his shadow on the wall was *standing!*

"No more Scotch for me," I said, as the waiter came up.

But I continued to stare at his shadow. He was sitting and the shadow was standing. It was a larger shadow than mine, and a blacker shadow. For fun I moved my hands up and down, making heads and faces in silhouette. He wasn't watching me, he was gesturing to the waiter.

His shadow didn't gesture. I just stood there, I watched and stared and tried to look away. His hands moved but the black out-

line stood poised and silent, hands dangling at the sides. And yet I saw the familiar shape of his head and nose; unmistakably his.

"Say, Gulther," I said. "Your shadow—there on the wall—"

I slurred my words. My eyes were blurred.

But I felt his attitude pierce my consciousness below the alcohol.

Fritz Gulther rose to his feet and then shoved a dead white face against mine. He didn't look at his shadow. He looked at me, through me, at some horror behind my face, my thoughts, my brain. He looked *at* me, and *into* some private hell of his own.

"Shadow," he said. "There's nothing wrong with my shadow. You're mistaken. Remember that, you're mistaken. And if you ever mention it again, I'll bash your skull in."

Then Fritz Gulther got up and walked away. I watched him march across the room, moving swiftly but a little unsteadily. Behind him, moving very slowly and not a bit unsteadily, a tall black shadow followed him from the room.

If you can build a better mousetrap than your neighbor, you're liable to put your foot in it.

That's certainly what I had done with Gulther. Here I was ready to accept his offer of a good job as his secretary, and I had to go and pull a drunken boner!

I was still cursing myself for a fool two days later. Shadows that don't follow body movements, indeed! Who was that shadow I saw you with last night? That was no shadow, that was the Scotch I was drinking. Oh, fine!

So I stood in the drugstore and sprinkled my sundaes with curses as well as chopped nuts.

I nearly knocked the pecans off the counter that second night, when Fritz Gulther walked in again.

He hurried up to the counter and flashed me a tired smile.

"Got a minute to spare?"

"Sure—wait till I serve these people in the booth."

I dumped the sundaes and raced back. Gulther perched himself on a stool and took off his hat. He was sweating profusely.

"Say—I want to apologize for the way I blew my stack the other night."

"Why, that's all right, Mr. Gulther."

"I got a little too excited, that's all. Liquor and success went to my head. No hard feelings, I want you to understand that. It's just that I was nervous. Your ribbing me about my shadow, that stuff

sounded too much like the way I was always kidded for sticking to my studies in my room. Landlady used to accuse me of all sorts of things. Claimed I dissected her cat, that I was burning incense, messing the floor up with chalk. Some damn fool college punks downstairs began to yap around that I was some kind of nut dabbling in witchcraft."

I wasn't asking for his autobiography, remember. All this sounded a little hysterical. But then, Gulther looked the part. His sweating, the way his mouth wobbled and twitched as he got this out.

"But say, reason I stopped in was to see if you could fix me up a sedative. No, no bromo or aspirin. I've been taking plenty of that stuff ever since the other evening. My nerves are all shot. That job of mine down at Newsohm takes it all out of me."

"Wait a minute, I'll get something."

I made for the back room. As I compounded I sneaked a look at Gulther through the slot.

All right, I'll be honest. It wasn't Gulther I wanted to look at. It was his shadow.

When a customer sits at the counter stools, the storelights hit him so that his shadow is just a little black pool beneath his feet.

Gulther's shadow was a complete silhouette of his body, in outline. A black, deep shadow.

I blinked, but that didn't help.

Stranger still, the shadow seemed to be cast *parallel* with his body, instead of at an angle from it. It grew out from his chest instead of his legs. I don't know refraction, the laws of light, all that technical stuff. All I know is that Fritz Gulther had a big black shadow sitting beside him on the floor, and that the sight of it sent cold shivers along my spine.

I wasn't drunk. Neither was he. Neither was the shadow. All three of us existed.

Now Gulther was putting his hat back on.

But not the shadow. It just sat there. Crouched.

It was all wrong.

The shadow was no denser at one spot than at another. It was evenly dark, and—I noted this particularly—the outlines did not blur or fade. They were solid.

I stared and stared. I saw a lot now I'd never noticed. The shadow wore no clothes. Of course! Why should it put on a hat? It was naked, that shadow. But it belonged to Gulther—it wore spectacles. It was his shadow, all right. Which suited me fine, because *I* didn't want it.

Now Gulther was looking down over his shoulder. *He* was looking at his shadow now. Even from a distance I fancied I saw new beads of sweat string a rosary of fear across his forehead.

He knew, all right!

I came out, finally.

"Here it is," I said. I kept my eyes from his face.

"Good. Hope it works. Must get some sleep. And say—that job offer still goes. How about coming down tomorrow morning?"

I nodded, forcing a smile.

Gulther paid me, rose.

"See you then."

"Certainly." And why not? After all, what if you do work for a boss with an unnatural shadow? Most bosses have other faults, worse ones and more concrete. That shadow—whatever it was and whatever was wrong with it—wouldn't bite me. Though Gulther acted as though it might bite *him*.

As he turned away I looked at his departing back, and at the long, swooping black outline which followed it. The shadow rose and stalked after him. Stalked. Yes, it followed quite purposefully. To my now bewildered eyes it seemed larger than it had in the tavern. Larger, and a bolder black.

Then the night swallowed Gulther and his nonexistent companion.

I went back to the rear of the store and swallowed the other half of the sedative I'd made up for that purpose. After seeing that shadow, I needed it as much as he did.

The girl in the ornate outer office smiled prettily. "Go right in," she warbled. "He's expecting you."

So it was true, then. Gulther was assistant research director, and I was to be his secretary.

I floated in. In the morning sunshine I forgot all about shadows.

The inner office was elaborately furnished—a huge place with elegant walnut paneling associated with business authority. There was a kidney desk set before closed venetian blinds, and a variety of comfortable leather armchairs. Fluorescent lighting gleamed pleasantly.

But there was no Gulther. Probably on the other side of the little door at the back, talking to his Chief.

I sat down, with the tight feeling of anticipation hugged somewhere within my stomach. I glanced around, taking in the room again. My gaze swept the glass-topped desk. It was bare. Except in the corner, where a small box of cigars rested.

No, wait a minute. That wasn't a cigar-box. It was metal. I'd seen it somewhere before.

Of course! It was Gulther's iron-bound book.

"German inorganic chemistry." Who was I to doubt his word? So naturally, I just had to sneak a look before he came in.

I opened the yellowed pages.

De Vermis Mysteriis.

"*Mysteries of the Worm.*"

This was no inorganic chemistry text. It was something entirely different. Something that told you how you could compound aconite and belladonna and draw circles of phosphorescent fire on the floor when the stars were right. Something that spoke of melting tallow candles and blending them with corpse-fat, whispered of the uses to which animal sacrifice might be put.

It spoke of meetings that could be arranged with various parties most people don't either care to meet or even believe in.

The thick black letters crawled across the pages, and the detestable odor arising from the musty thing formed a background for the nastiness of the text. I won't say whether or not I believed what I was reading, but I will admit that there was an air, a suggestion about those cold, deliberate directions for traffic with alien evil, which made me shiver with repulsion. Such thoughts have no place in sanity, even as fantasy. And if *this* is what Gulther had done with the materials he'd bought himself for \$5.39 . . .

"Years of study," eh? "Experiments." What was Gulther trying to call up, what did he call up, and what bargain did he make?

The man who could answer these questions sidled out from behind the door. Gone was the Fritz Gulther of the come-on-strong personality. It was my original moocher who creased his mouth at me in abject fear. He looked like a man—I had to say it—who was afraid of his own shadow.

The shadow trailed him through the doorway. To my eyes it had grown overnight. Its arms were slightly raised, though Gulther had both hands pressed against his sides. I saw it cross the wall as he walked toward me—and it moved more swiftly than he did.

Make no mistake. I saw the shadow. Since then I've talked to wise boys who assure me that under even fluorescence no shadow is cast. They're wise boys all right, but I saw that shadow.

Gulther saw that book in my hands.

"All right," he said, simply. "You know. And maybe it's just as well."

"Know?"

"Yes. Know that I made a bargain with—someone. I thought I was being smart. He promised me success, and wealth, anything I wanted, on only one condition. Those damned conditions; you always read about them and you always forget, because they sound so foolish! He told me that I'd have only one rival, and that this rival would be a part of myself. It would grow with my success."

I sat mute. Gulther was wound up for a long time.

"Silly, wasn't it? Of course I accepted. And then I found out what my rival was—what it would be. This shadow of mine. It's independent of me, you know that, and it keeps growing! Oh, not in size, but in *depth*, in intensity. It's becoming—maybe I *am* crazy but you see it, too—more solid. Thicker. As though it had palpable substance."

Crease-mouth wobbled violently, but the words choked on.

"The further I go the more it grows. Last night I took your sedative and it didn't work. Didn't work at all. I sat up in the darkness and watched my shadow."

"In darkness?"

"Yes. It doesn't need light. It really *exists*, now. Permanently. In the dark it's just a blacker blur. But you can see it. It doesn't sleep, or rest. It just waits."

"And you're afraid of it? Why?"

"I don't know. It doesn't threaten me, or make gestures, or even take any notice of me. Shadows taking notice—sounds crazy, doesn't it? But you see it as I do. You can see it waiting. And that's why I'm afraid. What's it waiting for?"

The shadow crept closer over his shoulder. Eavesdropping.

"I don't need you for a secretary. I need a nurse."

"What you need is a good rest."

"Rest? How can I rest? I just came out of Newsom's office. He doesn't notice anything—yet. Too stupid, I suppose. The girls in the office look at me when I pass, and I wonder if they see something peculiar. But Newsom doesn't. He just made me head of research. Completely in charge."

"In five days? Marvelous!"

"Isn't it? Except for our bargain—whenever I succeed, my rival gains power with me. That will make the shadow stronger. How, I don't know. I'm waiting. And I can't find rest."

"I'll find it for you. Just lie down and wait—I'll be back."

I left him hastily—left him sitting at his desk, all alone. Not quite alone. The shadow was there, too.

Before I went I had the funniest temptation, I wanted to run my

hand along the wall, through that shadow. And yet I didn't. It was too black, too solid. What if my hand should actually encounter *something*?

So I just left.

I was back in half an hour. I grabbed Gulther's arm, bared it, plunged the needle home.

"Morphine," I whispered. "You'll sleep now."

He did, resting on the leather sofa. I sat at his side, watching the shadow that didn't sleep.

It stood there towering above him unnaturally. I tried to ignore it, but it was a third party in the room. Once, when I turned my back, it moved. I began to pace up and down. I opened my mouth, trying to hold back a scream.

The phone buzzed. I answered mechanically, my eyes never leaving the black outline on the wall that swayed over Gulther's recumbent form.

"Yes? No—he's not in right now. This is Mr. Gulther's secretary speaking. Your message? Yes, I'll tell him. I certainly will. Thank you."

It had been a woman's voice—a deep, rich voice. Her message was to tell Mr. Gulther she'd changed her mind. She'd be happy to meet him that evening at dinner.

Another conquest for Fritz Gulther!

Conquest—two conquests in a row. That meant conquests for the shadow, too. But *how*?

I turned to the shadow on the wall, and got a shock. It was lighter! Grayer, thinner, wavering a little!

What was wrong?

I glanced down at Gulther's sleeping face. Then I got another shock. Gulther's face was dark. Not tanned, but dark. Blackish. Sooty, *Shadowy*.

Then I did scream, a little.

Gulther awoke.

I just pointed to his face and indicated the wall mirror. He almost fainted. "It's combining with me," he whispered.

His skin was slate-colored. I turned my back because I couldn't look at him.

"We must do something," he mumbled. "Fast."

"Perhaps if you were to use—that book again, you could make another bargain."

It was a fantastic idea, but it popped out. I faced Gulther again and saw him smile.

"That's it! If you could get the materials now—you know what I need—go to the drugstore—but hurry up because—"

I shook my head. Gulther was nebulous, shimmery. I saw him through a mist.

Then I heard him yell.

"You damned fool! Look at *me*. That's my shadow you're staring at!"

I ran out of the room, and in less than ten minutes I was trying to fill a vial with belladonna with fingers that trembled like lumps of jelly.

I must have looked like a fool, carrying that armful of packages through the outer office. Candles, chalk, phosphorus, aconite, belladonna, and—blame it on my hysteria—the dead body of an alleycat I decoyed behind the store.

Certainly I felt like a fool when Fritz Gulther met me at the door of his sanctum.

"Come on in," he snapped.

Yes, snapped.

It took only a glance to convince me that Gulther had his cool again. Whatever the black change that frightened us so had been, he'd shook it off while I was gone.

Once again the trumpet voice held authority. Once again the sneering smile replaced the apologetic crease in the mouth.

Gulther's skin was white, normal. His movements were brisk and no longer frightened. He didn't need any wild spells—or had he ever, really?

Suddenly I felt as though I'd been a victim of my own imagination. After all, men don't make bargains with demons, they don't change places with their shadows.

The moment Gulther closed the door his words corroborated my mood.

"Well, I've snapped out of it. Foolish nonsense, wasn't it?" He smiled easily. "Guess we won't need that junk after all. Right when you left I began to feel better. Here, sit down and take it easy."

I sat. Gulther rested on the desk nonchalantly swinging his legs.

"All that nervousness, that strain, has disappeared. But before I forget it, I'd like to apologize for telling you that crazy story about sorcery and my obsession. Matter of fact, I'd feel better about the whole thing in the future if you just forgot all this ever happened."

I nodded.

Gulther smiled again.

"That's right. Now we're ready to get down to business. I tell you, it's a real relief to realize the progress we're going to make. I'm head research director already, and if I play my cards right I think I'll be running this place in another three months. Some of the things Newsohm told me today tipped me off. So just play ball with me and we'll go a long way. A long way. And I can promise you one thing—I'll never have any of these crazy spells again."

There was nothing wrong with what Gulther said here. Nothing wrong with any of it. There was nothing wrong with the way Gulther lolled and smiled at me, either.

Then why did I suddenly get that old crawling sensation along my spine?

For a moment I couldn't place it—and then I realized.

Fritz Gulther sat on his desk, before the wall *but now he cast no shadow.*

Where had it gone?

There was only one place for it to go. And if it had gone there, then—*where was Fritz Gulther?*

He read it in my eyes.

I read it in his swift gesture.

Gulther's hand dipped into his pocket and reemerged. As it rose, I rose, and sprang across the room.

I gripped the revolver, pressed it back and away, and stared into his convulsed countenance, into his eyes. Behind the glasses, behind the human pupils, there was only a blackness. The cold, grinning blackness of a shadow.

Then he snarled, arms clawing up as he tried to wrest the weapon free, aim it. His body was cold, curiously weightless, but filled with a slithering strength. I felt myself go limp under those icy, scrabbling talons, but as I gazed into those two dark pools of hate that were his eyes, fear and desperation lent me aid.

A single gesture, and I turned the muzzle in. The gun exploded, and Gulther slumped to the floor.

They crowded in then; they stood and stared down, too. We all stood and stared down at the body lying on the floor.

Body? There was Fritz Gulther's shoes, his shirt, his tie, his expensive blue suit. The toes of his shoes pointed up, the shirt and tie and suit were creased and filled out to support a body beneath.

But there was no body on the floor. There was only a shadow—a deep, black shadow, encased in Fritz Gulther's clothes.

Nobody said a word for a long minute. Then one of the girls whispered, "Look—it's just a shadow."

I bent down quickly and shook the clothes. As I did so, the shadow seemed to move beneath my fingers, to move and to melt.

In an instant it slithered free from the garments. There was a flash—or a final retinal impression of blackness, and the shadow was gone. The clothing sagged down into an empty huddled heap on the floor.

I rose and faced them. I couldn't say it loud, but I could say it gratefully, very gratefully.

"No," I said. "You're mistaken. There's no shadow there. There's nothing at all—absolutely nothing at all."

A Bottle of Gin

(*Weird Tales* March 1943)

MR. COLLINS SCAMPERED UP THE STEPS. HIS TWITCHING CHIN, long, wobbly ears, and pinkly bloodshot eyes gave him the appearance of a frightened rabbit. Rabbit-fashion, he glanced fearfully over his shoulder, then scurried into the burrow of the building.

Little Mr. Collins bounded down a long hall on short legs. The museum corridor was deserted, but his pink eyes revolved fearfully. With a sign of relief, he made for a door marked *Curator's Office* and hurried inside.

The young lady in the outer waiting room rose from her desk with a look of vague solicitude.

"Tom," she exclaimed. "Tom—where have you been? You worried me sick these past three days. Why didn't you call me?"

Mr. Collins gave her a fleeting glance.

"Sorry, Edith. I can't explain now. Is the Doctor in?"

The young lady marched around the desk. Her lips curled, not in solicitude, but in sudden scorn.

"Tom—you've been drinking again! Out on another bender, I suppose. Just look at you! A fine wreck you are. Haven't been to bed for three days, I suppose."

Little Mr. Collins groaned. "That's right. I haven't. But it's not what you think, Edith, honest it's not. I haven't touched a drop—"

"Huh!" Edith snorted scornfully. It was a most unpleasant sound, and Mr. Collins winced. Then he straightened.

"I've got to see Doctor Sweet at once," he insisted.

"He's busy. Can't be disturbed. Now, Tom, look at me! I want you to explain right this instant just what you've been up to and—"

Mr. Collins suddenly darted past her and whirled through an inner door. His sweaty palm locked it behind him.

He stood, gasping for breath, in Doctor Sweet's private office. The Curator's sanctum was large, and necessarily so. For the room was literally and incredibly stuffed with objects. Rows of books. Shelves of books. Piles of books. Statuary. Idols. Figurines. Tables filled with jars. Tables filled with vases. Tables filled with bottles. The floor was carpeted with papers and manuscripts. The desk in the center of the room was completely submerged beneath a miscellany of paraphernalia.

It took a full minute before Mr. Collins was able to detect the figure of Doctor Sweet, buried behind the debris on his desk. Then the Doctor rose, as if to fully establish his presence.

"Well?" said the old man. His hands raked upward over a dome-like forehead and into a tangle of bushy white hair. They finally encountered a pair of spectacles, which Doctor Sweet now drew down to eye level.

"By Bel and Astarte!" he exclaimed. "Collins!"

Little Mr. Collins took a step forward and gulped. "I'm back," he announced.

"So I see. Burn me in Moloch's mouth if you aren't! Have you got it, man? Have you got it?"

"Here."

Mr. Collins fumbled inside his coat, drew out an object wrapped in tissue paper.

Doctor Sweet grabbed for it with careful haste. He undid the wrappings, then cupped the object in his hands.

"Perfect!" he muttered. "Early Korean. This vase completes the collection. By the Cabala, it's a gem. I congratulate you."

Mr. Collins turned pale. "You'd better offer me condolences," he whispered.

"What's the matter?"

"What's the matter? Don't you *know*?"

"I've been very busy, son. Very busy. Going through my collection. Three days now."

"Well, while you've been going through your collection, I've been going through hell."

"Very interesting." Doctor Sweet turned, his hands caressing the tear-vase. "You must tell me about it some time. Right now I'm very busy. Excuse me."

