

HELL'S ANGEL

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“I’ve always wanted to ask you why it’s so hard for a man to get to see you,” said Paul Hastings.

The Devil smiled blandly. At least, the smile would have appeared bland enough on any other face. In this case it was slightly disturbing to see.

“My dear fellow,” said the Devil, leaning forward in a confidential manner and anchoring his tail to the chair leg. “My dear fellow, the answer must be obvious to a man of your intelligence. After all, with due modesty, I must admit I’m rather an important personage. You will agree?”

Paul Hastings nodded.

“Naturally, if you understand my position, you can easily see I cannot be bothered with every Tom, Dick and Harry—or Harriet—who gets the notion of communicating with me. If I did there would be no time left to myself. And aside from tempting mortals, you know, I have other souls to fry.”

The Devil shook his head to accentuate his point. “And so you see, my dear sir, I’ve had to make it difficult to reach me. My chief detractors—members of the clergy and the like—would have it that I am continually in search of souls to snare. Why, badness me, nothing could be further from the truth!”

The Devil laughed heartily until sparks flew out of his mouth. “Matter of fact, I have souls aplenty—souls to burn, you might say. No need to tempt most mortals. They pave their own road to perdition without the need of assistance from me, I assure you.

“The only cases that interest me personally any more are chaps like you—men and women clever enough to dig through tangled and abstruse spells, and wise enough to interpret them. If they are intelligent enough and eager enough to go to all the bother of summoning me, then I am happy to appear. Besides, it is a simple matter to do business in such cases. Obviously such persons are eager to sell their souls to me. I don’t have to haggle and persuade and coax, like a used car salesman.”

“What do you know about used car salesmen?” asked the young man.

“Why, everything,” said the Devil. “You might have guessed that I get them all, sooner or later.”

Satan sat back and stroked his spade beard, while Paul Hastings marveled once again at his appearance. For the Devil looked exactly the way the Devil had always looked in pictures. He was the Devil of song and story and laxative bottle labels, to the life. And now he was sitting here in Paul Hastings’ little garret, just

as comfortable as you please, purring and beaming and pulling his beard.

“Speaking of selling souls,” the Devil murmured, “we might as well get down to business right away. I presume you had something of the sort in mind when you evoked me?”

Paul Hastings blushed and hung his head. “Well, yes,” he murmured. “You know how it is. Times are tough, a fellow has to get along, and the finance company won’t loan me anything without security. So I was wondering if—”

The Devil raised a delicate hand so that the black claws gleamed in the light of the tallow candles Hastings had set on the floor.

“No need to go into embarrassing details,” he said, kindly. “I quite understand. I’ve been handling cases like yours for years. Once made a deal with a chap by the name of Faust who—but I digress. What I mean to say is, I’m prepared to make a handsome offer for your soul. A clean-cut intelligent chap like you doesn’t often come my way. I’d be happy to place my resources at your disposal if only you’d tell me what it is you have in mind.”

Paul Hastings shrugged. It wasn’t much of a gesture, but somehow it managed to include his shock of unruly, uncut blonde hair, his wrinkled, shabby suit, his frayed shoelaces, his scuffed shoes, and the floor of the Bourbon Street garret in which the shoes and their owner stood.

“I see very well what you have in mind,” said the Devil. “It’s something like the letter ‘S’ with two lines drawn through it. Am I correct?”

“Right,” answered the young man.

“You don’t want eternal life, or three wishes, or any of that nonsense?”

“Certainly not. I’ve figured it all out. I have youth, and good

health, and I needn't ask for such things."

"Hmm." The Devil stroked his beard until it almost purred. "Think it over carefully before you make your decision, though. What about power? Lots of men like power, you know. And then some chaps have a fondness for feminine companionship. Without appearing to boast, I think I could arrange anything you might want along those lines—or curves."

"I'm way ahead of you," Hastings answered. "Give me the money and the power and the women will take care of themselves."

"Very true." The Devil nodded and exhaled softly, so that a faint reek of sulphur filled the room. He extended a claw and pulled a parchment out of the air, then extended his tail and proffered the point wrapped around a fountain pen. "Here we are," he murmured. "Think I remembered to fill this pen before I left—nice, fresh blood, everything legal—so if you'll just sign here, we'll have our contract."

"Uh-uh." Paul Hastings shook his head.

"What's the matter? You aren't—what is the current phrase?—chicken, are you?" The Devil pouted and bit a struck his cloven hoof against the floorboards.

"No. But the point is, I have no intention whatsoever of selling you my soul."

The cloven hoof stamped sharply, and the ancient boards gave off a shower of dust and sparks. "Then why, might I ask, did you summon me in the first place?"

"Well, it's like this." Hastings explained. "I moved in here about two weeks ago. Came to New Orleans expecting to get a job—I'm a public-relations man, you know—"

"Press agent!" snapped the Devil. "Don't tell me, we get plenty of your kind where I come from."

“All right, press agent,” Hastings agreed. “But I’m not the kind you’d get. That’s probably my trouble. I was, and am, an honest one. And my job fell through. Moved out of the hotel to this attic in the French Quarter and spent the days pounding the pavement looking for a job.”

“Get on with it,” urged the Devil. “I want to go out for some fresh air—stuffy as hell in here.”

“Well, to make it simple, I couldn’t find any job. But I did find something else, right here in this room.”

“What?”

“These books, under the bed,” Hastings produced a handful of tattered, battered old volumes. “Latin, you can see. Turned out to be textbooks of demonology—old books on sorcery, with spells and incantations. Must have belonged to whoever lived here years ago. I asked the landlady and she didn’t know; thinks she remembered an old man who owned the house once in the days before the war—he was interested in voodoo or some such thing—and when they took him away to the asylum and turned this place into a rooming-house he must have left his books behind.”

“I know who you’re speaking of,” muttered the Devil. “The man’s name was Red—Red Grimoire, I think, a Frenchman. He’s boarding with me, now.”

“So I read the books,” Hastings continued, “and decided to try out some of the spells. Naturally, I decided to try and call you up.”