"Listen, Doctor." Collins was tense. "If you don't hear me now, there may not be another time."

"Quit talking nonsense, son. I asked you to go up to Mr. Sung's house to buy this vase. You've done so. What you've been doing in the past three days does not concern me. Out on a rip-snorter, I'll bet." The old man cackled suddenly.

Collins lost his temper.

"You make me sick!" he shouted. "You and your secretary both! Out on a tear, was I? I'll have you know that for the past three days I've been riding the subway in fear of my life."

"Very dangerous things, subways," Doctor Sweet observed. "Never ride them myself."

Mr. Collins uttered a low moan.

"Get this through your head," he screeched. "When I went up to Sung's place to buy the vase, his downstairs shop was robbed. Some thugs held up the antique place and we heard them. Sung went down the stairs after them and they shot him. They saw me with the vase in my hand and started after me—three of them. Gorillas."

"My goodness!" clucked the Doctor, as though humoring a child. "Must have been after that fine antique collection of his."

"Of course they were," Collins wailed. "But that's not important. They were after me, too."

"This vase is worth twenty thousand," the Doctor gloated. "I don't blame them. By Eblis, I don't at that."

Collins muttered something under his breath, then recovered. "So I ran out the back entrance and made for the subway. They followed me. And for the last three days I've been dodging them from train to train. They're after me in shifts. I recognize all three of them now. Naturally I couldn't go to the police because there's no record that Sung sold the vase to me before he was murdered. So I've had to ride the damned trains until I could get away, without sleep or rest or food or—"

"How distressing," Doctor Sweet placed the vase carefully on a shelf. "Well, the vase is safe now. Why don't you go home and shave? You look awful."

Mr. Collins danced a cadenza of fright about the room.

"I'll look quite awful if they catch up with me," he answered. "I'm afraid to leave for fear they're waiting outside."

"By the Four Books!" exclaimed the Doctor. "That's very exciting, isn't it? If I were in your place then, I wouldn't go outside."

Mr. Collins suddenly slumped into a chair.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm dying," he groaned. "Dying from hunger. For mercy's sake, get me something to eat."

"I have a sandwich left from lunch in the other office," said Doctor Sweet, dubiously. "Do you care for minced ham?"

"I'll swallow anything," Collins gasped.

Abruptly, the little man's eyes swivelled to the row of bottles and beakers on the desk. There were tall bottles and small bottles, some stoppered and some open. Green ones and brown ones.

"That's what I need," he mumbled to himself. "A drink."

"What's that?" Doctor Sweet paused at the door.

"I merely asked you what was in that bottle."

Collins leveled a finger at random, selecting a tall brown bottle which stood apart from the rest at the back of the table.

"That bottle?" Doctor Sweet eyed him curiously.

"Yes."

The Doctor told Collins in a single word. He left the room.

Two seconds later Collins was at the table. His frantic fingers scabbled at the bottle, tore at the tight cork. He wrenched it free, held the brown bottle to his lips, and gulped. Then he sank back and tottered over to his chair.

When Doctor Sweet re-entered the room he found Mr. Collins sitting slumped in his seat with a most peculiar expression on his face.

Suddenly he gave a little hiccup.

The Doctor ignored it and extended a sandwich.

"Here's the minced ham," he said.

Collins peered at the offering with pale distaste.

"I don't want it," he said.

"What's that?"

Collins hiccuped again.

"Something wrong?"

"Hic."

"Collins—what's the matter?"

"Hic."

Doctor Sweet shook the little man's shoulders.

"What did you do?" he demanded.

"I—hic—took a swig out of that bottle of—hic—gin you have."

"Gin?" said Doctor Sweet. "By Allah's beard, I haven't any gin here."

"You said so before you left," Collins accused. "You told—hic—me that there was gin in that brown bottle."

"Great jumping dervishes!"

"What's—hic—wrong?"

"I didn't say there was gin in that bottle."

"No?"

"I said there was a *djinn* in there." Doctor Sweet goggled. "A *djinn*," he repeated. "A genie. An elemental spirit imprisoned in a bottle. And you've *swallowed* him!"

Collins nodded weakly.

"I just took a gulp," he whispered. "Something went down into my stomach, hard. Hic."

"Dear me," the Doctor wailed. "One of my most priceless treasures, too. That bottle was hundreds of years old. Found off the Persian gulf. I've always been careful to keep it sealed, too. These *djinn* are terribly dangerous if let free. That's why Solomon imprisoned them. And now you've got to go and swallow one."

Collins tottered to his feet.

"You mean I have a guy in my stomach?" he croaked. "Well, get him out of there." Excitement stifled his hiccups.

Doctor Sweet ran his hand into cottony hair. "I'm afraid I can't," he whispered. "You don't understand. If a *djinn* is released, he'll run wild. You'll just have to keep him there."

"Not on your life," Collins announced. "I want a meal on my stomach, not a midget."

"That's just it," the Doctor answered. "The *djinn* is a small creature when he is imprisoned. But once released, his substance grows like a cloud of smoke. He becomes a huge pillar in human shape. Perhaps fifty feet tall. He wants to destroy, wreak havoc."

Collins wasn't listening. He was busily engaged in thrusting a finger down his throat.

Doctor Sweet jumped for his hand.

"No, don't!" he gasped. "He'll escape."

"I want him to. You think I'm going to walk around with this—monster—inside of me? Get him back in his bottle."

"I wish I could," sighed the Doctor. "But he wouldn't go back. From now on, *you're* his bottle."

"*Me?*" Collins stared at his paunch. "I'm a human bottle for some oriental demon?"

"I'm afraid so. We'll just have to find a way out, somehow."

Collins glanced despairingly at the ham sandwich.

"I'm so hungry," he wailed. He reached for the bread.

"You can't eat," Doctor Sweet snatched his hand back. "Don't you understand? Food will *displace* the *djinn*."

"What'll we do, then? Stomach pump?"

"And let him out? Certainly not!"

"You've got to think of something, quick!"

"I know, I know." The Doctor moved towards the window, head bowed. He wheeled, suddenly. "Do you snore?"

"Snore? What's that matter?"

"Do you snore?" the Doctor demanded.

"Suppose so."

"Then," decided the old man, "I must forbid you to sleep. Once you fall asleep and let your mouth hang open, the *djinn* comes out."

"Oh!" groaned Collins. "Fine help you are!"

"Of course," the Doctor mused, "you can have three wishes."

"Wishes?"

"Yes. It is a custom of *djinns* to offer their captors three wishes before being released. You might make a deal with the *djinn*."

"How?"

"Maybe you can talk to him," suggested Doctor Sweet.

"Talk to my own stomach?"

"Ventriloquists do."

Mr. Collins drew a long breath. "All right," he muttered. "All right, then." He paused. His voice receded peculiarly in his throat.

"Hey! Hey you down there."

A sound came from Collins' mouth. It wasn't his voice, but a voice spoke. A hollow voice. An entombed voice.

"Yes, Master."

The actual sound of the reply disconcerted both men. Collins shuddered. When he attempted to go on, he discovered that there was really nothing his trembling voice could say. What would one say to a *djinn* under such circumstances?

"How's—how's things down there?" was the only inanity he could bring forth.

"Very distressing, Master. Please permit me to leave."

"He wants out," Collins whispered.

The Doctor nodded. "Naturally."

"What about my three wishes?" Collins asked.

The voice from his stomach grew soft. "But certainly, Master!

Three wishes—whatever your esteemed presence desires.”

Collins turned to Doctor Sweet. “You heard him? Suppose I wish he was back in his bottle?”

Sweet shook his head. “Wouldn’t work, I’m afraid. That’s destroying part of the agreement, you see.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

The Doctor took Collins by the shoulder. “On second thought, I don’t believe it’s safe for you to wish at all. Because on the third wish he comes out.”

“But I could make two—”

A voice interrupted them. It was the *djinn*.

“Will you release me then, O Master?”

“I’ve got to think about it for a while,” Collins temporized. He turned to the window with a sigh of despair. His eyes suddenly revolved in their sockets.

“There!” he breathed. “Look down there!”

“What’s the matter?”

“You see those three men?”

“Yes?”

“They’re the gorillas who’ve been following me. They’re coming in—I’ve got to get out of here.”

“But the *djinn*—”

“Never mind him.” Collins bolted for the door.

The Doctor wheezed after him.

“Here,” he urged. “Take this with you. And good luck.” He held out the brown bottle and its cork. Collins grabbed for them hastily.

“Remember,” warned Doctor Sweet. “Don’t let them shoot you, or anything. The *djinn* would escape through the holes.”

With a sob, Collins rushed through the door.

The girl in the outer office confronted him with an icy stare. Her eyes wandered to the bottle he was clutching in his hand.

“So!” she accused.

“But Edith—it’s empty. Look!” Collins held it upside down.

“I know it is. Drank it all, did you?”

“I haven’t touched a drop,” Collins began.

But another voice broke in.

“Who is this *hour*i, Master?”

Edith whirled.

“What did you say, Tom?”

“Is it your wish that I destroy her?” The *djinn* continued, blandly.

"No, no—nothing." Collins answered both voices at once. The effort was too much. He hiccuped softly.

"Tom, you're sick."

Collins nodded. "Stomach trouble," he said.

"Let me get you some bicarbonate," Edith suggested, softening.

"No, don't. He wouldn't like it."

"Who wouldn't like it?"

"Why the thing down there—inside me," Collins began, then checked himself.

"Are you raving, Tom?"

"I don't know!" The little man's eyes blinked rapidly. "Let me out of here," he commanded. "Quick! They'll be after me in a minute."

"What's after you? Tom Collins—you have d.t.s., that what's the matter."

"Hold your lying tongue, wench." The voice came from the stomach.

Edith gasped. As her mouth opened, Collins made a break for the door.

Dodging along the hall, he neared the entrance. Then he halted, sick with sudden dread.

Standing squarely on the steps below were the figures of three men—the stocky little fellow in the blue overcoat, the tall, thin man wearing a derby, and the ugly fat gentleman with his hand significantly inside his coat pocket.

Collins stared into the three blue-jowled faces. He saw tight lips and little eyes; a kaleidoscope of hairy knuckles, protruding jaws, and jutting brows.

They were waiting for him to come out.

Collins slipped the glass bottle into his coat. He crouched back in the doorway and mopped his forehead.

Let them wait, he decided. He was willing. Just as long as he was inside and they were outside—

But they weren't going to stay outside.

Collins saw the three huddle together. The man with the derby whispered, gesturing significantly towards the building. Then the three wheeled. They began to march slowly up the steps.

"Oh, oh!" breathed Collins.

"Master?" inquired the voice from within his stomach.

But "Master" didn't have the time to reply. With a courage born of desperation alone, Collins decided to dash for it. If he could run through them as they were caught coming up the steps now—

He burst from the building and clattered down the stairs. They saw him coming, attempted to dodge. He caromed into the trio, hurling his body forward at the fat man in the center.

With a grunt of surprise, the fat man staggered back. His two companions tripped over his legs, sprawled down the steps.

Mr. Collins hurdled their tangled bodies and continued down. Then he turned. They were on their feet again, and this time the fat man waved a gun. He didn't wave it long. He began to point it. He pointed it directly where it would do Mr. Collins the least possible good.

Collins looked around wildly for a hole in the pavement. There was none. No place to hide, no place to run to for shelter. He was in the open; a visible target.

"This is it!" he groaned.

"What, Master?"

The voice came through a fog. Then Collins remembered.

"*Djinn*," he croaked. "Now's the chance to show your stuff. I wish you'd take care of these babies, quick."

"Your wish," echoed the *djinn*, "is my command."

Almost without volition, Collins felt himself running towards the man with the gun.

The three hoodlums faced him in astonishment. The fat man steadied his aim, ready to fire. And then—

Collins *felt* it happen. The feeling of growth, stealing along his throat. The trio before him *saw* it happen.

They were gaping at his mouth. It was a small mouth, but from it protruded the largest tongue in the world. Or something.

Something—something long and black. Something muscled and menacing. Something that writhed forth like a snake of smoke, swelling to unbelievable proportions from Collins' opened mouth. Something that waved in the air, extending claws and a fist.

"Look out!" shrilled the thin man, suddenly. "He's on fire—smoke's coming out of his mouth!"

But it was not smoke that darted forward a dozen feet in advance of the charging Mr. Collins.

The fat man realized this when he felt the black column against his chin. He didn't have a chance to realize anything else before he sagged to the pavement.

The gun fell from his hand. His stocky little companion snatched it up and cursed.

"You will, will ya?" he snarled. A shot pumped into the black pillar rising from Collins' throat. It thudded home, but the huge inky paw of smoke merely swirled about his head and descended.

There was the sound of a walnut cracking, magnified ten times.

"Hey!" yelled the third party, as Collins turned, and the horrid limb reared once more. "Holy Moses!"

But Moses, sanctified or not, did nothing to help him. The black triphammer descended and sent the last man to join his fellows on the ground in a soggy heap.

Slowly, the emanation disappeared from before Mr. Collins' face.

He stood there for a moment and rubbed his aching jaws.

"Whew!" he panted. "How did you do that?"

"It is simple, Master. Any wish of yours—to hear is to obey."

"Was that really your arm?" Collins asked, weakly.

"Indeed. Am I not many cubits tall?"

"Don't talk about it," begged the rescued man. "It upsets my stomach just to think about it."

"Your other two wishes?" pursued the voice of the *djinn*. "Perhaps you would like some stomach tablets?" it went on, craftily.

"No, not that," said Collins. "Give me a little more time to think."

"But I desire my freedom from this prison," the *djinn* complained. "I am no Jonah."

"I'm no whale, either," Collins snapped. "Believe me, this hurts me more than it does you."

It was true. Collins had a terrific stomach ache. The *djinn* was moving around down there. Let's see—if it fitted into the brown bottle, it could reduce its size to about four inches. Still, that was quite a bellyful at that.

Too much for Collins. But at the moment, he had other matters to consider.

He took one more glance at the three forms on the pavement. He trembled, thinking of what might have happened if any passersby had chanced to wander down the street while the battle was in progress.

"Must get away before somebody comes along," he muttered. He started up the block and rounded a corner rapidly. He moved briskly along for ten minutes before slackening his panic-driven pace.

During this time he was becoming more and more aware of the load he carried under his belt. The *djinn*, unused to his queer surroundings, was evidently pacing back and forth.

"Will you kindly cut out walking around inside of me?" Collins begged, hoping no one else was listening.

"Is that a wish?" asked the *djinn*.

"No. Oh, let it go."

Collins shrugged. An old woman walking ahead of him glanced back. Collins closed his lips and tried to look sedate.

But not in time. A hiccup escaped from his mouth.

"Excuse me," mumbled Collins.

"Me also," said the voice from his stomach.

The woman quickly glanced away again.

"Drunken sot," she muttered.

Collins blushed.

"I wish they wouldn't—" he began then stopped.

No. That wouldn't do. He had to be careful about wishes. He mustn't say he wished he could get some sleep, or some food, or a moment's peace. The price to pay was too great.

Yet he must do something. And quickly. Collins realized the impossibility of his situation. The *djinn* must be disposed of.

"Could I wish he wasn't here?" Collins wondered. "Or was Doctor Sweet right when he said I couldn't get rid of him that way?"

He glanced down at the brown bottle he still carried under one arm. The *djinn's* bottle. How to get him back in? That was the problem. That's what he must wish for.

Ouch! The *djinn* was evidently doing a tap dance now. Collins patted his stomach gingerly.

"Who's there?" came the voice.

"Oh, shut up!" Collins barked.

A man beside him suddenly shied away. He cast a leering glance at the bottle under Collins' arm.

Collins ducked into an alley.

"Now see what you're doing," he complained. "Everybody keeps thinking I'm drunk. This simply can't go on."

"Make a wish," the *djinn* coaxed.

Collins brandished his brown bottle in futile rage.

Suddenly he smiled, as inspiration came. He stared at the bottle curiously. Here was his solution, after all!

"All right," he whispered. "I'll make a wish. Get this one, *djinn*. And get it right, because this wish is important."

"To hear is to obey."

Collins took a deep breath in anticipation. He gloated over the words.

"I wish this bottle you came in had never even existed!"

For a moment there was a stunning silence. And then—
Collins felt it in his fingers. A lessening of weight. He glanced

down at the bottle he was holding in his hand. But there was no bottle! There was nothing at all between his fingers.

With a curious shock, Collins realized that there never *had* been anything there. He had never carried a bottle, never seen one. He couldn't exactly *remember* what it looked like.

The little man sighed deeply. "That's that," he breathed.

"You spoke, Master?"

The incredible voice, again. And still from his stomach.

"What the—thought you were gone!"

"Not I," the *djinn* corrected. "Merely the bottle. But I'm not in the bottle, remember. I'm in you."

Collins clasped both hands to his head.

"All right," he groaned. "I can't get rid of you. I give up."

"And let me out?" persisted the *djinn* eagerly.

"I don't know."

Collins lurched out of the alley. He walked along in a daze.

"That does it," he told himself. "Now the bottle's gone. I can never get him back into what doesn't exist."

"Master!"

That hateful voice again.

"What is it?"

"Your third wish, Master?"

Collins couldn't answer. His third wish? He had so many of them. He wished the damned genie wouldn't keep calling his "Master" for one thing. Because in reality, the *djinn* was *his* master. The *djinn* kept him from eating, from sleeping, from associating with human beings. And how Collins wished he could eat and sleep and meet his fellow men again!

But he dare not wish aloud. He dare not release this creature and he couldn't keep on going this way. He couldn't.

Automatically his feet led him up the stairs to his own apartment. On the way the *djinn* joggled up and down inside him with every step. It complained bitterly about the climb, too. Collins was glad the hall was empty.

Oh, well, it wouldn't be for long.

Once inside, Collins went straight to his pantry. There was a fifth of gin there. Gin, by all that was ironic! He opened it and took a swig. A healthy swig. It gave him the courage he needed for what he was about to do.

Collins sat down at the phone and dialed the museum. He had to. He owed it to the girl to tell her. In a moment she answered.

"Edith?"

"Yes—oh, Tom, it's you."

"Edith, I want to say good-bye."

"But Tom, where are you going?"

Collins didn't hesitate before he answered.

"Down to the pier."

"Tom, you're not going to—"

Collins hung up quickly. He'd made a damned fool of himself again. But it was no use. He couldn't tell Edith what he meant to tell her. About the *djinn*. About the way he loved her.

It was loving her that drove him to drink in the first place. That feeling of inferiority. She was always so calm, so cool. So unapproachable. And he was just a little museum clerk.

That's why he had clung to the vase the last three days, even with those men on his trail. Because Doctor Sweet had promised him an assistant curatorship if he managed to get it. Then he and Edith could be married. But now the *djinn* had come and there was no way out.

These were the things he meant to tell her. But he couldn't. And what was the use? He'd go down to the pier now and take the plunge. He and the *djinn* together. It was the only way out.

Collins pocketed his fifth and left. Before going out the hall door, he took another drink. It consoled. And it enabled Collins to walk the five blocks down to the beach.

The *djinn* was mercifully silent. It threshed around from time to time, but Collins didn't care. In a few moments it would all be over.

Collins scanned the deserted autumn vista of the beach. With plodding steps he moved out along the short white stretch of the pier. The water churned icily around the stones.