“Which you did. And quite a lot of trouble you went to,” commented the Devil, glancing around the tiny room. “All this blue chalk, and chicken-blood, and candles in pentagrams, and the rest of the mess—but why did you go to such bother when you had no intention of selling your soul to me?”

“Because I still had hopes we might do business.”

“How?”

“Well, don’t you buy anything except souls? Services, perhaps?”

“What service could you possibly offer me?” asked the Devil.

“Oh, I don’t know. Seems to me as if Hell could use some good public relations. I mean, human beings don’t seem to think too kindly of the place, or of yourself either, if you’ll pardon my frankness.”

“You’d make Hell popular?” jeered the Devil.

“I’m not saying what I’ll do. But I still want money without selling my soul for it, and I wondered if there wasn’t something a human being might do for you which you couldn’t do yourself.”

“Something a human being might do—”

The Devil stared at Hastings until his face burned from the intensity of the gaze. Noting this, the Devil shifted his glance and stared at the wall until two holes began to char and smoke. Then, “I’ve got it!” he snapped.

“You have?”

“Yes, and so have you—a task, I mean! My dear chap, you were right in calling me. There *is* something very special you might do, as a straight business deal. Right in your line, too. I’ve had a pet project in mind for a long time, and I believe you can carry it out. It will mean money galore for you, and help me immeasurably.”

“And I won’t be selling my soul?”

“Of course not.”

“Then I’ll do it.” Hastings held out his hands. “But cash in advance, please. Not that I don’t trust you, but one hears so many rumors—”

“Competitors give me a bad name,” sneered Satan. “But

you'll have to wait a while. You see, I can't *give* you the money. I can only give you the chance to earn it."

"But I thought—"

"Don't believe all you hear. I have no power to produce gold out of nowhere, and besides we're off the gold standard. I can't make dollar bills because if I created too many it would disrupt our present economy—and I like our present economy the way it is; took a lot of trouble to build it up. And besides, if I counterfeited the money, it would be dishonest."

"You disappoint me," Hastings sighed. "Here I thought you were capable of just waving your hand or your—your tail, maybe—and there it was."

"Very few people make money waving either object," commented the Devil, dryly. "You see, they tell so many lies about me. For instance, there are stories about me appearing in all kinds of shapes and forms at will, but you see me as I really am. It isn't true that I can change into human appearance, for example. And that's why I need a human being for this job I suggest. The job that will make you a fortune."

Hastings stood up. "Just what is it you want me to do?" he asked.

"Very simple," said the Devil. "I want you to kidnap an angel."

"Huh?"

"You heard me," repeated Satan, patiently. "Just kidnap an angel. Steal one from heaven, as it were."

"But—"

"I know what you're going to say, and it's all arranged. I have the means of getting you transported to heaven and back again. I have a plan for capturing an angel. There is nothing for you to worry about. As the vulgar expression has it, the job is all cased."

Satan smiled. “You see, I’ve had this plan in mind for centuries, but there was nobody to carry it out. Naturally, a fiend can’t get into heaven, and most men—in spite of the fact that they’re always talking about the joys of heaven—seem strangely reluctant to go there. But I’ve wanted an angel for ages, and you’re the chap to bring one back for me.”

“Let me get this straight,” Hastings sighed. “You want me to kidnap an angel and bring it down to Hell?”

“No, not to Hell. To earth. The angel will live on earth. That’s the whole point of the scheme.”

“What scheme?”

“The one that makes your fortune.”

“Aren’t you going to let me in on the details?”

The Devil shook his horns. “I shall assuredly do so—the very moment that you and the angel return. It is all arranged and perfectly safe.”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s a billion-dollar proposition,” said the Devil. “Guilt-edged.” Again the tail waved the fountain pen. “Here’s the contract. Look it over, and sign at the bottom.”

Paul Hastings took the contract. Words appeared on the parchment as he read. Yes, it sounded perfectly legal. He was to kidnap the angel and in return was guaranteed a fortune not to exceed one billion dollars, by means to be explained. No soul was to be sold. Whereas, hereinafter, aforesaid, and etceteras.

“Looks OK to me,” he commented.

“Then sign. Be careful with that pen, though. It leaks at times. Wouldn’t want you to get corpuscles all over the table.” The Devil watched considerately as Paul Hastings affixed his name to the document. Then Satan in turn wrote his signature.

“Fine,” he said, folding up the parchment. “I’ll just file this away in Limbo for safekeeping.” A whisk, and the contract disappeared.

“All right, what next?” asked the young man.

“Meet me at midnight tomorrow night at the amusement park out at Lake Pontchartrain,” said the Devil.

“What for?”

“Go to heaven!” said the Devil. “And please don’t ask so many questions. Er—I suggest that you air the room out after I leave. It’s quite stuffy.”

The Devil disappeared in a puff of smoke. Paul Hastings, coughing, ran to the window and opened it wide. He hung his head over the sill and gulped down air. Then he shook his head.

“So I’m going to heaven tomorrow night. Isn’t that a hell of a deal?”

Lake Pontchartrain glittered beneath a February moon as Paul Hastings, his battered coupe wheezing away its last gallon of gas (regular, of course: he hadn’t been able to afford ethyl for months), rattled towards the amusement park. The gleaming white skeleton of a huge prehistoric monster loomed ahead—and with a shock, Hastings recognized it as the outline of a roller coaster.

He parked the car almost directly beneath it, and the little auto made a lonely black dot on the empty road. He shivered as he crunched down the gravel pathway, eyes alert for his partner in crime.

“Hello there!” came a voice. “Here I am! No—look up!”

Sure enough, the Devil was sitting on top of the roller coaster, waving his tail in a friendly greeting.

“What are you doing up there?” Paul called.

“Waiting for you, of course. Climb up—don’t be afraid.”

Now there was certainly no reason for Paul Hastings to be afraid of climbing up the sides of a rickety roller coaster at midnight in order to keep a rendezvous with the Devil. So up he went, clambering shakily but steadily, until he reached the top. From that vantage point he could see the lights of New Orleans, the Navy landing and training field, the airport, and the peculiar incandescent luminance of the Devil's eyes.

The Devil was sitting in the front car of one of the roller-coaster vehicles. He helped Hastings to climb in beside him.

"Hope you like it," he said.

"Like what?"

"This. It's your plane, of course." The Devil indicated the car in which they sat.

"I'm going to heaven in this?"

"Certainly. You expected to fly, didn't you? I mean, it's millions of miles high, you know."

"I know," sighed Paul Hastings. "And I don't like your altitude. However—"

"However, you signed a paper," the Devil continued, for him. "And it's time to go."

"But how can I fly in this flimsy car?"

"It's not a flimsy car. It's a plane, besides which your current developments in jet propulsion appear infantile; its simplicity of design and function are such that you need do nothing but act in the capacity of a passenger."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it's fueled, there's an automatic pilot to guide you to heaven and back, an automatic timing device to function during your stay; the course is accurately charted and all you need to do now is wave good-bye."

“I still claim it’s a lousy roller-coaster car,” said Paul Hastings. “And I wouldn’t go over the tracks in it, let alone to heaven and back.” His companion stepped out of the car.

“What do you say to this?” asked the Devil. “And this? Also this—and this—and, at the risk of becoming boringly repetitious—this?”

He punctuated his remarks by deft movements of hands and tail; reaching under the car and elongating it abruptly, smoothing it over until the surface assumed a silvery sheen, pulling at the sides until wings were extended, fumbling with the interior and drawing out an instrument panel, waving across the seat and enclosing it in a glass bubble.

Hastings now sat in a streamlined silver cylinder, a winged projectile that looked like something designed by Hannes Bok. The bubble over his head served both to insulate and isolate him; he had to raise his voice to make himself heard.

“Why didn’t you show me this in the first place?” he shouted. The Devil balanced his cloven hoof delicately on the roller-coaster track and shrugged discreetly.

“Somebody might have driven by and seen it,” he said. “As it is, you’re going to leave in a moment—just as soon as you pull the left-hand switch.”

Paul Hastings surveyed the instrument panel. “Looks complicated,” he yelled. “How about some instructions? And what do I do to capture an angel?”

“It’s all planned for you,” the Devil answered. “Now just listen to me and you’re on your way.”

The young man listened. From time to time he nodded—from time to time his head fairly spun—but in a few moments he comprehended the Devil’s plan.

“You’ll find the bottle inside the glove compartment,” Satan

concluded. “Now, it’s time to go. Follow instructions and you ought to be back here, safe and sound, within the hour.”

“I still don’t understand why you’re so confident,” Hastings sighed. “That angle on the angel—”

For answer, the Devil closed the plastic bubble over the young man’s head and zipped the insulation tight around the interstices. “No more questions,” he said. “Time to go. By the way, don’t worry if there’s a lack of scenery on the trip. You’ll be traveling much faster than the speed of light and you’ll see nothing except yourself and the vehicle. But there’s not much worth seeing between here and heaven, anyway.”

“Sour grapes,” muttered Hastings, to himself. Actually, he was badly frightened. The prospect of his journey was far from intriguing—he had no intention, originally, of going to heaven in anything except a nice, comfortable coffin; and that would be in the distant future. But now—

“Of you go!” snapped the Devil. “Pull the lever.”

Hastings pulled the lever and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he was alone.

Alone.

It’s a funny word, doesn’t mean much to anyone, and didn’t to Hastings. Alone is when there’s nobody home and you turn on the radio. Alone is when you’re sitting at the end of the bar, nursing a drink and wishing you were drinking with a nurse. Alone is looking out of the window on a rainy day and waiting for the telephone to ring, only it’s disconnected. Alone is a lot of things.

At least, Paul Hastings had always believed that. But now he found out that alone is—nothing.

That’s what he saw when he opened his eyes—nothing. He sat inside the plane, looked out through the sides and top of the plastic bubble, and saw—nothing.

No earth. No moon. No sun. No stars. No clouds. No air. No color.

It was like gazing into a transparent sheet of glass that was also opaque—and endless sheet, without sides, or top, or bottom; a sheet of glass that caught neither reflection nor absence of light. It was like looking into emptiness; an experience probably known to brain surgeons when they open a politician's skull.

Hastings didn't like it. He closed his eyes and waited for it—or the absence of it—to go away. After a moment, he raised his eyelids again.

Nothing, and more of it. Pressing around the bubble, pressing around the walls of the ship as it soared or seared or shredded dimensions in its flight upwards. Only there was no upwards. Paul Hastings was all alone.

He felt no motion, heard no sound. There was only the psychic pressure from outside, the surge of imponderable emptiness.

He felt that unless he thought about something quickly he would go mad; the emptiness would be absorbed into his brain. He tried to think about the Devil and about heaven and about catching an angel, but that seemed madness, too.

So he thought about himself.

Paul Hastings, all alone in outer space, thinking about himself. About the foolish, honest kid who got out of the service and decided to use his college training and natural savvy to get into public relations work. About the two years and more of fruitless effort, culminating in this trip to New Orleans and ending up in the garret.

Two years ago—two months ago—perhaps even two weeks ago—he would never have thought of calling up the Devil. He had been so honest, so naïve. He'd tried so hard to get a job, any job.

But the South was a funny place. Everything was “family” and “connections” and “contacts.” You had to know somebody who knew somebody who knew somebody who knew Jefferson Davis.

Oh, once in a while, there had been minor assignments; temporary jobs working for some established publicity man during the peak of a campaign. But it had never lasted. And inevitably a crisis would come up when it was necessary to soft-pedal a story, or misrepresent certain facts, or tone down an angle for a client. And the Paul Hastings of two years, two months, two weeks ago—fool that he was—would never tell a lie. Not even for a client, not even for business, not even for a buck, and not even for a very fast buck.

That, Hastings now realized, is why he had ended up in that garret on Bourbon Street. Fourth floor rear, high above the nightly noises from LaFitte’s, Dan’s International, Prima’s and the other pleasure palaces. Ten dollars a week in advance to Madam Adam, who ran the place for the privilege of sitting there and rotting in her honest way.