His head was clearing. That would never do.

Collins took out his gin and drank. Deeply. Then he sat down at the end of the pier. He stared at the greenish-black depths of the water. Water—how he hated it! Gin was better.

He took another swig. The fifth was going down. It would go down and then he would. He drank again. It warmed him.

"Master."

The damned voice again! Collins forced himself to reply.

"What is it?"

"Where are we? I'm warm."

"Never mind."

"But I feel very strange, Master."

Good! The gin was displeasing to the demon. Collins took

another drink, a long one. With malicious satisfaction, he tilted the fifth back.

"Ooooh, Master—that burns!"

"It feels fine."

And it did feel fine. Collins was aware of tipsiness. A pleasant sensation.

"I'm getting all wet," the *djinn* pleaded.

"You'll be wetter in a minute," Collins chuckled.

He would be, too. Because when Collins jumped off the pier—

But that could wait. Another drink now.

Collins began to feel good. He anticipated the moment of release. The water looked inviting now.

"Master—what is this?"

"A little stomach medicine. Just what you advised me."

"But it smells strange."

"You'll get used to it."

"Strong. It's like fire."

Collins began to laugh. "Best stuff I ever drank," he chortled.

"You drink this?" The *djinn* was incredulous.

"Of course."

"Oh."

Then there was silence. Collins drank recklessly.

"This is good." The *djinn's* voice rose on a note of discovery.

"Glad you like it."

"Let's have some more."

"Why not?" Collins took another sip.

"You are right, Master. It is excellent. Warming."

This was the last straw. The *djinn* was actually getting drunk on the gin Collins absorbed!

"Let's have a lot more of it," the voice suggested. It was loud, yet oddly blurred.

Collins obliged with enthusiasm.

"Say, Master."

"Yeah?"

"How 'bout that other wish of yours?"

"Forget it."

"Very kind of you. Very. Have a drink on that."

They drank.

"Hot down here. Makes me thirsty." The *djinn* was slurring his words now. "Can't stand up right."

"Lie down, then."

"Can't lie down. Want another drink."

Again the fifth was lifted. Collins drained the last drop.

"Good. You're th' mos' exalted of all Mas'ers."

Collins could tell the *djinn* was swaying around. He stood up. Now the gin was gone, and it was time to act. The party had been swell while it lasted, but it was over. The thought of entertaining two hangovers at once was impossible. Collins looked down at the water again and took a deep breath.

"Mas'er!"

"What is it?"

"Wanna 'nother drink."

"No," replied Collins brusquely. "No more drinks."

"Please. Got to have one."

Collins exulted. The *djinn* was frankly begging now. Let him—it served him right for the misery he caused.

"Just one. Please."

"No! Why should I give you a drink? What have you ever done for me? You wreck my life, you plot against me, you take possession of my nice warm stomach and jump around. You think I like to walk around feeling as though I were going to have a baby or something?"

"Jus' one little drink?" the *djinn* begged.

"Absolutely none," Collins retorted.

"But I wanna—enchanting stuff—do anything."

Collins felt the *djinn's* drunken frame quiver with eagerness. He glanced down at the empty fifth beside him, then looked at the water again.

Suddenly Collins sat down.

"Listen," he whispered, softly.

"Lis'ning," the *djinn* mumbled.

"You really want that drink?"

"I swear it, Mas'er."

"Then," said Collins, "you can come and get it."

"Wha'ssat?"

"I said you'll have to come after it—I'm tired of pouring the stuff down to you."

"You'll let me out?"

"Why not? If you want a drink, come and get it."

"To hear," mumbled the *djinn*, "is to 'bey."

Collins opened his mouth to reply.

The reply never came. His throat was choked—choked with smoke. A cloud welled from his parted lips, an ebon pillar poured forth in the air above him. Not an arm this time, but a gigantic billow that swirled inchoately in midair.

Collins caught a glimpse of a coalescing pattern—an unbelievable huge torso, towering coal-black limbs, and a pair of bloodshot rolling eyes like striated billiard balls.

“Wait!” he whispered. “It’s down in there.” His trembling finger indicated the fifth of gin.

The inky column wavered drunkenly. Materialization halted.

“You’ll never get it that way,” Collins repeated. “You’re too big.”

The smoke spiraled in woozy indecision. Suddenly it began to contract.

Swiftly it was shrinking to human size, then to child’s height. A little black smoke doll danced over the standing fifth.

“Smaller still,” Collins whispered.

Obediently, the *djinn* contracted. A tiny ebony wisp hovered about the neck of the fifth.

“In there,” Collins directed.

The wisp hesitated. A shrill little piping voice rose.

“But it’s inside the bottle,” it protested maudlinly.

Collins gasped.

“Yes,” he breathed. “And so are you!”

His darting hand pushed the smoky wraith down the neck of the empty fifth bottle. His fingers rammed the cap over the top. He twisted it tightly.

Inside the gin bottle, the *djinn* danced up and down in drunken rage. Its wrinkled little black face was contorted, and Collins saw its mouth shaping curses he could not hear.

Nor did he hear the shrill honking of the horn from the beach behind him.

It was not until Edith had jumped from the car and run clattering out onto the pier to where he stood that Collins turned his head.

Then she was in his arms, sobbing just a little as she poured out her words in a torrent of tenderness.

“Oh, Tom, thank goodness I’m in time . . . poor dear . . . suicide over me . . . Doctor Sweet explained about everything, how you got his vase for him . . . promotion . . . and when I looked out the window and saw those three awful men lying there . . . what you did to them . . . never knew you were so strong and wonderful . . . get married.”

It went something like that, between sobs and hugs and quite undignified kisses. Collins liked it a lot.

Edith retrieved her dignity just once, and only for a moment. She saw the gin bottle standing there on the pier edge and turned away.

“But Tom . . . you’ll have to promise me you’ll stop drinking.”

"Certainly, dear," whispered the little man. "From now on I'm off the bottled goods forever."

Edith smiled happily. Stooping, she picked up the fifth bottle with an impulsive gesture. She flung it into the water.

Collins watched appreciatively. It was a good throw. The bottle bobbed far out on the waves.

"That's a load off my mind," the girl murmured, happily.

"That's a load off my—"

But Collins didn't say it. He merely held Edith very closely to him, so that he couldn't see the *djinn* bottle as it floated away toward the open sea.

Wine of the Sabbat

(*Weird Tales* November 1944)

IT'S TOO DAMN BAD THIS STORY HASN'T GOT THE PROPER SETTING. Prague would do it, I think, or Budapest—one of those foreign burghs that no one knows anything about but vaguely associates with Bela Lugosi or Peter Lorre. That's what this yarn needs; setting and atmosphere—what the books call “build-up” and what critics of weird fiction call “adjectivitis.” But it's just my hard luck that this happens to be true, and I can't see it in my mind any way except that in which it happened. So that's the way I'll have to tell it.

Maybe it's just as well. I've noticed that in what we laughingly call “real life” the big things come pretty much as a surprise. The Paramount Studio Orchestra doesn't play *Leiberstraum* in the background when you propose to a girl. There are no three pages of foreboding description preceding an actual railroad wreck in which you cut your throat. Those infrequent moments of icy horror in real life come suddenly, without warning. Sometimes they occur in the bright sunlight of morning, amidst prosaic happenings. Then it's the contrast, the *unnaturalness* of instantaneous dread in commonplace circumstances, which makes for true horror.

That's the way this thing was—no haunted castles, no mad hypnotists, no ravens wheeling and croaking under an accursed and blood-bloated moon.

But simple and sudden as it was, I still wake up in the middle of the night and feel cold sweat at the memory of Mabel Fiske's party.

When I met Mabel Fiske I was living in Los Angeles. That was before I turned commercial. I had a little room in a flophouse where I ate graham crackers and drank milk and wrote the Great American Novel.

Excuse the autobiography, but it's necessary to account for my relations with Mabel Fiske.

Mabel Fiske had a house near Laguna Beach, a sense of humor, and a wide circle of acquaintances. That's why I liked her.

She had a house, and once a week I could drop in for a square meal. Hunger knows no conscience.

She had a sense of humor, and I like that sort of person. Loneliness is in itself a hunger.

She had a wide circle of acquaintances, and I met interesting people at her place. To a fellow of my garrulity, that's a god-send.

So I cultivated Mabel Fiske, I admit it. Not romantically, just socially. Mabel was a mousy little brunette of at least thirty-five.

Her late husband had been a scenarist of considerable means and since his death she had lived in a sort of haze—a haze in which her old friends moved in an extremely social set that dropped into the house at all hours of the day or night. Her home was a continual open house, open bar, and open forum.

Amongst the crowd that knocked lettuce out of the ice-box, burned the piano-keys brown with cigarettes, and added to the pile of empty fifths in the bath-tub were quite a number of interesting people. Movie folk predominated, but there were also at times visiting business men, college professors, dude ranch cowboys, aviators, taxi-drivers, hermits, cubist painters, radio comics, messiahs, swamis, and admirals of the Pacific Fleet. But the occult note predominated on occasion. Mabel and her late husband seemed to have been on intimate terms with every yogi, divinator, metaphysicist and screwball on the Coast. They generally swarmed down for the weekends, waving their crystals and horoscopes and luck-charms, babbling of Paracelsus and Swedenborg and Hermes and Father Divine. In flowing robes, House of David beards, evening dress and goatees, burlap bags and bare feet—all came to prance under the genial influence of the juniper berry.

Frankly, I found it fascinating. I was impressionable enough to relish calling a film big-shot by his first name; avaricious enough to dream of meeting some befuddled publisher who might give my

book to a waiting world; human enough to enjoy those fantastic parties.

There it was. And there was I.

There was I, on Saturday evening of April 30th, 1940. I hitch-hiked down late that afternoon and hit the house about five. It was almost dinner-time and I had a very healthy appetite.

I walked in—you didn't knock at Mabel's, on a Saturday—and stared around the living room. There was a room worthy of its name. Never have I seen a room that looked quite so *lived* in. The walls were black with smoke, and there were lipstick frescoes on the mantel, and on the floor was what had once been an oriental rug but was now merely a sort of Teheran ash-tray. The furniture stood (and slouched, and tottered) in a war-torn parade of crippled chairs; armless, legless, even seatless. The sofas were sagging hulks of disemboweled stuffing. The hands of the grandfather's clock on the mantel were pulled down to form a mouth, and the face was repainted to caricature Groucho Marx. The fireplace under the mantel housed a portable refrigerator for those too weak to seek the kitchen's nourishment.

Glancing around, I noticed the faces of several old friends. Anyone you ever shared a drink with became an "old friend" at Mabel's.

There was Cyril Bruce, the movie actor—a matinee idol whose afternoon was nearly over. He was a tall, blond chap of about forty; his eyes ravaged by the effects of Kleig lights and bright lights in equal proportions.

Bruce stood deep in conversation with Ensenada Eddie, a swarthy little Filipino whose feet had never been confined by shoe-leather. Ensenada was a mysterious beachcomber who spent all his time writing free verse—he couldn't sell it.

Bruce and Eddie spotted me at the same time, drifted over. Bruce shook hands and Eddie offered me a glass, which meant the same thing to him. "Welcome to Liberty Hall," Bruce chuckled.

"Libertine Hall, I'd call it," remarked a voice behind me. It was Lavinia Hearn who spoke; a statuesque blonde who claimed to be a painter, but exhibited no signs of her work save a heavily-rouged face.

"Don't mind Lavinia, she's bottle-dizzy," said Arch Blaine, the writer's agent, appearing at her side. I liked Blaine; he usually rescued me from the attentions of the schizoid guests.

"Enjoying yourself?" he asked me.

Lavinia answered for me. "He always enjoys himself! But he seldom enjoys anyone else."

"Quite a crowd," I commented to Blaine as Lavinia, Bruce, and Ensenada Eddie wandered off. It was quite a crowd. In addition to those I'd met, I recognized a number of people wandering from the parlor to the kitchen and back. There was a cowboy, a playboy, and a bus-boy; a composer, a housewife, an elderly woman psychiatrist, and a burlesque chorine. They were all (a) going to the kitchen for a drink, (b) coming from the kitchen with a drink, or (c) staying in the kitchen and drinking.

The conversation sparkled like fake champagne.

"So I say listen Zanuck, if you want me to write General Grant into the picture you'll have to cut out the Ritz Brothers—and it was the custom of this Gilles de Rais to procure small children which he—gets fresh with me, see, so I says whaddya want for two beers, a floor show?—all right, I'm a radical. But I'm impartial—I hate everything—He's so naive in his sophistication—I'll mix a flock of them right away—sometimes wonder if people grow up or down—want to know is when's feeding time in this zoo?"

That last sentence struck a responsive chord in my own breast, and lower, in my stomach. I turned to Arch Blaine.

"When *do* we eat?" I inquired.

"When Mabel Fiske gets back," he replied.

Lavinia, entering, heard him. "When Mabel *what*?" she giggled. "Blaine, you outlaw, you aren't implying that our Mabel has gone out?"

Blaine nodded.

"But Mabel never goes out," Lavinia wailed. "It's the Apocalypse."

"She went down to L.A. to pick up some important guests," Blaine offered. Lavinia looked stunned.

"She wouldn't go ten blocks to meet Roosevelt. Or Charlie McCarthy."

"Must be a big evening planned," I said. "Wonder what's up—what kind of guests she's bringing."

"Step into the kitchen," Blaine advised. "The crowd out there ought to give you a hint. Their kind never shows up unless something is doing."

I stepped out. The kitchen was a dark shrine of Bacchus, but today it held queer worshippers. There were dark men in turbans, pale men in togas, gaunt women in flowing gowns. Beards wagged furiously, slim fingers gesticulated in ivory patterns, lips were red

blurs of motion. Such a queerly dressed talkative crowd meant only one thing—occultists.

It was a meeting of the Isms and the Osophies; a congregation of Ologies and Abrists. The faces, on the whole, were unfamiliar to me, but they were interesting. The blur of sounds: deep male voices, shrill female tones, outlandish foreign inflections, blended into a conversational hash from which I gradually extracted information.

Tonight was April 30th. Tomorrow was May Day, then—maypoles and Communist parades, all that sort of thing. But this was not the point. Tonight was Walpurgis Eve. Walpurgis Eve, the immemorial night of the Sabbat—the Witches' Sabbat. Black Mass Eve.

On Walpurgis Eve the demon stars formed in a black conjunction. On Walpurgis Eve things walked that were meant to crawl; things crawled that were meant to lie and rot. On Walpurgis Eve the covens assembled and drank in honor of the Master of all Mystery. On Walpurgis Eve all ancient evil became reanimate. Christians kept their holy days, and Diabolists kept their unholy nights.

But, where was Mabel Fiske on Walpurgis Eve?

Mabel had learned that Doctor Voidin was expected on the Coast; Voidin the Satanist. She meant to bag him, hence her trip.

This Doctor Voidin, who was he now? A rather fabulous figure; wealthy European Manicheist. A dabbler in necromancy, some said.

What was he doing on the Coast? Oh, that was a secret. Of course, there were stories of underground Devil-worship out here; of a quite sizable cult whose devotees included many wealthy eccentrics, a smattering of movie-colony folk, and a number of serious students. Hearsay had it that the doctor was out to conduct the Mass—the Black Mass of the Sabbat, always held on Walpurgis Eve.

When and where? Who could say? Naturally, it was a secret. The Satanists did not reveal their faith or its mysteries. But it really was no joking matter, and there were amazing tales of the worship and how the rites were conducted, and why, and who attended. And where the blazes is that other fifth of gin?

I stood in the doorway and listened to that crowd of dilettantes babble of mysteries older than the Sphinx, and all at once the incongruity struck me full force. I started to laugh. Then I walked in and had a drink.

Arch Blaine joined me, and Lavinia, and Cyril Bruce. We were talking about *The Golden Bough* and double-scotches and Kwong-fu-Tze and Thorne Smith and *Till Eulenspiegel* and Bruce's new picture and Blaine's sobriety and Lavinia's tipsiness, and I just switched the conversation around to my book, very cleverly, and started to down my fifth drink, when Mabel Fiske entered.

Mabel Fiske entered, and that was unusual. Mabel was the kind of a woman who appeared; who drifted in. But tonight, despite my slight befuddlement, I could see that she *entered*.

Her slight figure poised momentarily in the doorway. I'd never quite swallowed that phrase—"poised momentarily"—when I read it; but that was exactly what Mabel did. She surveyed the crowd, and then deliberately advanced. Mabel was sober. Mabel's brown eyes sparkled.

"Hello, Bob," she greeted me. "Bruce, Blaine—you're wearing an alcoholo, Lavinia—help me to get these hammerheads out of here, will you please?"

We circulated, pushed, led, persuaded the majority of the drinking esthetes into the other room. Then Mabel beckoned to the waiting figures in the doorway.

"Come in, Doctor," she invited.

Now I had thought it was a joke. I'd been drinking with Blaine and ribbing him about the Sabbath, and picturing the long-haired old boy Doctor Voidin was going to be. Lavinia had called him a "French poodle with a dash of Sigmund Freud about the beard."

But the tall, cadaverously thin figure in the black coat was real. His was the pale face of the ascetic; his eyes the ancient black of forgotten midnights.

No, it wasn't the scotch in me, nor the Ben Hecht. Doctor Voidin's stare sobered; and warned. He brushed the single strand of silver back into his black, curly hair, and extended his talon—I swear to Heaven, for a moment I thought it was that!—to shake hands. His voice was the deep purr of a cat's. A black, wise, sinister feline.

"Pleased. You have written of goety, no? We must talk.

"My associate, Dubois."

I would have guessed "Hassim." But it was "Dubois," just as it had once been "Christophe." The man was a gigantic black; Haitian, no doubt—ebony in evening dress.

"And the Reverend Mr. Orsac."

There was mockery in the way Doctor Voidin pronounced the title, and mockery in the eyes of the fat little bald-headed Orsac

who grasped my hand in the cold, pudgy grip of a meeting in the morgue. I didn't like this fish-eyed little foreigner, and I didn't care for the sneering Negro giant. As for the tall, thin figure out of Poe—

"We will meet again at dinner," purred Doctor Voidin. He turned, with the Negro and the clergyman, and left the room in Mabel's company.

Lavinia smirked in astonishment. "What a trio," she remarked to herself. "Dracula, Uncle Tom, and Bishop Shapiro."

"That man is—disturbing," was Blaine's comment. He stared into my eyes, and I nodded slowly, knowing his thought.

"I wonder if Mabel knows just what's goin' on," Blaine continued. "He isn't one of the occult boys, by a long shot. I'm pretty skeptical, but if I ever saw living, psychologically incarnate Evil walk, it's walking in that man. I'm worried about tonight."

"Death," giggled Lavinia, "Takes a Holiday. And what a time he'll have at this party!"

Neither Blaine nor I could laugh at this sally. There was an ominous ring of truth in the witticism.

There was an ominous ring of the dinner-bell. Mabel had opened up the little-used dining room, and we turned to enter. There were only twenty of us at the table. Perhaps a dozen or so of the lesser figures departed, urged by Mabel. She had a newfound spirit of purposefulness which surprised me; ushering the guests out firmly.