And that, Hastings also realized, is why he called up the Devil. Perhaps the Mardi Gras was the last straw. The gay carnival had just begun, and four flights down Paul could see the revelers, night after night, laughing and dancing and drinking and spending money; a myriad of masked figures. Masked, mysterious, but merry. Nobody could tell rich from poor, honest from dishonest. They all wore masks.

Nobody could tell the true from the false, and nobody cared. So Paul had made up his mind, cast up his spells, called up his Devil, signed up his bargain.

Isolated, eyes elated, Paul thought it all through. Truth and falsehood were relative after all. Two days ago he hadn’t believed in the Devil, but now he’d met him. Two days ago he hadn’t even been too sure about the existence of heaven as a geographical location—but he was going there.

Come to think of it, according to infernal calculations, he should be arriving shortly. Hastings decided to take a chance and open his eyes once more.

He remembered that his speed exceeded the velocity of light—and it was this factor which would enable his craft to soar over the gates of heaven without being detected. The Devil had told him of the automatic slow-down which would occur once the vessel came into contact with the atmosphere and the cloudbanks of the celestial realm. The Devil had sneered about that in a fine fashion.

“Heaven is vastly overrated,” he had said. “Clouds everywhere. More smog than Los Angeles. As a matter of fact, heaven isn’t very much better than Los Angeles—and some Los Angeles folks have told me it’s worse. All they have is a strong Chamber of Commerce up there. So don’t be disappointed when you arrive. Look for the clouds.”

Paul Hastings looked for the clouds. And suddenly, he saw them. Simultaneously he became aware of motion. “It’s because the plane is slowing down,” he told himself. His voice sounded hollow as it reverberated against the sides of the bubble. But most of his attention was focused through his eyes rather than his ears.

He gazed out at endless acres of clouds; white, fleecy clouds made out of lamb’s wool, baby bunting, Christmas tree cotton. They were plump bulgy clouds, cuddling up against a blue sky in the best tradition of greeting card artists’ handiwork; in a word, heavenly clouds. As a matter of fact, Hastings almost caught a glinting glimpse of golden walls in the distance—almost, but not quite. The clouds intervened, sailing serenely by through celestial space.

Hastings felt the plane easing in, floating down. It was heading, almost as if by volition, towards a small fragment of cloud that had just become detached from a larger mass; a little isolated island.

The logic of a heavy plane landing on a cloud didn't bother Paul Hastings very much. There was nothing at all logical about the plane itself, or his mission. He knew the plane would land and that was enough.

Now he had to think about the immediate future. How do you catch an angel?—that was the major problem.

How do you catch an angel? Sprinkle salt on its tail? Use a butterfly net? Lasso it by the halo? Take a saxophone under one arm and pretend you're Gabriel?

Hastings didn't know.

“Open the glove compartment,” the Devil had said. “And take out the bottle.”

As the plane settled down on the cloud bank, the young man opened the glove compartment and took out the bottle. It was a small bottle bearing a plain label.

“Then press the third button on the panel.” The Devil's instructions, again. Hastings decided to obey. He pressed the button.

There was a crackling and a sputtering and a thin, eerie whine as of women bawling out their husbands for coming into the house without wiping their feet.

“Hastings!”

The voice cut through the whining with a sudden clarity, and Hastings jumped.

“Don't be frightened, my dear chap,” the voice reassured him. “This is just the Devil. Sorry, I've only one-way reception set up, so you can't talk back to me. But listen now for the rest of your orders.”

Hastings nodded to nobody in particular and bent an ear over the instrument panel.

“Press the fifth button to open the side of the plane,” the Devil instructed him. “Step out on the cloud. It’s a little damp, but you won’t catch cold. They tell me the air of heaven is filled with antihistamine.

“Walk across the cloud until you come to an angel. Then go into your story. If you’re as persuasive and convincing as I have reason to believe, you can lure it back to the plane. Then use the bottle and you’ll be ready to take off on the up-lever. Better get started now—you have, according to my chronology, seven minutes.”

The voice blended into the crackling and the crackling blended into silence. Paul Hastings blinked, shook his head, squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, and—unable to think of any other way of stalling—pressed the fifth button.

The side of the plane opened. A step automatically dropped from the base of the door to the topmost layer of cloud. Paul stepped out and landed up to his ankles in slush.

So this was heaven!

Slush. Nothing but slush. Hastings moved his feet, lifting them up and down. It was hard going. If you’ve ever walked on a cloud, you’ll understand.

Hastings never had, and he didn’t particularly like it. The precious seconds were fleeting by and still he was slogging along. Snowbanks of cloud loomed all around him; it seemed funny that he couldn’t see his breath. Icebergs and glaciers floated off in the blue distance, and his little island of cloud drifted away from them. Everything was steeped in snowy silence, everything—

Then he heard it and his feet found wings.

It was music, *heavenly* music. How often he’d heard the phrase, heard it applied to everything from brassy dance-bands to broken-down accordion players. But this was the first time he’d

ever heard the reality, and it was *heavenly*.

Little ripples of pure sound that entered the ears, caressed them, and then slid slowly down the spine, melted against his heart. A tune that was soft as a mother's tears, carefree as a child's laugh, buoyant as the breeze on which it was borne.

Hearing it, he could walk in ease and grace. Hearing it, he could no more restrain his pace than his very pulse-beat. Paul Hastings rounded the corner of the cloud and came upon the angel.

The angel, of course, was playing a harp; a small, simple instrument in the Grecian tradition. And the music, close at hand, was even more exquisite.

But somehow, Hastings lost all interest in the music when he beheld the musician.

For the angel was a girl.

To say that she was a blonde is an understatement. To say that her eyes were blue is an insult. To say that her skin was cream-white is absurd. Hastings could see all that for himself, and his own eyes told him that her hair was more golden than the halo above it, her eyes were bluer than the sky of heaven, her skin whiter than the angel-wings which sprouted from her back. She was, in a word, a series of *clichés* incarnate; the most beautiful *cliché* ever known.