Mabel shared the head of the board with Doctor Voidin. The black Dubois and Reverend Orsac sat nearby. Lavinia, Cyril Bruce, Blaine, and the esoteric crew comprised the remainder of the company.

It was a good dinner, for Mabel's place. The long table was spotless, for once. Food had evidently been brought from a restaurant, and it was decently served.

But no one spoke. There was a definite tension in the air. Mabel's changed manner seemed to amaze her friends to silence. The occultists glanced nervously at the grim figure of Doctor Voidin. To them he seemed appropriately playing the part of skeleton at the feast. Blaine and I watched his imperturbable death-mask throughout the meal.

No one ate much. Mabel whispered to Voidin, Voidin whispered to Orsac and Dubois.

I remembered those nasty rumors floating around the crowd in the kitchen and wondered. The rumor-mongers themselves were

wondering, too. I could tell that, because they began to drink.

Lavinia set the pace, of course. "Brrrr," she giggled. She rose and went into the kitchen for a bottle. Others followed. It was steady, serious drinking at the table from then on. No laughter, no sociability—just a shuddering glance at the corpse-like face of the doctor and a hasty gulping from the glasses.

A mood had fallen over the company; one of those herd-impulse things which at times seems to grip a social gathering *en masse*.

"Condemned man drank a hearty breakfast," Lavinia whispered. She poured for Blaine and myself. The scene began to remind me more strongly of Poe—of his story, *King Pest* about the revellers in a charnel house during a plague. A drinking-bout of the doomed, as it were.

We drank. Blaine stared at me. Mabel mumbled to Voidin. The occult brethren re-filled their glasses. And yet, there was nothing *really* wrong, or out of place. But that room held panic. I could feel it rising from each quickened breath. The way Voidin *stared* down the table. The gloating look in Orsac's eyes, the sneer of Dubois' face. Mabel's changed expression of determination. Something was very wrong. Was this really Mabel's house, were these Mabel's carefree friends? Something alien had crept in; crept in and crouched, waiting. Waiting for—what?

Mabel rose from her chair.

"Listen, friends. I have a surprise for you."

I caught it at once; the forced tone in her voice. She wasn't natural any more. Something had happened.

She continued. "Doctor Voidin, here, has just returned from a European trip and he tells me he's managed to get hold of some real wine. He brought along a half-dozen bottles or so, out in my car. Shall we try it?"

"Yeah. Why not?" And so forth, in varying tones and inflections. The guests were just primed for that psychological suggestion. I looked at Blaine queerly, and he winked. Yes, there was a *purpose* behind all this.

Dubois left the room. Presently the black returned, assisting the single servant in passing glasses around the table. Then he produced a number of tall, green bottles that bore no labels.

"Say, what kind of stuff is this?" asked Bruce.

Doctor Voidin smiled. "It's a special preparation of my own vineyards," he replied. "A sacramental wine."

Dubois was pouring.

The words should have clicked in my brain, but I felt dazed. Previous drinks had set my mind wandering in dark channels of unwholesome fancy. For perhaps ten minutes I sat there in a sort of abstracted trance. I suppose I became aware of what was happening only when the conversation started.

For suddenly—it seemed sudden—everyone commenced to speak. I looked up. There was a queer animation in every countenance.

I looked down. My fingers clutched the stem of a wine-glass, filled with a dark red liquor.

I glanced about. Twenty hands were duplicating my gesture; clutching a glass of ruby fluid, raising it to drain the contents. Black, gigantic statue of silence, Dubois passed around pouring from the long green bottles as he refilled the glasses.

I raised my glass to my lips and inhaled the scent. It was bitter, yet alluring. It did not appeal to the physical senses, but to the imagination. It was the kiss of a cold woman named Mystery, it was the chill caress of a serpent; it was the enflamed embrace of a stone Sphinx.

I shook myself out of *that*. Where the devil did such thoughts come from? Looking up, I saw Voidin. He too was holding a glass, but as I watched, he carefully slipped it under the table for a moment and brought it up emptied. He wasn't drinking.

Neither was I. I nudged Blaine, who followed my gaze. Together, very discreetly we followed Voidin's example. Dubois didn't notice. He refilled Blaine's glass, my glass, Voidin's glass. The strong perfume of the wine rose again, and I fought against the peculiar drugging scent. Quickly I looked about. That buzz of conversation sounded *wrong*. And on my left I saw Cyril Bruce's glassy eyes. He looked through me and said:

"Many are the moons that ride the night when the peacock soars to shadowed khem and the dark lord ascends to the throne of his delight."

He said it like that. Bruce, the actor, said it like that—no inflection, no capitalization, no punctuation in the monotony of his cold, dead tones. I stared raptly into his dead face as he drank his second glass.

"And over the graves the mandragora embrace for this is the night of their desire when all passion creeps from dark places to rule men who share the sabbat—"

I turned to Lavinia, stared into her purple pupils as her coral lips parted.

"Hail the Black Goat of the Woods! Prance from the stars, O Prince, and thy hooves shall be bathed in shining red! The Black Goat comes—"

Quietly, I slipped my glass under the table and poured the refilled contents out upon the carpet. As I did so I again became aware of the abominable reek of the wine, welling in a black bouquet. It was the smell of hasheesh, the scent of musk, the odor of aphrodisiac, the perfume of warm blood on an obscene altar.

Voidin's wine, from his own vineyards—or the Devils' brew!
Wine of the Sabbat.

The words flamed through my brain.

The wine of Evil—the liquor that transformed men's nature, as the devil's ointment was said to transform the bodies of witches and wizards. It was being used.

Circe's wine.

I stared at faces—once familiar faces—about me. Yes, Circe's wine. For I saw not men, but animals. Hog-snouts, hound muzzles, feline eyes and wolf-teeth and bat-ears and red slaving mouths crept through distorted flesh. The light caught each shadowed expression and caused it to simulate some animal countenance. And from the throats came the growls of beasts.

The food was gorged, and ever the red wine poured. Claws snatched the glasses refilled by the silent Dubois. Talons trembled as they held beakers to snarling lips so that the long red tongues might lap.

They drank deeply, and then in torrents came that incomprehensible jumble of speech.

At the head of the table sat the Reverend Orsac, his wine untouched, fish-eyes closed. Mabel Fiske was chuckling with laughter. Doctor Voidin looked about him and smiled.

His smile was somehow worse than any of the bestial grimaces on the faces about me. It was a smile that could not, should not be—the smile of a corpse, the smirk of a death's-head.

He *knew*.

And Mabel knew. That laughter—for the first time I saw Mabel Fiske. There had been a method in her madness, a purpose. This was a climax, a consummation. It had all been planned, arranged.

The feast went on. The feast indeed! Mewing and braying, cackling and moaning like animals—the people I had once known drank of the red wine. Man into beast.

And then, as the shrieking rose to a crescendo—beast into demon. Voidin rose to his feet and said, "Come. It is the Hour!"

They followed into the other room; followed on hands and knees, crawling, leaping, rending their garments. Cyril Bruce was a hound from hell as he turned and bit savagely at Lavinia's leg in the doorway. The Reverend Orsac, Dubois, Mabel, and Doctor Voidin paused near the threshold in a whispering group.

And I—ludicrous figure, grotesque *farceur* in a melodramatic setting—crouched cowering under the table where Blaine had dragged me. We listened to Voidin's triumphant purr.

"You have worked well, Mrs. Fiske. Better than I had hoped for. There was no trouble introducing the wine to these sycophants."

"Three years," muttered Mabel, in low tones I didn't always distinguish. "Three years to pave the way—tolerated all sorts of fools—gained the reputation for eccentricity—rented the house and posed as one of them—adapt themselves to the plan. When will the Change occur?"

Her speech capitalized the word. What Change? I wondered desperately for there were hints in her speech. Had she deliberately planned all this? In conspiracy with Voidin she had lured us here to put us under the influence of that accursed wine. But why?

Voidin's voice.

"Shall occur at once. Did you raise the Altar? Very well. I am ready to officiate. I have the sacrifice, and the Host."

Altar. Priest. Sacrifice. Host. Walpurgis Eve. *The Black Mass*.

And now from the next room, organ strains. Dubois played the organ. Dubois tortured the organ; he flayed its keys with massive, claw-like fingers that tore screams and sobs and groans that rose from Hell. It was the *Dies Irae* of the damned he played, beneath yellow candle-light, in a room evidently transformed during our meal by silent servitors. Incense flickered forth from braziers against newly hung black velvet drapes on the walls. And at the head of the room an Altar had been reared. This I saw from my vantage beneath the table, through a slit in the portieres. Now the view was obscured by the moving legs of Voidin, Mabel and Reverend Orsac.

Blaine nudged me and whispered.

"I never would have believed it of her," he muttered. "A secret Satanist, paving the way, luring excitable guests to be drugged by the wine—"

Guests? The thought swept through my brain. Where were the guests in the other room?

"What comes to the Sabbat?"

"Witches and warlocks that ride the winds. Men in the diverse and curious shapes of strange beasts."

For some reason these words, resurrected in memory from some old monograph on demonology, now whispered through me. A part of my mind was struggling with hints of horror. Drugged wine, a Circe's wine that changed men to beasts. There was a Sabbat wine, I knew, drawn from grapes plucked by the moon of mid-night; grapes nourished strangely by blood. I had read of such things.

And I had read the phrase that now rang in my head—*"Men in the diverse and curious shapes of strange beasts."*

Now the two thoughts met and mingled to produce a monstrous surmise. Satan is worshipped by mockery, and the human tenement is sacred because it holds a soul. If the human form can be violated, what greater mockery exists? Drugged wine. Beasts attend the Sabbat—

I stared into the other room and saw nightmare come true. For from the opposite side of the chamber they came, pouring in as an obscene horde. The gigantic shadows crept along the wall before I saw them—the shadows that should not, could not be. And then the bodies; the loping, trotting, crawling bodies!

A black dog, tongue lolling as it squatted and grinned a grin of agony. A black dog with the tormented eyes of Cyril Bruce!

The great gray cat entered with mincing terror; statuesque even in fear. A picture of Lavinia crossed my brain. The rats padded in; and the sow with the human eyes; the little green toad that hopped and hopped, croaking with fright and shame. Voidin tended the flames in the brazier set at the altar sides. He wore a black cassock now, and Orsac was garbed in a red cowl from which his white face leered forth. He grinned at the beasts and his laughter rose.

Of course I couldn't stand it. Mabel was just an eccentric alcoholic, Lavinia was a drunken *poseur*, and Bruce was an ordinary enough rounder, and this was a stucco house in California. We were in the Twentieth Century; not five miles away a movie house was playing Shirley Temple, and in a parked car down the road someone was listening to Raymond Scott's Quintette—

My mind fought. Mabel's queer guests had brought in a pack of animals for their screwball ceremonies, and my friends had gone. These amateur theatricals in the front parlor were just that.

So I desperately reasoned. But all the while I kept reviewing Mabel's scheme; how she'd planned for this night and given her guests the Sabbat Wine so that they might be changed to beast-

forms and worship the power of Satan. I heard again the horrid cries from human throats, saw again the terrible change in visages once familiar. I saw the black dog with the eyes of Cyril Bruce, and the gray cat that walked like Lavinia. I fought, but I could not forget. And from the next room the organ boomed, I heard the whimpering of beasts, and smelled the acrid animal scent mingling with incense reek.

I fought, and lost.

"God, give me a drink!" I gasped. Blaine, crouching under the table next to me, reached one hand around and fumbled for a bottle. I grasped it and drank avidly in the darkness. The liquor warmed my senses.

"Now! We've got to do something." There was command in my voice. Blaine grasped my shoulder.

"I've a revolver in my car," he whispered. "If I can make it."

I gripped his hand. "Hurry!"

He scuttled away, crawled through the portieres, through the throng. I strained to see his weaving figure as it reached the hall and disappeared. Then I sat back and took another drink.

And staring into the parlor, waiting, waiting, I saw Mabel enter. She was clad in white, and bore the Shepherd's Crook, which was shaped in a way that I cannot name.

She was Circe, face alight with the white fire that burns up from the Pit. The music ceased, the mewing beasts bowed down, and Voidin stood before the altar, in his hands the knife of sacrifice. The chanting began, and the animals moaned at the goading of Mabel's staff. The Sabbat was at hand!

I crouched watching, suddenly numbed. I felt cold. There is a tingling sensation when one's foot falls asleep, and now this sensation invaded my entire body. In another way it entered my mind. Shadows seemed to pour over my brain, buzzing away all thought. I felt it, and struggled to resist. I seemed able to clear my mind, but the numbness of my body persisted.

And then I jerked upright. Blaine had re-appeared. He stood in the doorway as the chanting rose, and his face was a grim shield of vengeance. In one hand he held the revolver, and as I watched he raised it, pointed it at Voidin's chest. I saw him.

They saw him.

"Slay!" The voice crackled from Voidin's throat. And the animal horde turned, swiftly. Blaine hadn't expected that. The pack was upon him even as he fired. The shot went wild, and then they were milling around his waist, leaping up for his throat. A

dozen furry forms tore at Blaine's flesh and he went down, down in a moaning melee. He screamed.

I screamed. I clutched the portieres for support there in the doorway, for that numbness was stealing over me. My knees were giving way under me. I tried desperately hard to stand erect, but my body burned, and the bottle I held in one hand began to slip through my fingers. Madly I struggled to act.

I made it. Racing forward, tottering forward, I swung my bottle down, beating at furry backs. Fangs snapped at me; fangs freshly reddened at a ghastly feast. My torn fingers groped for the floor. I clutched the revolver, scooped it from where it had fallen. I was burning to the floor, they were baying at my waist, and yet I dared not sink. I wheeled and fired a shot, not into that nightmare horde, but through the portieres. The burst of quick flame was welcome as it seared into mounting light across the doorway. The throng turned and howled. Voidin leaped from the altar, Mabel and Dubois at his heels.

But the revolver held them back. The flames spread swiftly—they had to, I prayed. Flames cleanse.

I held them; held them in swirling smoke and rising heat. They knew my purpose—to destroy them in fire.

Then through the wall of brightness I saw that they were looking at me in a peculiar way. And I felt the shivery horror of burning lance through my body—burning not of fire. I felt my bones wrench, and then I seemed to be on my knees. I was smaller, standing on shortened feet and hands as well. I was—I must admit it—on all fours.

They laughed then, as though something had happened, and tried to leap through the mounting barrier of the flames. But merciful Fate was with me, for of a sudden the fire blazed as the wood caught, and it swirled through the room fed on oils spilled from the brazier. Cries of horror drowned in a crackling red sea as I turned.

Turned on hands and knees—turned to stare down at the bottle still resting in my palm, the bottle Blaine had fumbled for under the table, the bottle from which I drank.

The bottle—containing the Wine of the Sabbat!

And it did not rest in my palm. It rested in a *paw*. They had laughed, and I was numbed, and on all fours. I had drunk the Sabbat Wine!

Then I crawled into the hall on hands and knees. I saw the big hall mirror bright in the flames behind me, stared at myself in the mocking glass. It was then that I screamed—although what rose in

my throat was not a scream. The dreadful sound was a confirmation of what tortured eyes revealed to me in the reflection. I leapt from that burning house and surrendered to nightmare. Since Walpurgis Eve I have never returned.

I don't know how I got home. It's a long way from Laguna to Los Angeles, but I made it.

A man can't run that far, nor crawl on hands and knees. I might have been drunk or drugged by that wine, but I made it. Because the next morning I woke in my garret bed. I was naked, and tired, and shocked to read in the papers of the house that had burned last night in Laguna Beach. But I was in human shape, and to that my sanity clung. I wish I could convince myself that the Wine of the Sabbat was ordinary vintage.

I could, too, if I were not such an untidy person. Being untidy I had neglected to sweep my garret in days past. And the cruel sunlight of that morning glinted only too plainly on the uncarpeted area of floor stretching from the open door to my bed. The uncarpeted floor was dusty, and the dust had been recently disturbed.

Leading from door to bed were a series of great tracks in the dust; tracks leading inward only—the unmistakable, the damnable, the maddening pawprints of a giant wolf!

I lay back in bed and pulled the covers tightly over my head.

Soul Proprietor

(*Weird Tales* November 1945)

"For Sale—One human soul, in reasonable condition, to highest bidder. Owner must dispose of same at once. What am I offered? — Box 418."

PETE RYAN READ THE DAMP PROOF SHEET OF THE ADVERTISEMENT and whistled.

"You aren't going to run this ad in our personal column are you?" he objected.

"Why not?" Editor Lesser raised his head and met Pete Ryan's scowl with a grin.

"But it's screwy," Ryan protested. "I mean, the whole thing's obviously some kind of fake."

"The \$4.60 paying for this ad is genuine currency," replied Lesser. "And we must give value received. We have no editorial control over the advertisers in our paper. Ethically, we can't refuse to take an ad, either, unless the message is obscene or offensive."

"Don't you think this ridiculous hoax is offensive?" stormed Pete Ryan. "It's a case for the Better Business Bureau, that's what it is!"

The older man pushed back his chair and shook his head as he confronted Ryan's scowling gaze. Lesser tried hard to suppress a

strangely youthful twinkle in his eyes. Clearing his throat, he ventured a reply.

"I hardly think so," he mused, putting his finger-tips together and staring down at the desk. "If somebody wants to sell his soul, why shouldn't he advertise? That's sound business, you know. It pays to advertise."

"But how can anyone sell their soul?" complained Ryan.

"I don't know," Lesser admitted. "but if he can produce the merchandise when he gets paid for it, there's no hoax involved. Certainly the Better Business Bureau hasn't got an investigator in occultism—"

Lesser halted. A twinkle came into his eyes. "That's it!" he chuckled. "An investigator in occultism!"

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning *you*, my boy!"

"Me?"

"Exactly." The older man hunched elbows over the desk and talked rapidly. "What do you think those dogs on the city desk will do when they see this item in the bladder? They'll send out a leg man to cover the yarn. Find out who inserted the ad and try to build up a godawful 'human interest' story.

"Well, we'll just beat them to the punch. We'll go out and interview this advertising client. We'll get there first and sew the story up. We'll build a little feature to promote the sale of want ads. We'll get the jump on all of them. We'll—"

"*We?*" interrupted Pete Ryan, skeptically.

"Uh—not exactly. *You* will cover this story."

"You know what you can do with—"

The twinkle disappeared, and Editor Lesser's eyes narrowed. "That's an assignment, Ryan," he snapped.

Young Pete Ryan had been with the Want Ad Department long enough to know when to keep his mouth shut. This was definitely one of those times.

"That's settled, then," his boss went on. "Early edition will hit the street. Better get started tomorrow morning. Meanwhile I'll warn the city desk to lay off—it's our baby for promotion angles."

He burrowed among the papers on his desk.

"Here's the address," he said, holding out a crumpled slip of stationery.

"Be on the spot tomorrow morning—bright, early, and sober. Inquire for the party who inserted this ad. Ask if there have been any answers."

"But suppose they won't tell me anything?" asked Ryan.

"Listen to what wants to be a reporter!" sneered Editor Lesser. "You talk like that and you'll be selling want ads all your life."

He bit his lip for a moment. "Here's your angle," he suggested. "Tell the party you're with our sales force, and it's part of the service to see if the ad pulls any results. Keep talking. Get all the story you can.