He surveyed her carefully, and despite her overpowering beauty he was able to make a critical observation. He noted the sleeveless, almost diaphanous gown she wore, with its television neckline; it seemed finer than silk, more shimmering than nylon. He observed with interest the rakish tilt of the small halo which gave off a concentrated glow similar to that of a strong neon tube. He took cognizance of her large and powerful wings; silver-feathered pinions which sprouted from the shoulder blades. These were surely not the token wings usually seen on the angels in

the story books—one look convinced him that they were meant for flying and were capable of carrying her weight for great distances.

And yet halo and wings did not detract from her beauty, did not even seem incongruous. They belonged, they were a part of her angelic being, and therefore natural.

But there were one or two features which shocked him. To begin with, the angel's feet were bare—and her nails were not painted! Her fingernails weren't painted, either, and—horror of horrors—the wave in her golden hair seemed natural, as did the coloring! Strangest of all, she wore neither rouge nor lipstick, and there wasn't a trace of eye-shadow or eyebrow pencil!

In all his life, Paul Hastings, like millions of other men, had never once seen a beautiful girl who wore no makeup. *That* was the clincher. Wings may be faked, halos might be contrived, but beauty without makeup was surely impossible to feign. Without doubt, here was proof positive that this girl was a real angel.

He stood there, staring at her silently, and she sat there strumming the harp. Gradually the music increased its potency and appeal; hearing it, Hastings almost forgot his mission. The soaring sweetness invaded his being, absorbed it, so that he seemed to become a part of a vast serenity, a pulsating peace.

Paul Hastings shook his head, shook off the spell. He stepped forward, uttering one of those polite little coughs.

The hands stopped moving, the harp tilted back into the silken folds of the lap, and the music ceased. The angel looked up at him with wide eyes, and then opened her mouth.

Her voice was fresh music, a fresh spell.

“Oh! I didn't know anyone was here. I'm sorry if my music disturbed you.”

“It didn't,” Hastings said. “I liked it.”

“I was just practicing,” the angel explained. “I really can't play

very well yet—you see, I’m new here. So I like to fly over to one of these outlying clouds, where I can be alone, and rehearse a bit.”

She glanced at Hastings curiously. “But you must be new here, too. Why, you don’t even have your wings yet!”

“I’m not an angel,” Hastings told her.

“You’re not? Then what are you doing up here?”

“I get around. As a matter of fact, my dear Miss—”

The angel noted his hesitation and giggled. “Miss? We have no titles here, you know. You may call me Angela.”

“All right, Angela. My name’s Paul Hastings, and I happen to be a traveling salesman.”

“A traveling salesman in heaven? My, you fellows certainly seem to get around.”

“That’s progress.” Hastings stepped closer, marveling at her credulity. But, he remembered, all angels are innocent.

“Came in a plane,” he explained. “We’ve got a lot of new developments since you left. Radar, jet propulsion, atomic bombs. We’re really civilized.”

“I’ve often wondered what the world was like these days,” the angel sighed. “You see, I left in such a hurry—”

“When was this?”

“We don’t talk about such things up here,” reproved the angel, gently. “We put aside all worldly memories. And I still don’t quite understand why a human being, even a traveling salesman, would venture here.”

“Business,” Hastings assured her. “Always opening up new territories. And I felt that heaven would be just the place for me. Because of what I’m selling.”

He reached over and picked up the harp from her lap. “Take

this article, for instance,” he said. “Mighty pretty little thing. Brand new, you said?”

“Almost,” said the angel.

“Sparkles beautifully.” Hastings held it up and inspected it. “But wait a while. Wait until the damp air gets in its work. Pretty soon the finish will begin to tarnish. And that’s where I come in.”

“What are you selling?” asked the angel.

“Metal polish!” Hastings proclaimed. “The finest metal polish in the world—in the universe, for that matter. Guaranteed to preserve the sheen and lustre of gold, silver, any precious metal. Ideal for harps, perfect for halos. Cherubim cry for it!”

“But nothing ever changes here,” protested Angela. “I’ve seen the heavenly choir, and their instruments are always bright.”

Hastings considered the statement for a moment. Then he shrugged. “I can see you’re new here,” he told her. “Otherwise you’d realize that I’m not the first traveling salesman to reach heaven. Why, I’ll bet that my company has sold more metal polish up here than anywhere else. No wonder the older angels keep everything bright and shiny! They all use my polish.”

“I don’t know. It sounds all right, but—”

“Why not take advantage of my free demonstration? Here, step right over to my plane and let me show you a bottle. No charge or obligation.”

“Well—”

“Come on!” Paul Hastings reached down and took the angel’s hand. An electric tingling ran up his arm and rang a buzzer in his heart.

She rose to her dainty feet, then continued to rise. The great wings spread automatically, and she flapped them slowly, floating forward through the cloud mass. Hastings stumbled along behind

her.

In a moment they reached the plane. And here, for one moment, Paul Hastings faced disaster.

It had been the Devil's plan, of course, to have Hastings pose as a salesman of metal polish. He was to lure an angel to the plane, show it the bottle, and entice it inside the bubble. Then Hastings was to slam the door, press the lever, and whiz away. A simple plan—diabolically simple, in fact—and it looked as though it might work. Except for one simple little error.

The angel's wings would never fit inside the bubble!

Hastings surveyed the cramped, transparent compartment, then noted that majestic span of angelic pinfeathers.

"Two minutes left," he reminded himself. But what to do?

"Come over and take a look at the plane," he invited. "I'll get the bottle—it's right inside."

Trustingly, the angel permitted him to take her hand and lead her over to the silver cylinder. She gazed at it in pleased wonder.

"Beautiful!" she said. "And to think you could fly all the way up here in this machine."

Paul Hastings walked towards the door and entered the cabin, sliding into position under the domed roof. "Notice how it shines," he told her. "That's our polish, of course." Angela ran her hand appreciatively along the silver sides.

"My, it's so light," she marveled. "I can't see how such a delicate machine could come so far."