"Ten to one, it's just some crackpot. But there's a chance we might really dig up a great yarn."

Pete Ryan frowned. "You should talk about crackpots," he grumbled. "Of all the screwball ideas, this takes the cake. Souls for sale!"

"Don't be childish," said Editor Lesser. "Be broadminded, like I am. Why I'd sell my own soul, if I could get a fair offer!"

Pete Ryan faced his boss, grinning. "If you ever insert an ad offering your soul for sale," he declared, "you could be sued for fraud!"

The door closed behind him, just in time to deflect the inkwell that Editor Lesser hurled at his departing head.

II

Pete Ryan walked up the steps to the door of the big brownstone house. The morning sun beamed, but not Ryan.

"A fine assignment," he muttered. "Oh well, here goes."

His index finger pressed the buzzer. Footsteps pattered along the hall beyond, and he braced himself.

"Bet two bits it's Dracula," he murmured. "Nope, I'm wrong. It's a zombie."

That was hardly an accurate description of the pert, smiling colored maid who opened the door.

"Yes, sir?"

"Pardon me, but I'm looking for the party who inserted an advertisement in yesterday's paper."

"Step in, please."

Ryan stepped along a mahogany-panelled hallway. The maid led him toward a parlor down the hall.

He went in, trying to repress a stare of admiration as he gazed at the handsome interior. The furniture was dated, but it consisted of opulent period pieces that hinted of luxury and good taste. Deep carpeting almost clung to his ankles as he set his feet down firmly and sank into an overstuffed chair.

"No screwball put that ad in," he mused. "Anyone rich enough to afford this stuff deserves to be called eccentric, anyway."

The maid left the room, and Ryan waited. He was getting strangely nervous. There was something definitely suspicious about all this. . . .

There was a moment of silence. Ryan strained his ears for the sound of approaching footsteps. Right now he didn't know *what* to expect. A decadent old millionaire, hoping to play Faust . . . a cynical amateur diabolist . . . a foreign nobleman . . . a degenerate younger son out of Huysmans. . . .

Footsteps.

Ryan braced himself.

A figure appeared in the doorway, and Ryan almost whistled.

The girl was gorgeous. Sheer brunette perfection. Ryan's eyes admirably catalogued her charms—shimmering black hair, coiled at the nape of a shapely, creamy neck—blue eyes, piquantly slanted—full, sensitive, scarlet lips—a body moulded from the stuff which dreams are made of. She was a dream come true.

Young Ryan had little experience with dreams. Not knowing what to say, he blurted out the thought foremost in his mind.

"You're not the person who inserted that ad about the soul, are you?" he gasped.

"Yes. What do you offer for it?" replied the girl, calmly.

Ryan flushed. "Well—you see—that is, I'm not a prospective purchaser," he stammered.

"Then what is the meaning of this visit?" persisted the girl. The smile had vanished from her face. "Who are you, and how did you find my address? I listed a box number in the ad."

Once again Ryan, unprepared for duplicity, replied with the truth. He gave his name and occupation and ran through the little prepared speech about dropping around to see if the ad had "pulled" results. But by the time he had finished, the girl was smiling once more.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I misunderstood you." Her lips shaped a sigh. "But I was hoping you were a genuine customer."

"Then you haven't had any results?" Pete Ryan attempted to assume a professional attitude and interest.

"Well. I've just come from the letter box now," said the girl. "I found letters of protest from two religious organizations, one utterly insane scribble from a fanatic, a note from a would-be wolf, an anonymous threat, and a bottle of Pluto Water from a practical joker."

Ryan grinned. "But honestly now, isn't this whole thing some sort of practical joke on your part?"

"Not at all, Mr. Ryan." The brunette beauty faced him squarely. "I'm deadly serious about this matter."

"But why, Miss—er—"

"Cabot. Lucille Cabot," she answered. She sat down on the sofa and crossed her shapely legs as she lit a cigarette. "Is your interest in my affairs personal or professional?" she asked.

Ryan shrugged and smiled. "Both, I'm afraid," he answered, softly.

"Well, then. The story's simple, really. Father had a lot of money. Mother died when I was still a baby, and I've spent most of my time in private schools. When I graduated two years ago I came back here to live with Father. Then he passed away. The lawyers went over his estate and found that he'd made bad investments. I was left with the house, a load of debts, and some bad securities."

"But that doesn't explain anything!" Ryan protested. "After all, selling one's soul for the sake of a few debts—if you can sell such a thing as a soul—it's utterly fantastic!"

"Really? Then I'm afraid there's nothing further to discuss. Good day, Mr. Ryan." Her tones were icy.

"Now wait a minute! Don't take it that way," Ryan soothed. "I'm anxious to listen. It's only that all this strikes me as a little strange."

"There's nothing strange about it," said Lucille Cabot. "What can a girl in my position do? I have two choices. I can take a sordid job, for which I am not suited. Not a very pleasant choice, that one. Or I can do my best to find a wealthy husband. And that's all."

"What's wrong with that?" demanded Ryan. "Millions of women face those choices every day. Some of them take their sordid jobs and mould splendid careers out of them. Others marry, and not necessarily for money, either. Strikes me as a pretty good solution. With your schooling and beauty you're better off than most. Why not settle down, make up your mind to—"

"Are you quite done?" Lucille Cabot rose. Her slanted blue eyes flashed fire. Yet her voice was gentle, almost maternal.

"You stupid, petty fool," she sighed. Her tender tones lent incongruity to her words. "Look at me," she said, coming close.

Ryan didn't miss the opportunity.

"No, don't stand there goggling like a sick calf," breathed the girl. "Look into my eyes. Look into my eyes and tell me if you think I was meant to be a clerk, or a stupid housewife."

Ryan stared into cerulean depths. There was something about this girl, something vital and intense, that swept aside all doubts. She *was* sincere.

"I was destined for greater things," she whispered. "Haven't you ever dreamed of power—riches—reaching the heights?"

Ryan nodded dumbly. There was a tightness in his throat.

"Haven't you ever wanted to reach out and shake down the stars?" Her voice was low, vibrant. "Aren't there ambitions, hidden desires, which if realized are worth the price of the human soul?"

She stood close to him, very close. He could feel her aura, the pulsation of power emanating from her lovely presence.

"In olden times, men conjured up demons and received boons," she said. "I am not a sorceress. I cannot cast spells. I cannot call up the Devil. But perhaps there exists, somewhere, somehow, a man who can. A man with which to bargain. For I swear to you, to gain what I desire, I'd deal with the Devil himself."

"But—" said Mr. Ryan.

The buzzing doorbell cut through his objection. The maid appeared in the hallway.

"Gentleman to see you, Miss Lucille," she said softly.

"Show him in," commanded the girl.

It was as simple as that.

Into the room walked his Satanic Majesty—the Devil.

III

"You have a soul to sell?" asked the Devil, politely.

"I have."

"I would like to purchase it," he purred.

"What am I offered?"

"What do you desire?"

He came close to Lucille Cabot, but the girl did not flinch. For a long minute he stared directly into her oblique eyes.

"You shall have all that and more," he smiled.

Then Lucille broke. Her composure drained away as she shuddered and drew back from the tall man in black—the man with the two horned forelocks of raven hair, the pointed mustachio and waxed goatee—the man with the sabre eyebrows, the deep-set, burning red eyes and cleft chin of the Devil.

"Wh-who are you?" she quavered.

"Who do I look like?"

"The Devil himself—but you can't be!"

"Why can't I?"

"There's no such person as the Devil."

He smiled. "If I adopted such a skeptical attitude, I might reply that there is no such thing as a human soul."

Ryan interrupted. "Let's get down to cases," he snapped.

The black eyes turned and fixed upon the young man's face. "Who are you?"

Lucille opened her mouth to intervene, but Ryan stepped forward. "I'm with the sales department of the *Daily Press*," he offered. "I'm representing Miss Cabot in this matter."

The girl turned away, eyes twinkling at his impudence. But she did not stop him.

"Now," said Ryan, "what I want to know is—just who are you and what are your credentials for making an offer to purchase a soul?"

"All right, wise guy," said the stranger. "I'll give. My name's Sam Bolman, but I travel under the stage name of the Mighty Mephisto."

"You're that stage magician?" asked Pete Ryan.

"Yeah, that's right. Now here's the angle. I'm opening a new vaude unit for a tour, see? I see this ad in the paper and I say to myself, here's a hot idea for a publicity tie-up. I'll look up this bozo and hire him as an assistant or something. Now that I find out the party who put in the ad is a pretty dame, it's all the better, get me? We can work up a nifty of a stunt. Miss Cabot, we'll announce that you sold your soul to me, understand? Then we go out on tour. I'm willing to pay—"

"Sorry. We're not interested," said Ryan, curtly.

"Hey, wait a minute, fella!"

"We're after bigger game," Ryan explained. "This isn't a gag. This is on the level."

"You mean you actually want to sell a soul to Satan?" breathed the Mighty Mephisto.

"Or to anyone else who will pay the price," said Ryan. "Now, if you happen to know of any way to evoke a demon—"

"I'm getting out of here," announced the magician. "You're stark, raving screwy, that's what you are!"

As the outer door banged shut behind him, Lucille Cabot sighed. Her big eyes clouded as she faced Ryan once more.

"It's hopeless, I'm afraid. They're all alike. Either they're crazy or they think I am. This was my last foolish effort, but I can see it's no use. Now what will I do?"

Pete Ryan grinned. "I've decided that quite a while ago," he announced. "I guess you'll just have to marry me!"

IV

The funny part of it was that she did.

It took two weeks—two frantic, fantastic weeks of courtship.

Lucille had ordered him from the house at once, naturally. He called that night, the next day and the next. He wrote letters, sent flowers, telegrams, and inserted ads in the *Personals* column of the paper. He wined, dined, and wooed her. He did all the usual foolish things.

There were no further repercussions on her advertisement. And before the week was up, the incident of their meeting was almost forgotten; at least by Pete Ryan.

He talked to her very candidly, very sincerely, very earnestly. He told her of his own ambitions to reach the top, but insisted that one must move sanely, serenely. He informed Lucille that she was a little off balance, a little introverted. When Ryan learned of her love for bizarre jewelry, outlandish dress, fantastic music, and odd books, he took her to task.

"We'll get out and live," he promised her. "What you need is a little laughter, a little gayety. You've been alone too much. You brood, get morbid too easily. It isn't right that a beautiful girl like you should have such weird notions."

No YMCA lecturer could have done a better job. Ryan felt as if he had "converted" her when she consented to dine and dance that second week.

The marriage itself was a little more difficult to bring off, but he managed it. One night after they returned to her home, they sat in her father's old library and talked before the dying fire. She snuggled into his arms.

"All right," she sighed. "Right away, then, if you want me."

The usual embrace punctuated the discussion for a while.

"But it must be a civil ceremony," she insisted. "No fuss or bother."

"Anything you say," he agreed. "Just so it's quick. I'll get the license tomorrow. We can be married Saturday. I'll take two weeks off and we'll go south for the honeymoon."

He rose, radiant of eye, and paced the floor in growing enthusiasm and excitement.

Abruptly he halted before the bookshelves.

"What's all this?" he demanded.

"Why, just some of father's old books."

Ryan stared at the brown and black-backed tomes. Thick, ponderous volumes. Iron-hasped books with yellowed, crumbling pages. Thick, illuminated Gothic texts. Titles in Greek and Latin.

"*Demonolatra*," he read. "*Ye Complete Grimoires*."

He stared at her. "I thought you said you didn't have any of these books?" he said. "This stuff deals with sorcery, doesn't it? Black magic?"

"Oh, darling, those books are no good. Father made a hobby of collecting such items. But it's all nonsense. I admit that's where I got the idea for inserting the ad, though."

He grasped her slim shoulders with ruthless fingers. He stared deeply into her slanted blue eyes.

"Promise me one thing," he whispered. "I don't know much about all this. I'm not asking you to tell me. But you must promise me this much—never try to sell your soul to the Devil or anyone or thing else."

"I promise."

She offered the red seal of her lips. And Ryan knew she told the truth and was content. And so they were married and—

V

Saturday night was hectic. The afternoon wedding was followed by a dinner. Editor Lesser had insisted on that, and Lucille bore it with good grace. After all, at ten they would be departing on the train for New Orleans. She knew how much it meant to Ryan to display her before his boss and his friends. She sparkled at dinner.

At eight-thirty they broke away.

"We must dash for the house," she said. "I've got to change and finish packing."

They dashed.

It was a rather wavering dash on Pete Ryan's part. There had been champagne at dinner, and Scotch and soda had played a part in the celebration.

Lucille, he noticed, was a little "high" herself. But her radiance was of the spirit rather than "spirits."

They clung to each other in the hall as they entered the house.

"Now I must get busy," Lucille told him.

"Wait—let's have a drink first," Ryan suggested.

"No, darling. there isn't time. I'll pack. If I'm done promptly we'll have one together before we leave."

He pouted a bit. She kissed the pout. "Why don't you sit down here?" she suggested. "Pour yourself some Scotch. I'll be down in a jiffy."

Ryan sat down and poured. Then he poured again. The stuff was potent. Potent enough to make him whimsical.

"I'll sneak up and surprise her," he decided.

He tiptoed up the stairs. The light burned in her room and he headed down the hall.

"Confound it," he muttered. "I never did believe all those gags about women taking so long to dress. Guess I'm in for it."

Cautiously, he poked his head around the bedroom door.

Lucille Cabot was not dressing.

She stood stark naked in the shadow of a single lamp. Her magnificently moulded body was debased in an attitude of adoration on the floor.

The rug had been carefully rolled back. The polished surface of the floor held strange markings in green chalk. Triangles, and a pentagram.

There was an acrid odor of incense in the room, commingled with a musty, sour smell of death. It was hot in the wavering shadows.

The shadows were everywhere. They concealed the furniture, the prosaic outlines of the walls. They played weird tricks with normal vision.

It seemed to Ryan, as he gaped, that he saw nothing but the naked woman, the shining green design, and the shadows. The weaving, growing shadows. The shadows that crept and crouched like black beasts, moving as if in response to the summons from the scarlet lips of the nude girl.

For she was chanting, chanting—chanting into the darkness and the shadows. Chanting a summons.

Ryan opened his mouth to speak, then let it hang.

For as he watched, the summons was *answered*.

There was a flicker, elusive as heat lightning—just a flicker that filled the room with a momentary glare. And then the shadows on the wall *congealed*. Congealed into a Presence.

Ryan didn't see it with his eyes. His mind perceived it, tried to encompass the hideous, distorted outline of that ebony shape that emerged, squatting, and thrust a leering muzzle into the light. The thing was not meant to be seen, save with the eye of dreams.

Yet it squatted there, and the girl raised her eyes and praised it in a shrill voice, calling it by a name that Ryan dared not hear. And it moved closer to her, and Ryan saw its jaws part as it mewed and mewed—

He moved, then. He forced himself into the room. Every step was agony, but he moved. And then he stood before her, trying to keep his physical balance, his mental balance.

"Lucille," he muttered. "You're—a—"

He couldn't say it. But she said it for him, with a smile.

"A sorceress. Yes. And my father practiced the mantic arts, and now you know."

She spoke rapidly, without defiance. There was nothing but candor in her voice, and a curious amusement.

"But your promise," muttered Ryan, his world reeling. "You made me a promise. A promise that you would never sell your soul."

"Oh, that." She stepped close, and the witchery of her presence encompassed him. "But I am keeping that promise," she whispered, softly.

"Then why—this—?" He dared say no more, dared not indicate the thing that waited with them in that tiny room.

She ignored him and went on swiftly. "Besides, you silly boy, I never had any intention of selling my soul. If you recall the way I worded the ad in the paper, I merely said that I would have *a* soul for sale. And I have, now."

Ryan turned. The Presence blocked the doorway, and he saw Lucille nod toward it quickly. As he stood there, powerless to scream or move, the black horror glided swiftly toward him—and then at last, Ryan understood whose soul was for sale.

Satan's Phonograph

(*Weird Tales* January 1946)

THIRTY-THREE REVS A MINUTE. THIRTY-THREE REVS. THIRTY-three revolutions. That's the way it plays—night and day, night and day. The black disc on the playback of the recording machine, whirling around and around. Thirty-three times every minute. . . .

It looks just like an ordinary machine for making home recordings. But it isn't! You won't find any tubes or wires inside. I couldn't begin to guess what *is* inside. The box is sealed—and its contents were created in hell.

Take a look at the record. You'd think that was ordinary, too. But you're wrong. Because when you play the record, you don't hear a human voice. You hear—a *human soul!*

You think I'm crazy, eh; babbling like this? Well, I don't blame you. I thought he was crazy, too, when he brought me that instrument of the devil—Satan's phonograph.

Yes, I thought Gustav Frye was mad.

I always knew he possessed the eccentricities of a genius, of course. Ever since he taught me the piano—as only Gustav Frye could teach it. One of the greatest virtuosos in the world; this little, shrivelled-up old man. He made a concert pianist out of me, and a good one. But even in the old days he was moody, filled with queer ideas.

He didn't concentrate on technique. "Let your soul express itself through the music," he would tell me.

I laughed, then. I thought it was just an affectation. But I know now that he believed it; and surely he taught me to go beyond mere mastery of the keyboard, into the realms of the spirit. He was a strange teacher, and a great one.

After Carnegie Hall, my first successes, I didn't see Gustav Frye any more. I went out on tour—traveled abroad for several years. It was on my European trip that I met and married Maxine.

When we came back here together, I heard startling news of my old teacher. Gustav Frye had gone mad, they said—he had been put away in an institution. I was shocked, sorry, and anxious for further details. But nobody seemed to know the exact circumstances, and in the pressure of settling down once more, I overlooked the news for the moment.

Maxine and I took a little studio apartment uptown, and we were happy for a while.

And then—Gustav Frye came back!

I'll never forget the night. I was home alone. Maxine had gone out to spend the evening with friends, I remember that I was sitting before the fire stroking the black fur of Tiger, our cat.

Suddenly, the cat arched its back and hissed. Then silently, out of nowhere, Gustav Frye glided into the room.

He was little, and wrinkled, and old. He was clad in rags. But somehow, he looked terribly impressive. Perhaps it was his eyes—perhaps something that seemed to peer from *within* his eyes or *behind* them.

He startled me. I stammered out something trite, but he didn't respond. He kept looking at me and nodding his head as though marking the beat of some strange inward rhythm.

Oh, he was mad enough, and no mistake! I discovered that as soon as I ventured to comment concerning the big black case he carried under his arm.

I remember what he said as he set the case down and opened it.

"So, Roger, my old pupil—you want to know what this is, *ja*? You shall never guess! Twenty years I work to perfect this thing—this machine. I call it a machine because there is no other word you could understand; but it is not mechanical, *nein!*

"They laugh at me, Roger, when I tell them of my work. They call me crazy. They even lock me up; perhaps you hear of this?"

"But I work. And I finish it. When I finish it, I break out of that place where they shut me away—and I come here to you. Now, look at this!"

I looked at the open case; at the two turntables, the cutting arm, the playback arm, the package of discs.

"Why, it's a phonograph," I said. "A home-recording machine."

Gustav Frye nodded—kept time, rather, to invisible music.