"Not delicate at all," Hastings assured. "Here, you can prove it. Just hop up and sit on it. You'll see how easily it bears your weight."

Obediently, without question, Angela flapped her wings and rose in midair. She landed delicately on the top of the plane, right

behind the bubble, and settled herself in place with a pleased smile.

Hastings glanced at her through the transparent dome. She was sitting on the plane, all right. And now, he had only to close the door, adjust the automatic insulation, and use the up-lever. Traveling at far greater than the speed of light, the angel would never be able to leave her perch until they reached earth. And it couldn't harm her—you can't, as the Devil had reminded him, kill an angel!

He glanced back at Angela, and for a moment his heart failed him. She was beautiful, innocent, trusting. The thought of her shining radiance disturbed him.

He closed his eyes and another vision of shining radiance came to him—the shining radiance of gold and silver coins heaped up in stacks and rows. It was a hellish vision, and it drove all thoughts of heaven from his mind.

Still—this was wrong, he mustn't do it—he mustn't.

At that moment a crackling emerged from the instrument panel and a voice emerged from the crackling.

“What are you waiting for?” grated the voice. “Pull the switch!”

Paul Hastings pulled the switch.

There was a drone, a blur, a moan, a whirr, and then he was back in nothingness. But this time he was not alone.

Glancing back, he saw Angela, still visibly perched on the plane; hair flying, wings flapping, harp dangling wildly from a golden cord looped around her neck. Angela, teetering madly on infinity's brink, her halo askew, her mouth agape. Angela, her face transfixed not by fear but by complete incomprehension.

She couldn't fall, and she didn't. She couldn't speak, and if she could, Hastings would not have been able to hear her. As a part of

the moving mechanism that droned through the dimensions and sundered space, she was still visible. But that was all. And the vision of her helplessness again tore at Hastings' heartstrings, until he turned away and examined the instrument panel.

Kidnapping an angel, eh? Well, he was doing it. And he's getting his reward. But why must he feel so guilty?

After all, he wasn't really harming Angela. Matter of fact, this little trip would probably do her some good. Get her out of a rut. Otherwise she'd be sitting around in heaven for an eternity, with nothing to do but strum her harp.

She was much too pretty to spend the rest of her afterlife as a non-union musician. A girl her age needed a little fun, a little excitement. Once on earth, Angela could get rid of her white nightgown and step into some modern clothes. And she'd never run the risk of catching cold by sitting on a damp cloud all day.

Yes, Hastings was doing her a favor. He closed his eyes and waited for the vessel to hit the gaseous orbit of exhaust fumes, cigarette smoke, factory smog, sewer gas, profanity and atomic radiation which made up the aura surrounding earth.

Slowly the spaceship settled down over the world, over the continent, over the country, over the state of Louisiana, over New Orleans parish, over the amusement park, over the topmost track of the roller coaster.

It landed with scarcely a jar.

Hastings pressed the proper button and the side door opened. He stepped out on the track, gazing up at the sky. The moon had moved perhaps an hour's distance across the cloud-gaps, and the entire area around the park was quite deserted. This was a good thing, because there was no one to see him approach the winged figure which huddled up in the rear of the curious contraption.

"Where are we?" asked the angel, in a small voice. "What

happened?”

“On earth,” he answered. “Just outside New Orleans, to be exact. That’s Lake Pontchartrain over there. And as to what happened—” He hesitated, and a lie formed in his mind. It was a small lie, and if not altogether white, it seemed to be only slightly grey.

“As to what happened,” he repeated, “I guess I just pressed the wrong lever by accident. And we came back to earth.”

“But this will never do!” wailed the angel. “I’ve got to return to heaven at once. They’ll miss me, and there’ll be the very devil to pay.”

“The devil to pay,” Hastings murmured. “That reminds me—” He glanced around, expecting to catch sight of the friendly fiend. But there was no one in sight. He turned back and regarded Angela.

She was a forlorn little figure, despite her imposing wings, and he felt curiously ashamed of himself. He couldn’t bear to tell her the real reason for her presence here—and now, as a matter of fact, he could scarcely bear the knowledge himself. If only he might take her back to heaven and forget about the whole thing—but he couldn’t.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I can’t take you back. Not just yet, anyway. You see, there’s not enough fuel.”

“Oh.” She sighed. “But I shouldn’t burden you with my troubles. After all, it was an accident, as you say. It’s not your fault.”

Her smile was sweet, and it stabbed Paul Hastings to the quick—wherever that was. Now, he knew, he could never tell her.

“But what are we doing up here?” asked Angela. “Isn’t this an amusement park?”

“Er—yes. Guess I made a slight miscalculation when we

landed.”

“But why don’t we get down? I mean, you weren’t intending to spend the rest of the night here, were you?”

“Hardly.” Again Hastings glanced around, expecting to see the Devil materialize. But there was only the night and the silence, and the beautiful girl with the wings and the halo.

“Guess we might as well try climbing down,” he sighed—and wondered, as he said it, what would happen next. Here he was, just back from heaven and as far as he knew, the first mortal ever to make a two-way trip. The least he might expect was some kind of welcoming committee; if not a brass band, then a chorus of imps and demons. Instead, no Devil, no nothing. And what would he do now with an angel on his hands?

Come to think of it, he had other problems to confront. The simple one of climbing down from the roller coaster was enough to baffle him momentarily. But Angela solved that. Noting his indecision she rose and extended her hands.

“Grab hold,” she invited. “We’ll fly down.”

And that is exactly what they did, coming in on her wing and his prayer, as he felt himself swoop down through empty air. But in a moment they landed on the ground and Hastings escorted her in the direction of his parked car.

“Climb in and sit down,” he suggested. “I want to have a look at that rear left tire of mine. Got a hunch it’s flat.”

He breathed a sigh of relief as Angela disappeared inside the car. There was no one around but still, a chance night driver might happen by, and the sight of an angel would cause comment. Angels were scarce in this neck of the woods.