"And how do you make such a home-recording, as you call it?" he asked.

"Why, it's very simple," I faltered. "I don't know the technical process, but—you talk into a microphone, and the sound waves of your voice are electrically reproduced on the record. It's just a matter of vibrations impressed on the surface of the record; that's all. And when you play it back, you hear your voice."

Gustav Frye chuckled. Even his chuckle seemed to accent the rhythm to which his nodding head responded.

"Very good! You always were a smart pupil, Roger. But you are wrong. This is not an ordinary recording phonograph. It does not capture voices alone. It captures—souls."

I gaped at him. "Souls?"

"Yes, souls." He regarded me so earnestly that I felt pity for him in his delusion. "Sound is vibration," he said. "Well, vibration is the source of life. The atoms and molecules of your body are all moving, vibrating in certain set rhythms. They put out electrical impulses—wavelengths which can be recorded. They have recorded heartbeat and thought-waves. But suppose you could invent a machine that would pick up the vibrations of your soul, or your life-beat itself?"

"Impossible!"

He nodded again, faster. "I have such a machine here," he whispered. "A machine to capture and record the human soul. Mind you, I said *capture* and record."

How I laughed at him, then! I thought if he knew I was skeptical he might stop his tirade and go away. But the old man insisted. He said he had always tried to capture the essence of the soul in music—but never succeeded. That is why he had worked on the machine. He wouldn't explain what he had learned or done; I might steal the secret, he said.

Oh, it was fantastic! In the end, I told him so to his face.

Then he became stubborn. He insisted on giving me a "demonstration"—with Tiger, the cat.

What could I do? One humors madmen, eh? So I humored Gustav Frye.

I allowed him to set up his recording microphone there before the fireplace. It was just an ordinary microphone—in fact, the whole set appeared to be quite ordinary, though it bore no

manufacturer's label. I wondered where he had obtained it.

He attached the mike to the machine, and put the cutting arm in place above a fresh disc. He had no brush, and I noticed that there were no sound-level controls visible to my eye. The mike extended on a cord, and when he lifted it, I saw that a tiny red light seemed to glow from the mike head.

That was curious—the light glowed; he appeared ready to cut a record, and yet he hadn't plugged any wire into a wall socket. Apparently the machine did not operate on electric current.

I started to question him, then checked the impulse. It would only provoke a harangue on his mad theories. And I wanted him to get it over with, go away before Maxine returned. It was embarrassing and disturbing. Better to humor him, now.

So I held Tiger, writhing in my arms, as he placed the mike before the cat's eyes. The red glare rose from the mike in inexplicable phosphorescence, and Tiger stared at it, spitting and hissing.

Then Gustav Frye started the cutting arm moving across the black record. Tiger howled into the microphone.

It only took a minute.

After that, old Frye lifted the arm, switched the record over to the playback turntable, and played the recording. I could hear Tiger howling—howling hideously with nerve-wracking clarity.

It disturbed me—that dreadful squalling. I told him to stop the record. He shrugged and lifted the needle.

Then I looked around. Everything was unchanged in the room. I still held Tiger under my arm. But Tiger wasn't struggling.

Tiger was limp. Tiger was cold. Tiger was—dead.

Yes. The cat was dead.

I can hear old Frye chuckling now, as I protested in sudden, incoherent rage.

"But of course, your cat is dead! Didn't I tell you that my machine *captures* the soul as well as records it? The sudden shock; the translation of soul-essence into vibration—that does it. So, you see, it isn't Tiger's voice you hear. It is his *soul!*"

I threw him out, then. Yes, literally threw him out. The old lunatic had frightened my cat to death—and I admit he scared me, too—with his crazy talk of putting souls on phonograph records!

I hustled him out of there in a sort of unreasoning fury. He protested with the fervor of the madman that he was. He had made me rich and famous, he said. Now he wanted me to protect him while he perfected his infernal machine. He had great plans; he and I could share the rewards.

I lost my head completely. I shouted at him to go away, to stay away.

Then he cursed me. He cursed me and swore revenge.

I hardly heard him. I was too busy hustling him downstairs. He scuttled off with his bulky machine under his arm, his head still nodding frantically as he wheezed threats under his breath.

I shouted after him that he'd better not let me catch him around here again—and I meant it.

But he came back. Yes—he came back!

I found that out the next afternoon.

You see, I hadn't told Maxine about the madman. I knew it would only alarm her. I got rid of poor Tiger's body before she returned that night, and said nothing about the incident.

Then—the next afternoon—when I came back from a stroll after lunch, I opened the door and heard Maxine scream.

"Roger!" she shrieked. "Roger! Roger!"

I rushed into the studio. I saw Maxine there, lying on the floor. She was pale and lifeless.

But how could that be?

For I still heard her voice. She was screaming.

"Roger! Roger! Roger!"

She screamed my name over and over again, without a change of inflection; screamed it in utter agony.

Heaven help me, I knew *then!* I saw that accursed instrument over on a table, saw the record whirling and the needle pressing down.

The phonograph—Satan's phonograph—was grinding away. I knelt beside Maxine's body and kissed her cold, dead lips—while on the record she screamed her endless torment.

"Roger! Roger! Roger!"

I knew how it must have happened, of course. Gustav Frye had sworn revenge. While I was away he had come here, talked to Maxine; probably persuaded her to record her voice as a joke. "To surprise Roger," he must have said.

Yes, Frye had lured her before the microphone—and captured her soul on the record!

I rose, took the record off. It was an ordinary black disc, and its surface seemed grooved in the usual manner. I held it and it felt cold; cold as Maxine's body. I couldn't think, couldn't comprehend what had happened.

After that I just sat there for a long time. It was quite a long time, because twilight crept into the room as I stared into the shadows and tried to think.

What could I do?

The police would laugh at me if I called them. The whole story was so incredible. But it was true!

Perhaps I had better destroy the machine, then find Frye. But that's when Frye came back.

Yes, I must have fallen asleep. And that's when Frye came back. Yes, he must have tiptoed into the room in the twilight, nodding his head in that alien rhythm. And Frye must have seen me sleeping and hypnotized me.

Do you hear? He came to me in sleep and hypnotized me! He changed the records, put on a new disc, and held the microphone before my lips.

Then, as I slept, he commanded me to speak.

He made me speak these words—the words that put my soul on a record like all the rest.

Do you hear me? Do you hear my voice? Then *do* something! Find that man.

Find Gustav Frye, wherever he may be—and destroy him. Destroy that hideous machine, too, before it is too late. And do something to get me off this record.

Yes . . . get me off this record, do you hear?

Get me out of here . . . out of here . . . out of here . . . out of here . . . out of here. . . .

The Man Who Told the Truth

(Weird Tales July 1946) as Jim Kjelgaard

WHEN HARTWOOD CAME IN, IT SEEMED THAT A SMOTHERING presence filled the room.

He figured it must be a combination of the liquor and the closed windows that affected him. But when he threw the windows open, the oppression continued. It was like a heavy weight pressing him from all sides.

Hartwood sat down on the bed, his head cupped between his hands. He noticed by the alarm clock on his dresser that it was already past two o'clock. He should have been in bed four hours ago. If he had a hangover tomorrow, and showed it, old Brenner would be on his neck harder than ever.

He tried to get up and could not. It was much pleasanter to sit on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands. Dreamily, he watched the hands on the alarm clock creep ahead another five minutes.

Then he glanced up, sharply, head clearing abruptly. There *was* something wrong with the air in his room. He couldn't see anything—but he felt it. A definite, palpable vibration. Heaviness. Pressing down. It wasn't a heaviness in his head. It came from *outside*.

Intense, intolerable *pressure*.

And then . . . it was gone.

Yes, just like that.

The sense of oppressive heaviness departed, as though whatever had come into the atmosphere was gradually adjusting itself to conditions there. Within a few minutes Hartwood felt light, gay, happy.

If he could only feel like this all the time, instead of having to drudge eight hours a day at Swazey and Sloan's for thirty bucks a week! He had been born for better things, but he never got the breaks.

Hard-luck Hartwood. That was him, all right. No justice at all. No wonder he was drinking more and more lately.

But now, he felt good. It was as though he had a hunch; a hunch that tomorrow would bring better things. Of course it was all a lot of malarkey. Tomorrow he'd be back where old Brenner could get at him.

Old Brenner, his boss, just loved to ride him. Hartwood had to admit that he was afraid of Brenner. The old crab could have Hartwood fired any time he felt like it. He knew it and Hartwood knew it.

Hartwood often dreamed of what he would do to Brenner if he ever got him in his power.

"Brenner," he said aloud, "is a dirty, stinking rat."

"That's right" a voice said. "That's a hundred per cent right."

Hartwood jumped from the bed.

He looked around. The room was empty, of course, save for his presence. There was nobody else there. There couldn't be.

The closet door was open. He peered inside. The closet was untenanted, too.

Hartwood chuckled, harshly.

"That rye's got a helluva kick," he murmured.

"It's not the rye, Hartwood," said the voice. "Look towards the door."

Hartwood blinked at the door. Gradually he made out a greenish mist. It was about three feet high, cone-shaped, with the big end at the top and the point on the floor. At times it faded so that he could not see it at all, and never was he able to see it clearly. It swayed back and forth with a gentle, oscillating motion.

The voice came from this cone. It was a high voice, and it carried no echo. It was almost as though the voice came from within Hartwood's head. But he *saw* the mist—

"Who are you?" Hartwood whispered.

"Never mind who I am," the voice said. "I want to talk to you, and if you'll listen, you'll profit."

Hartwood shook his head. It was a dream, but a honey! Sitting on the edge of his bed talking to a green mist! Old Brenner had always said he was crazy. But he might as well see the dream through.

"What gives?" he asked.

"You don't like your life, do you, Hartwood? That job—that thirty-a-week job—gets you down, as you would say? You would like to be rich, powerful?"

"Sure. I'd give anything—"

"We need not discuss giving. I do not take gifts," said the voice. "That is merely an unkind rumor. I prefer to *bestow* gifts . . . to those I feel deserving of them. You are such a man, Hartwood. I have decided to give you riches and power."

"How?"

"From this night on everything you say, provided that it can take place in the future and has not already happened, will happen. All you need to do is say it."

"Everything I say is going to come true," Hartwood repeated cynically. "Do you know any more fairy tales?"

"That's not a fairy tale. I can give you that power, but it will have to be without reservations. Everything you say is going to come true. You might test it by saying you won't have a hangover in the morning."

"I won't have a hangover in the morning," Hartwood said, and fell over asleep.

2.

The next morning Hartwood jumped out of bed with the first tinkle of the alarm clock. He ran across the room, shut the alarm off, and closed the window before he realized that he had been drinking heavily last night and had only three hours sleep. He should be very tired and have a headache. Instead, he had never felt keener or more alive.

Thoughtfully, as the dream of last night came back to him, he sat down on the edge of the bed and took his pajamas off. It had, of course, been a dream—but what a wow of a dream! Everything he said, he remembered, was going to come true. He'd have to go back to the same place tonight for more of the same rye. It couldn't be bad if it left this kind of an effect.

But, by the time he had shaved and washed, thoughts of the day ahead brought depression. It would be another endless eight hours at Swazey and Sloan's under the carping watchfulness of Old Brenner. Hartwood groaned. He had worked nine years for Swazey and Sloan, and should be doing something besides menial tasks. Other people got better things.

It had never occurred to Hartwood that he might possibly get something better if he wasn't too lazy to work for it.

Dressed, he left his room and walked down to Joe's lunch wagon. He was hungry, and had just remembered that he had wanted one more drink last night and couldn't buy it because he had no more money. He already had enough on the cuff at the lunch wagon so that Joe wouldn't trust him with any more. But he would see if he couldn't work one more dodge. He'd order something to eat and jump for the door when he was finished. He'd have to move fast though. Joe had told him the last time he pulled a swifty what would happen if he tried it again—and Joe weighed a hundred and ninety pounds.

Hartwood entered the lunch wagon and sat down at the counter. He tried to look as though he had money, but felt that he was not putting it across. Joe had been too many years in the business not to be able to size a moocher up pretty accurately. Still, Hartwood was hungry.

"Bacon and eggs and a cup of coffee," he said.

Joe slid the plate down the counter, shoved a cup of coffee at him, and strolled out from behind the counter to take a stance in front of the door. Hartwood watched him from the corner of his eye as he ate. Joe knew what he intended to try, and was there to see that he didn't try it. Hartwood dawdled over his food in a desperate effort to gain time. When he was finished, Joe still stood. Hartwood plunged his hand deep into his inside coat pocket for some papers he had there. By looking at them he might stall until another customer came in and Joe had to go behind the counter again.

"Wish I had four bits," he muttered.

But—what was this? Hartwood's fingers touched a hard round something and he drew out half a dollar! He sighed in relief. He must have put it in there and forgotten it. Casually he dropped the coin on the counter, noting with malicious pleasure the chagrin on Joe's face as he rang it up and handed back fifteen cents change.

Hartwood returned to the street, so pleased with this little

triumph that the entire day assumed a brighter hue. He did not in any way connect the propitious finding of the half dollar with the events of last night. They existed for him now only as an amusing memory induced by too much whiskey. He halted at an intersection waiting for the light to change. There was no policeman there. When the light was in his favor Hartwood stepped from the curb—and instantly leaped back to escape by inches a taxi that was cutting through the light. Hartwood glared at it as it careened down the street.

“I hope you break your neck!” he muttered viciously.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the taxi swerved in its wild flight, seemed to hang in the air for the fraction of a second, and with a thunderous crash and a shattering of glass went head on into a concrete light pole. Hartwood ran down. The driver of the cab sat hunched over his wheel, his head hanging at a grotesque angle.

Hartwood stared until he was waved on by one of the blue uniformed police, a half dozen of which seemed to have appeared from nowhere. For a few minutes he walked silently, overawed as he remembered what the cone of green mist had said to him. He shrugged. There couldn't be anything to it. The lack of a hangover, the finding of the half dollar, and the wrecking of the taxi were all coincidence. Well, whether he'd had anything to do with it or not, one fresh taxi pilot had got what was coming to him.

But he was at Swazey and Sloan's now. In guilty panic he glanced up at the clock in the hall and realized that he was ten minutes late again. But maybe he could still get in without being seen by Old Brenner. Hartwood opened the door quietly, and made no noise as he hung his hat and coat on the rack. He tried to slip down to his desk, but just then Old Brenner came out of his office. Hartwood grabbed a ledger and Old Brenner was standing over him.

“Hartwood!” he snapped. “This is the third time in three weeks you've been late.”

Hartwood looked down to conceal the hate and loathing in his eyes.

“Yes, sir,” he said meekly.

“This is your last chance,” Old Brenner went on. “If you're late again, you'll be needing another job.”

“Yes, sir,” Hartwood said again.

“Such things aren't necessary. You know it and I know it.”

"Yes, sir."

But, when Old Brenner had gone, Hartwood thrust his tongue to the side of his cheek.

"What you know," he growled. "You don't know a damn thing."

3.

All morning Hartwood worked hard without speaking. He wasn't popular in the office, but that was all right with him because he didn't like anybody there either. They were all fools, Hartwood thought. They worked hard without complaining, studied in their spare time, and thought to get somewhere by pushing pencils up and down Swazey and Sloan's ledgers. Swazey and Sloan took all the profits. They had the summer homes, the stables of horses, the chauffeur driven limousines. All the rest of them did was make the money for Swazey and Sloan.

It was quarter to twelve when Swazey stepped to the door of his office—Sloan was on the road most of the time. Hartwood glanced at Swazey from under his eye shade. The old horse pretended to be quite democratic. He called all the office force by their first names and slapped them on the back at Christmas time. But he ruled Swazey and Sloan with an iron hand. What Hartwood wouldn't give to be in his place!

"Will somebody tell Mr. Brenner that I'd like to see him?" Swazey called.

Pretense, Hartwood decided. Old Swazey had a secretary to run his errands for him, and a buzzer that he could have used to call Brenner, but he preferred to do things this way so the office force would think him a regular fellow and give the last ounce of sweat they had for the glory of Swazey and Sloan. Hartwood saw a girl get up and open the door of Brenner's office. He heard her call.

"Mr. Brenner."

There was no answer. Hartwood saw the girl go a little farther into the office and heard her call again. Then she screamed, and came screaming out of the office with her hands covering her face. Old Swazey appeared again, bent over the girl who had sunk down in a chair and was moaning incoherently. She raised a trembling hand, and pointed at Brenner's office. Then Hartwood found himself, along with the seven other men in the office and Swazey, entering Brenner's office. The girls made an anxious ring in the background.

Old Brenner slumped in his swivel chair with his hands trailing down the sides. His eyes were open and staring, and except for the spasmodic heaving of his chest, he was absolutely motionless. Swazey bent over him.

"Brenner!" he shouted.

There was no answer. Swazey felt his pulse, then together with Hartwood and Jack Dorn lifted Old Brenner from his chair and carried him to a couch in an adjoining office. The old man lay full length and motionless there. Hartwood stared at him, puzzled. Swazey shook his head.

"It looks like a sudden stroke. Did any of you notice whether he seemed to be feeling ill this morning?"

"He talked to Hartwood," Jack Dorn said.

"I didn't notice anything unusual about him," Hartwood said. "He seemed all right when he talked to me."

A bustling little doctor with a black instrument bag in his hand came into the office. He took Old Brenner's temperature, checked his heart and reflexes.

"I can't understand it," he said, his brow wrinkling in a frown. "Physically he seems perfect. I never saw a case exactly like it before. It's just as though a black shade has been drawn over his mind and shut out everything. He doesn't know enough to raise a hand, or turn his head, or speak- he's exactly like a new born baby. He breathes and his heart beats because that's involuntary."

An electric shock stung Hartwood. He remembered the words he had muttered when Brenner left him. "You don't know a damn thing." Brenner didn't know a thing! Hartwood gasped, and staggered to the window. He threw it open; let the cool air caress his perspiring cheek. The hangover, the half dollar, and the taxi wreck could have been coincidence. But were they? And, if they were, could this possibly be? Hartwood seemed to be sitting in his room watching with cynical eyes a cone of green mist. Again he heard a voice emerging from that cone.

"From this night on everything you say is going to come true."

Hartwood felt Swazey's arm across his shoulders, heard Swazey's sympathetic voice.

"I know how you feel, Hartwood. The firm will have suffered a severe loss if Mr. Brenner doesn't recover. But, after all, such things happen. I would suggest that you take an hour or two off until you feel better."

Dazed, Hartwood walked out of the office. He must be crazy, he told himself. He was crazy. This couldn't have happened. Before

long he would wake up in his room with a hangover and have to hurry to get to work on time. He looked uneasily to the right and left as he walked out to see if anybody would look at him and comment. Nobody did. The sudden trance that had stricken Old Brenner was so much the topic of conversation that nobody had time for anything else.

Hartwood was not hungry and did not even think of food as he descended to the street. His whole mind was occupied with the cone of green mist and what it had said to him. He slid a hand into his pocket to pinch himself. The pain was real enough. A traffic cop in the middle of the street shouted at him.

"Oh shut up," Hartwood muttered. The cop halted in the middle of his tirade and swung to halt another line of cars. Hartwood gasped again. Everything *couldn't* be just happening this way. A man didn't encounter that much coincidence in an entire life. There had to be something to it!

Hartwood continued to park and sat down on a bench facing a lagoon. He was mightily thrilled, but more confused. He would have to have time to think. If he, Charles Hartwood, could make something real simply by saying it—If everything he said came true—The possibilities were so dazzling that his mind could not grasp any of them.

Vaguely he saw a couple of swans swimming about on the lagoon. For a moment Hartwood was tempted to say that the biggest swan would sink into the water, but he checked himself. If it didn't work the disappointment right at this moment would be too keen.

Crazy or not, he was going to be a little king for the next hour. He was going to believe that anything he said would come true. But he was not going to delude himself for very long. Of the men and women in the office, there were at least twenty whom Old Swazey would pick to fill Brenner's job before he got around to Hartwood. If by saying he was going to get Brenner's job, Hartwood got it, he would know that what had happened last night was more than a drunkard's dream. If he didn't get it, he would know that everything that had happened today would have happened anyway.

"I'll get Brenner's job," he said.

4.

Hartwood was still breathless and shaken when he got back to the office. He sank down at his desk, but opened no ledgers. Around

him the office hummed busily. Brenner was just another man in a fairly big organization, and that organization could not pause for very long because another man had gone out of it. Hartwood thought of the far flung offices and factories of Swazey and Sloan. This office was only the headquarters, the brain cell that sent impulses out to other offices who in turn transmitted them to twenty thousand people. For nine years Hartwood had been just another little cog in this big machine. This afternoon he might take his first step up to it. Tomorrow—Who knew what could happen tomorrow?

Nevertheless Hartwood was surprised when Swazey's secretary came out of the office to his desk.

"Mr. Swazey would like to see you," she said.

Hartwood's face colored when he stood up and his heart was pounding. He saw about him the faces of the people he had worked with all these years. They were surprised, resentful, amused. All of them knew that Swazey would have to appoint somebody to carry on in Brenner's place. None of them thought it could be Hartwood.

The secretary led Hartwood through her office into Swazey's and returned to her desk. Hartwood was nervous when he faced Swazey alone. Maybe Old Brenner had said something before he passed out.

"Mr. Hartwood," Swazey said finally, you have been with the firm a fairly long time?"

"Nine years," Hartwood murmured.

He sensed something here that was not as it should be. In the first place Old Swazey had called him Mr. Hartwood. Never before had Hartwood heard him call anybody mister. But that wasn't all. Swazey, ruler of millions of dollars, actually seemed afraid of him! Hartwood looked for the trap. Surely he was not important enough and had never done anything important enough to warrant fear on Old Swazey's part. Maybe this was the way men got promoted—or fired.

"Nine years is a long time to work without recognition," Swazey said. "But this firm rewards its faithful workers. Mr. Hartwood, do you think you could take Mr. Brenner's place?"

"Yes!"

"Hm—m," Old Swazey sat back. "Then the place is yours, Mr. Hartwood."

Hartwood watched him through narrowed eyes, but his mind was a leaping, exulting, mad thing. Swazey was not offering him this job because he wanted to or because he thought Hartwood was

the best man for it. There was something pushing Swazey, and Hartwood thought he knew what it was. He hadn't the least idea as to the identity of his extraordinary visitor last night. It was enough that it was watching over Hartwood, was powerful enough to make Old Swazey afraid of him.

"Thank you," he said dryly.

"Very well, Mr. Hartwood. Probably you are already acquainted with the policies of the firm, but I'll review them for you. It's always been our aim to pay our employees a living wage. We consider it fair to demand efficiency, but we pay for it. And, which is very important, we ask that no man in a key position do anything to injure the unity of the firm as a whole. Your job—"

"Listen," Hartwood said gruffly, "if I'm in charge, I issue my own orders. Got it?"

Hartwood sat back, amazed and a little appalled by what he had said. But something had told him that now or never was the time to cast the die. With the acquired shrewdness of one who all his life had barely skinned through by seizing every little advantage, he had sensed that Old Swazey had some reason to fear him. When a man was afraid of another anything could be done with him. Breathlessly he awaited Old Swazey's reaction.

"That's quite all right, Mr. Hartwood," he said at last. "You're in full charge."

Hartwood's brain was a dizzy whirl when he left Old Swazey to go into the office that until this morning had been occupied by Brenner. He still didn't know what had happened, couldn't realize that it had happened. He knew only that, after a lifetime of resenting those in authority, as last he was in authority himself!

He still hadn't any definite plans when, at six o'clock, he left the office. The sudden respect for him that had overtaken Jack Dorn and the rest of the office force was scarcely noticed. Hartwood wanted to be by himself, wanted seclusion so that he could think and plan.

His pocket was full of money now. Hartwood dropped into the lunch wagon and ordered and ate a plate of beans. Absently he laid a twenty-dollar bill on the counter, and told Joe to take out what Hartwood owed him. Ordinarily the bill would have been a matter for bitter quibbling. Now Hartwood paid no attention to it. He wanted no liquor tonight. He was already drunk with this new power that was his.

Hartwood climbed to his room, and sat on the edge of his bed staring at the wall. His mind was a tangle of so many things that

he could not separate one from the other. They came running and leaping at him and went away again. Hartwood wanted them all. But at the same time a thread of caution ran through the disordered pattern. If he asked for too many things at once there might be a conflict and he would lose all. Big things—Big things—What were they? The biggest thing he could even begin to have any clear grasp of was Swazey and Sloan. He didn't know exactly how big that was, but he decided that he would get it first.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I'll be boss of Swazey and Sloan."

He was out of bed very early. Again he felt fresh and alert, but again he was inclined to doubt that anything like this had happened or was happening. Oh, yes—he knew all about yesterday. But that was merely one day that would stand forever cameo clear against the drab pattern of a man's life. All those things would have happened anyway. He could have gotten the promotion simply because he had worked a long time for Swazey and Sloan, and Old Swazey could have considered that he was the best man for the job.

He had thought that Old Swazey was afraid of him because the offer of promotion had come like a bombshell and he hadn't been able to see straight or think clearly. Swazey hadn't fired him because he had realized that Hartwood, naturally, would be excited about his new job.

Hartwood forced himself into some restraint, but in spite of that he was at the office half an hour early. Because of long established habit he nearly dropped into the chair at his old desk. But he remembered in time and continued on to Brenner's office. There he sat down in the swivel chair and waited.

He was calm now, had full possession of himself. Yes, everything had happened naturally. If it had been a little startling, that was not surprising. But at least he was in charge of the office and all those snakes who had jeered at him for years could start watching their steps. His secretary came in, greeted him, and went to her own desk.

Hartwood opened his door a few minutes before eight, but closed it disappointed. Everybody had come in on time and he hadn't any excuse for bawling anyone out. Well, he would have an excuse for tying into somebody before the day was finished or his name wasn't Hartwood. Absently he pulled open a drawer of the desk and began to thumb through the papers there. The buzzer on the secretary's desk shuddered. Hartwood saw her pick up the listening tube.

"Yes? All right, I'll tell him, Mr. Swazey."

She turned to Hartwood.

"Mr. Swazey would like to see you, Mr. Hartwood."

For a moment Hartwood remained in the swivel chair. Swazey wanted to see him, did he? Well, all right, but it had been fun while it lasted. Besides, the most Swazey would probably do was send him back to his old job. Hartwood stamped out of his office into Swazey's.

Old Swazey sat behind his desk. Hartwood looked at him sharply. The old man's face was gray and his eyes were red and very weary. Dozens of cigarette butts lay on trays on the desk. He had probably been here all night.

"Mr. Hartwood," Old Swazey spoke in a husky whisper, "I don't want you to think there's been any plotting against you."

"I don't think so," Hartwood said, puzzled.

Old Swazey smiled tiredly. "Very well, Mr. Hartwood. I had hoped you'd take it in this spirit and are able to forgive an old man. But Mr. Sloan and I built this business up. Mr. Hartwood, listen to me just a few minutes before you take over. There are undeniable advantages to being in a position like mine and Mr. Sloan's. But there's a broader view than that.

"We have twenty thousand people in various capacities on our payrolls. That means we take care of approximately eighty thousand. If you'll continue to take care of those people as we have, to maintain the good wages we pay them, and to help them maintain the standard of living they are accustomed to, both Mr. Sloan and myself offer to place ourselves at your disposal without recompense."

Hartwood leaped to his feet. "Are you crazy?" he demanded bluntly. Another shade of weariness seemed to shroud those already on Old Swazey's face.

"I'm sorry, but I had to say it, Mr. Hartwood. Of course, you may do as your judgment decides. I now turn over to you fifty-one per cent of the stock of Swazey and Sloan. I might add that yesterday afternoon I was quite sure you were going to get it. Congratulations, Mr. Hartwood."

Hartwood's jaw hung slack. His eyes bulged as he stared past Swazey's head through the window.

It worked! It was so! Everything he said came true!

Suddenly everything speeded up, as though a film were unreeling through his brain. He was thinking now of the things he could say . . . the things that could come true . . .

"I will live forever."

"I will rule the world."

"Everybody on earth becomes my slave."

"I am greater than G—"

It was too much. His mind couldn't encompass it. Perhaps because the atmosphere was suddenly so heavy, so very heavy. . . .

Hartwood blinked at Old Swazey, trying to grope for a word, a phrase, something fitting to the newly-created Lord of the World. But all he could do was bring his hand down on the desk and call forth one of his stock expressions.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Hartwood.

The next instant he was on the floor, and Old Swazey was staring at a dead man who had been alive a minute ago. Hartwood's face held the look of one who knew, just before he died, that his soul must suffer all the torments of hell.

The Night They Crashed the Party

(*Weird Tales* November 1951)

THE WHOLE THING CAME AS A SURPRISE.

Nobody expected anything like it—but then, that's the way it was at Rudy's parties. You never could tell what might happen next.

It started just the way those things always did. Rudy called me up and said, "You'd better drop over. Having a gang in, just for laughs."

"For laughs, count me in," I told him. "But remember, I'm on the wagon. Ever since that last brawl of yours, when somebody socked that Senator—"

"Forget it," laughed Rudy. "In our business, you gotta drink. And once in a while you gotta sock a Senator or two. A Navy contract is a Navy contract. Which reminds me, put on a clean shirt when you come. We're having Admiral Cribber and a lot of brass. Also some models."

"Models? For them I'll find a clean shirt," I promised. "See you later."

I found my clean shirt and got started for Rudy's place along about nine.

Nine o'clock of a summer Saturday night. I'm not likely to for-

get it. Walking down the street and watching the new cars go by—station wagons, town and country models, convertibles from Chevy Chase.

Cars threading between tall buildings—neon signs stabbing red fingernails at the sky—and people crowding, jostling, pushing, hustling along. No, I won't forget it.

Most particularly, I remember the people. It seemed to me at the time that they looked different. Changed, somehow, from the way they looked a year or so before.

I kept thinking back to the time when Rudy and I had been broke. I wasn't on my way to any penthouse parties in those days, because Rudy didn't have a penthouse. And I didn't often have a clean shirt to wear, either. It hadn't been easy, breaking into this manufacturing agent's racket—we'd hocked everything just to keep going.

Then along came the war scare and Rudy and I nosed into these Navy purchasing deals. All at once we were signing orders, taking on new accounts, playing around with high brass and big shot scientists and people from show business. Rudy did the fronting, I did the estimating, and we both made money. It was all right, of course; it was what we had been looking for, but sometimes I wondered what it all stacked up to in the end.

Because, like I say, people seemed to have changed. A year ago they would have been strolling along this street on a balmy summer night. There would have been a lot of couples, holding hands; a lot of families out with the kids running circles around their legs. There'd have been girls in slacks, giggling along to the movies and young fellows whistling after them. It was always that way on a warm Saturday night.

But not any more. Tonight I could feel it as I moved along. I could feel the difference, see the difference. The change had come, all right. Not only with Rudy and myself, but with everybody. Maybe it was all this war talk, and the stuff about secret weapons—maybe that's what got people down. That's what wiped the smiles off their faces, wound them up and set them off to brush, shove, elbow, bump and march along.

Anyhow, they were rushing and the cars were whizzing and even the neon signs seemed to flicker faster. Everything jerked and speeded up, like an old silent movie film.

Somehow, it got to me, bothered me. I was glad to get off the street, glad to turn into the big apartment hotel, glad to take the elevator up to Rudy's penthouse.

Rudy met me at the door. The party was already going strong. I could see it, hear it, smell it.

"Here you are at last!" Rudy said. "Come in and meet the gang." And he winked and whispered, "Cribber's been here for an hour and he's loaded. I'm gonna brace him for that radar contract later."

He didn't have to tell me. I knew the routine by heart. And I could see for myself what he'd done to the Admiral. The big front room was filled with people and the people were filled with liquor and conversation to the point where both frequently spilled over. Cribber was standing in front of the fireplace with a model named Kitty. He was a handsome, distinguished looking old gent in a beautifully tailored uniform, and she was a gorgeous brunette. But somehow, together, they didn't make a very pretty picture tonight.

"Don't give me any of the high brass stuff," the Admiral was saying. He poked Kitty right in the V of her dress. "I'm just telling you the straight scoop." His finger left a red mark on her neck, and he tried to focus both eyes on it as he swayed back on his heels. "I'm just telling you they're ready to attack."

"Blah!" That was Chester Garland, the news commentator, horning in. "Can't you guys ever stop talking business? Every time I take a story off the wire, it's one of you monkeys making a statement. I go to the movies to relax with Danny Kaye and I get a newsreel with somebody in uniform making another statement. I come up here to relax and you're on hand, sounding off."

"I'm telling you—"

"Blah! You and the whole gang's been telling me for years now. But nothing ever happens. Nothing's gonna happen. So forget it. Here, have another drink."

Rudy came up and pulled Chester away. "Lay off," he said. "Pass around these Martinis like a little man, will ya?" He handed Chester a tray.

I went up to Kitty. "What's the good word?" I said.

"Don't know any good words." She pouted. "One of these lousy Treasury Department snoops showed up today. Hit me with a bill for a G in back taxes. How he ever found out about those stocks I don't know! And with this inflation and all—"

She grabbed a drink, clung to it desperately. I wandered around this gay, pleasure-seeking, carefree crowd of very important persons, celebrities, and leading intellectuals and drank in their words of wisdom.

"I tell you we've consistently underestimated the possibilities

of chain-reaction." That was old Professor McKittridge. "If the average citizen knew the potentialities of fissionable materials we wouldn't be so smug."

"I disagree." Doctor Sanbrenner always disagreed, no matter how drunk he got. In fact, the drunker he was, the more disagreeable he became. "It's biological warfare that will turn the trick. The next war will be won or lost within 24 hours. The proper use of chemical bombs planted over a widespread area in a hundred leading cities could wipe out 25 per cent of our population in a day, and another 25 per cent could probably die as a result of the universal panic. Now if we can only get to them first and do the smart thing—"

"Damned government controls," said another voice at my elbow. "Ruining free enterprise. What's the man in the street need control for? Wait until next election's over—we're introducing some bills that will end all that."

". . . but the psychiatrist told me to stop using them and switch to nembutal or something milder. I'd give anything for ten hours' sleep, simply anything, my dear!"

I felt the words bounce off my eardrums—all the gay, carefree words of wisdom typical of the conversation of very important persons, celebrities and leading intellectuals everywhere today. Oh, it was a lovely party, thank you!

So I tried not to hear what they were saying, and gradually I succeeded. The only trouble was, I could still see them, watch what they were doing.

During the next half hour or so, I saw Kitty slap Doctor Sanbrenner in the face and break his glasses. I saw old Professor McKittridge shake his fist at Chester Garland. I saw Chester's wife get sick, and I saw the lady who couldn't sleep pass out on the sofa near the fireplace. I saw Rudy steer Admiral Cribber into the back room. I saw everything—including my own puzzled, frightened face in the mirror. I wondered why my face was puzzled, frightened. I also wondered just what it was doing here at all.

The room got hot and stuffy. Reek of smoke, reek of liquor, reek of breath and perspiration and talcum powder and perfume and cologne and depilatory and running mascara.

I passed another tray of drinks for Rudy and then wandered over to the window, staring out at the sky. Somewhere off in the distance, over the Potomac, a storm was gathering. I tried to imagine what it was like up there, in the coolness of the clouds. There'd be wind, and rain, and the eternal movement of the night. Yes,

night after night everything was the same up there. And night after night, everything was the same down here. Down here, where I was. Where—

“The taxes keep going up year after year.”

“Honestly, there’s no place for children to play any more, if you insist on having the little beasts.”

“But what will it matter, if only we can drop the bombs first?”

Yes, night after night, that’s the way it went down here. And—

“Let’s all have another drink.”

It was Rudy, the life of the party. Pumping alcohol into the veins of the corpse. Trying to make it get up and dance.

Tonight, it wasn’t working so well. Too many quarrels, too many complaints, too many drinks. Rudy must have sensed that, and he was anxious to make the evening a success. He had to, if he wanted that Navy contract.

I was still watching the stormclouds gather when I heard Chester Garland talking to Kitty.

“What say we all go down there? We’d still be in time for the main event.”

“Go where? Nobody’s going anywhere.” Rudy’s voice, genial but with an undercurrent of dismay.

“Sure. Let’s get up a gang and go,” Chester, again.

“Where?”

“To the wrestling matches, that’s where. I’m tired of all this fighting—let’s go watch somebody else fight for a change.”

Kitty chimed in. “Sure, why not? Come on, everybody—let’s see the wrestling.”

There was a general babble and flurry. I could see the idea was catching on. Rudy saw it too. Because he stepped in front of the fireplace and raised his hands and voice.

“I have a better plan,” he shouted. “We’ll bring the wrestlers here!”

“Here? You mean real live wrestlers in our very own front room? Hooray!” It was Chester’s wife. She’d come to at the mention of strange men. “Ooh, those big hairy brutes—”

“Shut up!” Rudy suggested, with the *savior faire* of a true host. “I mean we can bring them here with television.”

“That’s right,” Chester agreed. “The bouts are being televised tonight. But I didn’t know you had a set, Rudy.”

“I haven’t.” Rudy improvised. “But we can get a TV set up here in twenty minutes. There’s an ad in tonight’s paper. They’ll deliver and install a TV set, no aerial needed, the minute you call the store.”

"Call 'em!" That was Admiral Cribber.

"Your wish is my command," said Rudy. "It shall be done."

And it was done. We all settled back, most everybody had a drink, and Rudy made his phone arrangements in the other room. In order to pass the time of waiting, Kitty took off her shoes and did a dance, although it wasn't the sort of a dance where taking off her shoes made any difference. Professor McKittridge shook his fist at Admiral Cribber. The lady who had passed out on the sofa sat up and slapped Doctor Sanbrenner, breaking his extra pair of glasses. Rudy steered Chester Garland into the back room. Chester's wife, quite recovered, had two more Martinis and then got sick again. Oh, they managed to pass the time, all right.

I watched the freak storm. More clouds had gathered and there were a number of isolated lightning flashes, still off in the distance. Once or twice I could even hear thunder above the braying of the crowd, but there was no sign of rain in Washington proper—or improper, as the case might be.

Nobody else paid any attention to what was going on outside. The men with the television set must have knocked about five minutes before Rudy went to the door. Finally, he let them in.