Hastings walked around behind the car to take a look at the tire. Yes, it *was* a bit flat; no puncture, but it probably needed a good ten pounds more of pressure. He regarded it thoughtfully for

a moment.

“Wonder if we could make it into town all right?” he mused.

“Sure you can.”

He whirled at the sound of the unexpected voice. There was no one behind him.

“Climb in,” the voice continued, in a sort of rasping whine. “Let’s get moving, brother.”

Paul Hastings shook his head violently from side to side, then up and down. As his head went down he noticed the black, furry object crouching at his feet. It was a cat.

“It isn’t polite to stare, brother,” purred the cat.

“But you spoke to me!”

“There’s maybe a law against speaking to you?” the cat asked, twirling its whiskers sarcastically.

“No—I mean—it’s just that—”

“Oh, I get it; your mother taught you not to speak to strangers. Well, let me introduce myself, brother. The name is Brimstone. And you’re Paul Hastings.”

“How on earth do you know that?”

“Not ‘on earth,’” the cat corrected. “In hell would be more accurate. Because I’m your familiar. The name is Brimstone.”

“A talking cat, eh?”

“Not a talking cat. Your familiar. His Nibs sent me.”

“I suspected as much. What happened to him? Why didn’t he meet me here as agreed?”

“The Devil was called away unexpectedly,” the black blasphemy explained. “It seems he had an urgent meeting with Joe Stalin.”

“So?”

“So he sent me to keep you company, brother.”

“Why must you call me ‘brother?’” demanded Hastings.

“Because that’s what you are. I’m your familiar, your brother in damnation.”

“But I’m not damned. I didn’t sell my soul!”

Paul Hastings had never heard a cat laugh before. He heard it now, and didn’t like it.

“Of course you didn’t sell it,” the cat chuckled. “But you damned yourself without knowing it by agreeing to steal an angel. Don’t you know that’s a terrible offense?”

“Never thought of it,” Hastings answered.

“Well, you’ll have a lot of time to think about it in the future. All eternity, in fact. How His Nibs roared when he told me about the fast deal he’d pulled! You, thinking you were so smart, taking such pains not to sell your soul—and then practically giving it away by agreeing to commit an unpardonable sin! Don’t you know that you can’t get the best of the Devil in a bargain?”

“Then I’m finished,” Paul Hastings sighed, bitterly. “I’m cheated.”

“Not at all,” Brimstone said, flicking his long black tail in a gesture of deprecation. “You’ll still get your money; a bargain’s a bargain. And all you have to do is hang on to the angel here until the Big Boy returns tomorrow.”

Hastings shivered, and it wasn’t because of the night air.

“Come on,” coaxed the cat. “Introduce me to the angel. I’ve never seen one, you know.”

“And you’re not going to, either!” the young man declared. “Why don’t you go away?”

“Because I’m your brother, that’s why—and I have orders to go wherever you go. As a matter of fact, the Big Wheel told me to watch you very carefully, just in case you changed your mind about delivering the angel.”

“So you’re a spy, eh?”

“Right,” answered the cat.

Hastings shivered again. The Devil had thought of everything; there would be no turning back for him now. Still, the thought of revealing his treachery to Angela was the worst part of it. He looked for some way out. He turned to the cat with a gesture of appeal and appeasement.

“All right. You have your orders, I suppose. But just do me one favor and we’ll get along without any trouble.”

“What’s the deal?”

“When you’re around the angel, pretend that you’re just an ordinary cat. Don’t talk.”

“Suits me, brother.” The cat waved its tail in assent. Then it squinted up at the roller coaster in the background. “Which reminds me,” purred Brimstone. “I’ve got a little job to do, first.”

“What’s that?”

“Can’t leave your plane sitting up on top there in sight of everyone, can we? The Big Noise gave me strict orders.”

Paul Hastings sighed. Somewhere in the back of his brain, a plot had been hatching—but now he knew he had merely laid another egg. He’d entertained a wild notion of escaping from the familiar demon, taking Angela to the plane, and somehow discovering how it operated so that he could pilot her back to heaven. But now, with the plane gone—

And it was gone.

Even as he watched, Brimstone turned and meowed up at the

moon, then waved his tail in mystic cadence as he whis-purred:

“Retsaoc rellor otni nrut, enalp!”

The plane became a roller coaster car once more. Arching his back significantly, Brimstone minced forward towards the door of the car.

Paul Hastings followed. He found Angela sitting patiently in the front seat, her wings folded.

“Sorry to be so long,” he apologized. “I had that tire to look at. And besides, I found a stray cat—”

“You did!” The angel smiled, glancing down at Brimstone. “Oh, isn’t it pretty—so black and soft—come on, kitty, jump up on my lap. Come on, there we are!”

As Hastings closed the door and started the car, Angela scooped Brimstone into her arms and snuggled him into her lap, petting and stroking the inkblot body. The young man looked, shuddered, but said nothing.

And thus it was that Paul Hastings returned to New Orleans, sitting next to a real live angel holding a real live demon on her lap.

Two o’clock in the morning, on Bourbon Street, is the time when the amateurs leave and the regulars take over. The marks have goggled at their last floor show; the savages have departed in the taxicabs for attractions in other fields; the tourists have left the bars and hit the mattresses of the Roosevelt, the Jung, the St. Charles or the Monteleone.

And that’s when the fun begins. That’s when the boys in the band drift across the street and sit in with the rival combo to really beat it out until dawn. That’s when the spielers leave the doorways of the night spots and go inside to have a drink with the strippers at the bar. That’s when the artists and the Vieux Carre regulars drift into their private patios or the little isolated night spots deep in the

heart of the Quarter where aching tourist feet seldom dare to tread. That's when the drinks and the talk get bigger at LaFitte's.

Tonight, with the Mardi Gras in full swing, it was the same only more so. The Crewes were out in strength, and paraders and spectators alike now met and mingled in masked mirth. Everyone was drunk—drunk on liquor, drunk on dollars, drunk on excitement, drunk on the sheer drama of the carnival.

Canal Street, on the west border of the Vieux Carre, was deserted as Paul Hastings steered his way through the tangle of confetti, empty pint bottles and full owners of same who still wandered forlornly through the ruins.