The crowd let up a yelp of simulated delight as the two came in, carrying a heavy 16-inch console model.

"Right in here," Rudy said, indicating the dining room. "It'll be easier to set up chairs. How about the corner?" He went in there with the men and closed the door. The rest of the crowd got busy on a fresh tray of drinks.

"He'd better hurry." Chester Garland glanced at his watch. "It's almost eleven. We'll miss the main bout."

"I just love wrestling," said the woman who slapped faces. "Last time George and I went, there was one of them, some Indian I think it was, named Chief Thundercloud or something, and he had one of those brown torsos that was out of this world, I mean, well anyway, he broke this man's arm and you could just hear the bone go crunch. I thought I'd pass out it was so exciting, really it was."

"Did you ever see the lions at work on a bunch of Christians?" I murmured, but she didn't seem to hear me. Maybe it was just as well.

By this time everybody was herding towards the dining room. The two workmen seemed to have slipped away, and Rudy was stooping and fiddling with the controls as we came in. The lights snapped out, and in the darkness I could hear the thunder of the distant storm.

"Nice looking set—what'd they charge you?"

"What make is it?"

"Didn't they tell you how to work it? Having trouble getting the channel?"

"Here—let me show you."

Rudy ignored the queries. He stooped and fiddled, grinned drunkenly, stooped and fiddled some more. Then there came an incandescent glare from the screen and a blast of sound from the speaker.

Everybody scrambled for seats facing the screen. "Here we go," whispered Kitty.

A face filled the screen, a voice filled the room. For some reason, we all seemed to hear the voice before we saw the face. It was a sing-song voice, droning but penetrating.

". . . landing at eleven p.m. earth time . . ."

"Blah! Missed the wrestling!" That was Chester interrupting. Somebody said, "Quiet, there," and the voice came through again.

". . . over what is regarded as the western hemisphere of the planet."

I guess that's what the voice said. I can't be sure, for most of the words were drowned out by shouts and conversation from Rudy's guests.

They were seeing the face for the first time.

The face on the screen was like a metal mask. It showed up as gray, and might have been almost any color which would produce that way on television. It was an oval and contained the usual features, although the nose seemed flat. There was nothing too grotesque about it except its absolute hairlessness; the head was round and bald, and the face itself lacked eyebrows, eyelashes or hint of beard. The result was a gray, metallic sexless countenance that might have been utterly unremarkable as a mask, except for the fact that the lips moved.

And the lips of Rudy's guests moved, too—shouting in incomprehension.

Suddenly something blocked the screen. It was Admiral Cribber, getting to his feet. "Where's the phone?" he bellowed. "We're being attacked!"

"Nonsense," Rudy shouted. "It's a program. Siddown."

"But they're attacking us—"

"Wait a minute."

He waited. The face flickered out. Now the screen showed the sky. It was pinpointed, but not with stars. Moving patterns of light skyrocketed across the horizon.

The voice singsonged through. "Landings will be made shortly. There is no organized opposition. Complete control will be established immediately upon landing."

"Look!" Kitty was squealing and pointing at the screen. "Flying saucers."

"The sky gives it away." Chester Garland told her. "No clouds moving. It's a studio backdrop."

"But what's it all about?" his wife wailed.

"Just one of those invasion shows. Remember Orson Wells on the radio?"

The screen showed a metropolitan skyline, pinpoints of light flickering like glowworms over the enormous concrete stalks of skyscrapers. Lightning crackled and part of the skyline disappeared.

". . . proceeding according to plan. Landings will be effected immediately. . . ."

"That's no play!" Kitty exclaimed. "Listen, you can hear the explosions."

"Thunder," Rudy howled. "Can't you see there's a storm coming up? Reception is bad."

Reception *was* bad. The screen flickered again, and we caught a glimpse of the metallic mask, then of another. Thunder boomed louder, and Admiral Cribber lurched to his feet once more.

"Gotta put through a call," he said. "I still think they're attacking." He stumbled out of the room.

There was another flurry of conversation, all jumbled together, and I caught only fragments. "Norman Corwin . . . documentary . . . lot of science-fiction . . . another station . . . need a drink. . . ."

Then the roaring from the television set drowned out all other sounds, and the images came up. In one monstrous visual upheaval they spewed forth. The thunder rose.

We saw a horde of metal faces moving down an enclosed ramp that led to a city street. We saw something flicker and explode in midair.

We saw a shot of what was obviously a table-top miniature of the city of Washington, dominated by the monument. Lights played upon it momentarily and it broke in half like a stick of candy.

We saw—

"Turn it off!" snorted Chester Garland. "We need a drink!"

A half-dozen voices seconded his proposal. I added my own plea, I admit. The room was hot, steamy; thunder and darkness enveloped us, and the incessant nightmare of the television poured

forth. For a moment I reflected upon its meaning. I couldn't exactly put my finger on the point, but my thoughts ran something like this:

All over the country, millions of people were sitting at their televisions sets, watching some paid technicians stage a lurid melodrama about the destruction of a civilization which had degenerated to the point where millions of people just sat at their television sets, watching some paid technicians state a lurid melodrama about the destruction of a civilization which had degenerated—

And so on, over and over again. There was a hideous kind of truth buried somewhere in all this, and I tried hard to think about it coherently.

But it only took a moment. They were still yelling for another drink, the set was still blaring forth its explosions, a voice was still rasping, "Landings have now been made successfully at all designated points," and now Rudy was responding to the almost hysterical insistence of his guests.

"Turn the stinking thing off!"

He rose, marched up to the set, stooped and fiddled. The crowd rose and half-turned to re-enter the living room. Rudy was still stooping and fiddling, but the thunder increased in volume and tempo, and now the screen flickered forth in a scene of inferno.

A city was disintegrating before our eyes. Beams played from the pinpoints in the sky. People fled between a labyrinth of buildings. People vanished. So did the buildings. The beams played on. And the metal-faced monsters marched on metal legs, unscathed by beams. Screams rose above the thunder.

"What's the idea?" hooted Chester Garland. "Turn it off!"

Rudy stood up.

"I—I can't," he said.

"Can't?"

"No. Look." He raised one hand. It held a wire ending in a wall-plug. "I can't because it isn't turned on. It was never turned on in the first place."

"Never turned on?"

"Then what's all this we saw?"

"Is it some kind of gag?"

Abruptly, there was a crescendo of thunder and the screen went dead. Somebody snickered.

"What you trying to do, Rudy—throw a scare into us?"

"I swear the set wasn't connected."

"Blah!" Chester Garland and his wife pushed towards the door to the living room. Kitty and the others crowded after them.

"Fooled me for a minute," said Doctor Sanbrenner.

"But—" Rudy's reply was drowned by another burst of thunder. It came not from the set but from outside. The walls began to vibrate.

"There *is* a storm," said Kitty. As everyone crowded up to the bar, she walked across the room to the window. I watched her as Rudy took down a couple of fresh bottles.

"Well, soaks," he chuckled, "What'll it be? Might as well get on with the party."

I watched Kitty peer out of the window, saw her eyes widen, saw her hand grip the sill.

"The party's over," I murmured.

But nobody heard me. For suddenly, above the thunder that resounded from the streets below, Kitty began to scream. She was still screaming as we all rushed to the window and gazed down at what was happening in the world outside.

Philtre Tip

(*Rogue* March 1961)

MARK THORNWALD HAD AN OBSESSION.

Now there is nothing wrong with having an obsession in our society, provided one chooses it wisely. The man who is obsessed with the desire to make money often becomes wealthy. Those who dedicate an entire existence to the pursuit of fame frequently are rewarded, and can deduct the clipping bureau's fee from their income tax. Men who devote a lifetime to excel in athletic pursuits often wind up with a sizable collection of trophies, plus an occasional hernia.

But Mark Thornwald chose the wrong obsession.

Her name was Adrienne.

It is easy to deal with this particular obsession in terms of labels—*mother-fixation*, *chemical attraction*, *love object*, and the like.

Unfortunately, Thornwald wasn't satisfied with labeling his obsession. He had other plans for Adrienne. With the sorry result that he wasn't satisfied, period.

The first time he attempted to put his plans into action, Adrienne laughed at him. The second time, she slapped his face. The third time she threatened to call her husband and have Thornwald thrown out of the house.

Thornwald elected to leave quietly, hugging his obsession to his

breast, nursing it on the juices of hatred and frustration. As a result, it grew enormously.

Since Adrienne's husband, Charles, happened to be an associate professor of medieval history and since Thornwald was one of the regents of the university, it was no great trick to see that his contract was not renewed. After assuring himself that attrition had set in, Thornwald again approached Adrienne and made what he considered a handsome offer.

Adrienne thought both the offer and Thornwald quite ugly, and told him so. Again he retired to defeat, comforted only by the knowledge that she would never stoop to telling her husband.

Thornwald took stock of the situation. Of course, being obsessed, he did not consider matters realistically. When one is obsessed with avarice, one does not reflect upon the widows and orphans who may purchase the phony uranium stock; the seeker of fame at any price is quite willing to propel his pelvis in public or even run for Congress if needs be. And the man whose obsession takes a delectable, feminine form is equally lacking in ethics and scruples. To him, love laughs at locksmiths and goes into positive hysteria over the spectacle of a faithful wife.

"The end justifies the means," Thornwald told himself, and when he spoke of "the end" in connection with Adrienne it is to be feared he had a very tangible image in mind.

But there were no means available until Adrienne's husband provided them.

They came to Thornwald in the shape of a bulky manuscript, delivered by Charles himself.

"*Aphrodisia*," Thornwald murmured. "*A Study of Erotic Stimuli Through the Ages*."

"Don't let the title deceive you," Charles told him. "It's a scholarly work. I've been doing research on it now for almost a year—ever since I lost my position at the university. See what you think. Maybe it could stand a chance with Harker House."

"Ah yes, Harker House." Thornwald happened to be on the board of editors of the publishing firm.

"Read it as a professional," Charles urged. "Not as a friend."

This wasn't difficult for Thornwald, since by no stretch of the imagination did he consider himself to be Charles' friend. Rival, or deadly enemy—that was much more to Thornwald's taste, and the nourishment of his obsession.

Still, after Charles went away, he *did* read it professionally. And found the answer.

"Why did you cross out this formula for a love philtre?" he asked Charles, upon a subsequent visit. Thornwald indicated the page. "Here—the one from Ludvig Prinn's *Grimoire*, in the English edition." He read the ingredients listed and the description of effects.

"The meereest droppe, if placed in a posset of wine or sack, will transforme ye beloved into a veritable bitche in heate."

Charles smiled and shrugged. "You've just answered your own question," he said. "Most of the spells and incantations I've set down are mere *curiosa*. I doubt if there's any amorous incitement in owl dung, and calling a tomato a love apple is just sympathetic magic. But a few items come from sources I respect. Ludvig Prinn, for example, was a considerable sorcerer in his day."

Thornwald elevated his eyebrows. "In other words, you decided to omit this particular formula because you're afraid it might work?"

Charles nodded. "Look at the ingredients," he said. "Some of them I never heard of, and heaven only knows what their reaction might be in combination. The ones I do know—yohimbine and cantharadin, for example—are in themselves powerful aphrodisiacs. Added to this other stuff, the result could be trouble."

"Just what I was thinking," Thornwald said. And made a mental note, which he at once underlined in big black encephalographs.

"Interesting material," he told Charles. "Let me pop this in to the editorial staff and we'll see what we can do."

He took the manuscript away and, three weeks later, called Charles. "It's practically set," he said. "You've an afterdinner appointment with the board tonight. Get into town and come back with a contract."

That part was easy. The difficult matter had been to trace down all of the obscure ingredients for the love philtre. Some of them were only approximated in the pharmacopia and others had to be illegally obtained, but Thornwald's obsession brooked no obstacles. And now he was ready.

As soon as he made certain that Charles had indeed departed for the city he made his final preparations. Promptly at eight he knocked on the door of Charles' flat and Adrienne admitted him.

"Charles isn't here," she said.

"I know, but he'll be back before midnight. And then we'll celebrate his new book contract." Thornwald waved the two bottles. "Champagne, my dear, and already iced. One bottle for when Charles returns. One to share between us while we're waiting."

Adrienne eyed the bottles dubiously, but before she could object, Thornwald took over. "Glasses," he demanded. "And a corkscrew, if you please."

"But—"

"It's to be a surprise," Thornwald assured her. And he meant it.

Adrienne, he knew, could never resist surprises. And this particular one she could resist least of all. He didn't tell her about the third bottle—the tiny one—which he carried concealed in his pocket. He waited until she brought in the glasses and the corkscrew and an ice bucket.

"I'll open the bottle," he said. "Man's work." He winked at her. "Meanwhile, why don't you slip into that party dress of yours, so that we can give Charles a proper welcome?"

Adrienne nodded and left the room. It was then that Thornwald opened the champagne, poured it, and added just the merest drop of the love philtre to the contents of her glass.

He finished just in time, dropping the little vial back into his pocket just as Adrienne blossomed into the room. His hand trembled, not with apprehension but with anticipation.

Obsession or no, Adrienne was a beautiful woman in her own right; slim, shapely, and quite probably a natural redhead. Thornwald determined to satisfy himself on this latter point the moment Adrienne downed her drink.

She swept over to him, proffering his glass and raising her own as he turned away until he could control his shaking fingers. Now was the time for self-control. In a moment, he felt certain, it could be abandoned.

Thornwald raised his champagne glass.

"To tonight," he said. And sipped tentatively.

Adrienne nodded, bent her shapely wrist, brought the edge of the glass to her lips, and hesitated.

"Now that we seem to be friends again," she murmured, "suppose we seal our relationship in a friendly gesture?"

"Such as?"

"Let us take each other's glasses."

Thornwald gulped. "Oh no!" he exclaimed. "Believe it or not, I have a cold."

"Very well." Again, Adrienne paused.

"Drink up, my dear," Thornwald urged. "Here's to surprises."

"Surprises," Adrienne echoed. And drank.

Thornwald tossed off the champagne. His hands were trembling again. How long would he have to wait?

Not very long, apparently. For it seemed but a moment before the change came.

Adrienne moved quite close and her voice, like her smile, was soft and caressing.

"I don't know what you put in my drink," she murmured. "But you *did* put something in. That's why you wouldn't switch glasses with me, isn't it?"

Thornwald noted the warmth in her voice and felt it was now safe to nod.

"Good," Adrienne said. "I thought as much. Which is why I switched glasses before I made the suggestion—when I handed you your drink."

Thornwald blinked. And then the philtre took effect and he knew it worked, knew that if the merest drop would transform a woman into a bitch in heat, it was equally potent when administered to a male.

All he could do was tremble and watch the room swirl and listen to Adrienne's laughter. If only she could understand his motivations, if only she realized he'd acted out of genuine affection! Thornwald knew he had to tell her, so he took a deep breath and opened his mouth.

"I love you," he barked.

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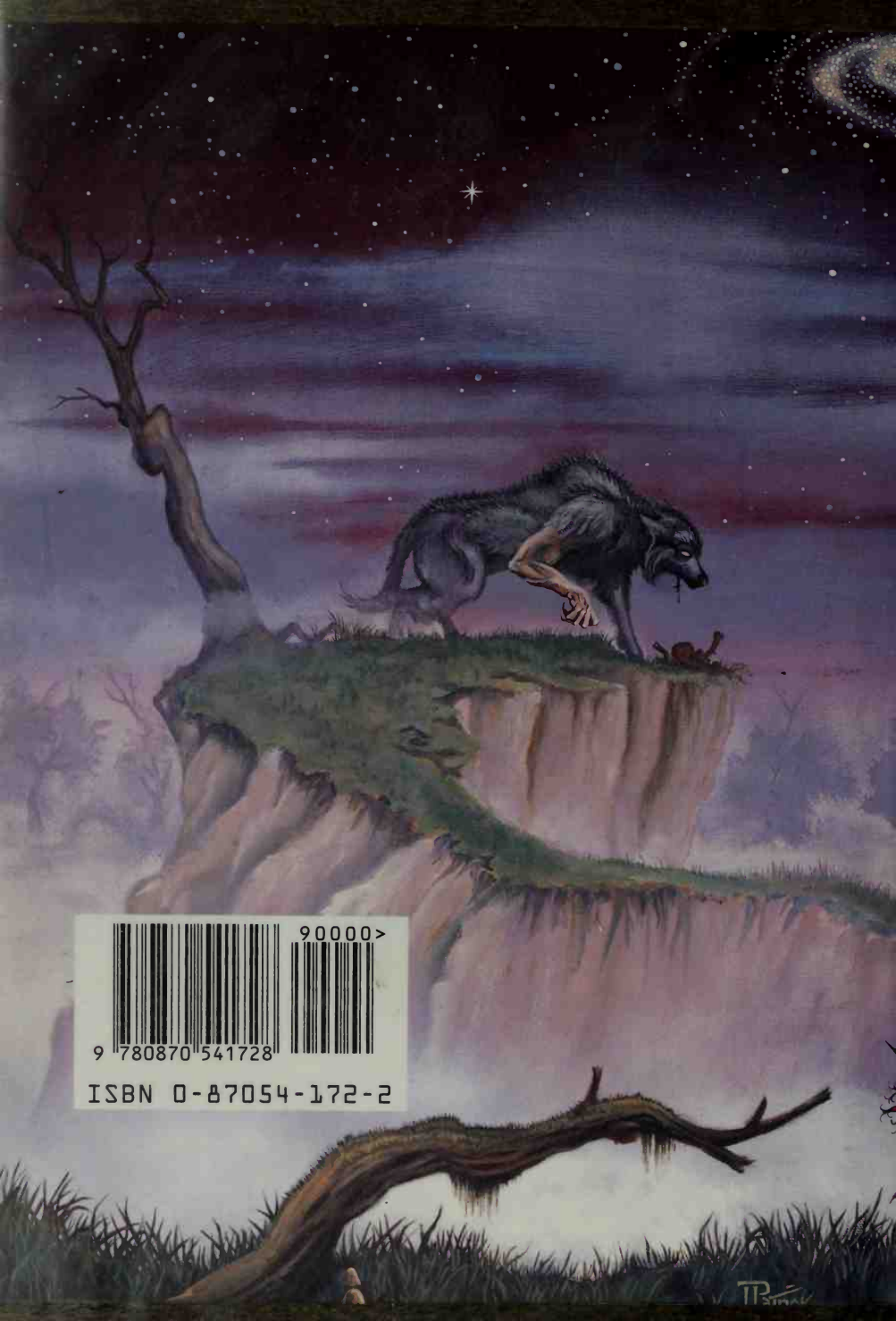


Robert Bloch (1917-1994)

Robert Bloch is perhaps best remembered for his novel *Psycho*, which was turned into one of the greatest horror movies of all time, under Alfred Hitchcock's brilliant direction. Bloch was also one of the most popular writers on such TV shows as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *The Twilight Zone*. As author of a score of best-selling novels and hundreds of short stories, Bloch's gallows humor sets him apart from many of his contemporaries. *Flowers from the Moon* is the third Robert Bloch story collection published by Arkham House. The others, *The Opener of the Way* (1945) and *Pleasant Dreams* (1960), have become highly prized among collectors, as this book soon will be.

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