Angela peered out of the window. "What's been happening here?" she gasped. "War?"

"Carnival," Hastings explained, shortly. "It's like this every year, they tell me. I wouldn't know. Oh, now what's happened?"

The last remark was addressed not to the angel but to the engine of the car. It wheezed, sputtered, and then seemed to obey some mysterious cease and desist order.

The car swayed to a halt at the entrance to Bourbon Street.

"Out of gas!" the young man sighed. "Come on, we'll have to walk. It's only about six blocks down, more or less."

He opened the car door, then hesitated. For the first time he realized what he was doing. He was coming into one of America's largest cities with a live angel in tow—a live angel, with big wings.

"Wait a minute," he called to Angela. "I—I just want to check that rear tire again." He shot a significant glance at the cat, and Brimstone caught it. Tipping him a wink, the fiendish feline bounded from Angela's lap and sauntered around in back of the car with him.

"A fine mess!" Hastings commented. "How what do I do? I can't walk an angel down Bourbon Street."

“Why not?” whispered Brimstone. “There’s maybe a law against angels?”

“It isn’t that,” Hastings sighed. “It’s just—oh, how can I explain it? If it happened to be the Devil, now, I wouldn’t hesitate for a moment. He’d feel right at home on dear old Bourbon. All I’d have to worry about is that somebody wouldn’t take advantage of his innocence.”

“What are you worrying about?” sniffed the cat. “Take a look at what gives.” He pointed his tail in the direction of the narrow entrance to Bourbon Street.

What gave was simple. Teetering along the edge of the sidewalk and emerging upon the broad expanse of Canal Street was an African Zulu in full war dress, ostrich-plumes waving. The Zulu brandished a knobkerry in one hand an assegai in the other. Supporting him on either side in his drunken progress was, reading from left to right, a ghost and a crocodile.

“Mardi Gras, stupid!” purred Brimstone. “Everybody’s in costume. They’ll think she’s wearing a costume, too.”

Hastings smiled and nodded. “Come on, then. Once we get to my room, our troubles are over.”

He walked around the car and helped Angela out and across the curb. The cat trailed primly behind.

“Hope you aren’t freezing,” Hastings remarked. “It’s pretty chilly tonight.”

“I’m warm enough, thank you,” said Angela. Then, “Who are those strange looking people?”

“Mardi Gras masqueraders. Remember, you’re supposed to be one, too. It wouldn’t do for them to know that you’re a real angel.”

“I understand.” Angela squeezed his arm. “You’re so clever, Paul—the way you think of everything.”

Paul Hastings smiled, and the cat gave him an unlaundered look.

The crocodile, the ghost and the Zulu gave them scarcely a glance as they passed by and started to walk down Bourbon on the north side of the street. The first block, flanked by the sides of Canal Street stores, was deserted—but up ahead the neon lights blazed fiercely and the mingled shrieking of voices and clarinets rose on what Bourbon Street uses instead of the air.

Angela stared straight ahead and took in a deep breath, compounded equally of bar whiskey fumes, *odeur de oyster shell*, perfume, perspiration, and fresh garbage—which gives the French Quarter what the Chamber of Commerce likes to describe as a “quaint old world atmosphere.”

“Oh!” she sighed. “I’m so excited! You know, it may be sinful of me to even think of such things, but I’m really almost glad you made a mistake and brought me back to earth again. I’ve missed so much—for instance, I’ve never been in a place like this before. As a matter of fact, I’ve never even stayed up so late! I don’t know what’s going to happen because I’ve come down here, but even if I’m punished, it’s worth it. Thank you, Paul, for taking care of me like this.”

Again the young man smiled and the cat returned a soiled grimace—but this time there was pain beneath Hastings’ grin. To think that she trusted him; thanked him for taking her to a Bourbon Street garret in the company of a fiend, in order that he could sell her out to the Devil!

“But what else *can* you do?” he asked himself, despairingly. “You can’t get her back to heaven. You can’t run away with her on earth because Brimstone will follow you. And you can’t go away yourself and leave her at the mercy of the Devil—or the local citizens here, who might be worse. No, you’ll just have to go through with it. And as long as she’s having a good time, you might as well see that she enjoys herself for as long as possible. Eat, drink

and be merry, for tomorrow—”

“Nobody dies,” whispered the cat, finishing the thought for him. “Not if they obey orders.”

“Who said that?” asked Angela.

“I didn’t hear anything,” Hastings lied. He quaked inwardly, and his heart made seismographic vibrations, as he suddenly realized that the infernal cat could, and did, read his mind. From now on even his thoughts were known to the Devil. So how could he possibly escape?

They crossed the street, jaywalking over to the southeast corner and continued on down. Now they were passing the garish doorways of bars and dives, dens and dumps, eateries and cheateries. A milling throng was milling and thronging, moving in a frantic orbit between to and fro. A clown rushed hither, two laughing, bottle-spinning señoritas ran thither, and a party of men and women in formal evening attire were going yon. There was screaming and shouting, and much tossing of confetti and lunch. Serpentine streamers rained down from the second-story balcony of a private residence, and from either side, bands blared through saloon doorways.

Nobody paid any attention to the young man, the black cat, and the girl in the realistic angel costume.

“She’d be safe here if we could only escape,” Hastings told himself. Then, “Damn! I must be careful what I think or Brimstone will be angry.”

He glanced down at the cat, but the familiar padded along serenely as though it hadn’t caught his thought.

Then Hastings realized a curious phenomenon—the cat couldn’t read his mind as long as there were noises around to distract his attention!

“That’s something to remember,” he told himself. “If the

chance ever comes—”

They kept walking, jostling their way through the crowds, exchanging grins and winks at masked revelers, listening to snatches of music and song, shouts and laughter. People were blowing horns, beating on drums, reeling along and singing their praise of Momus, Comus and the other ancient lords of Saturnalia.

Hastings was alarmed, but Angela seemed enchanted. She drank in the raucous shouts as if they formed a melody; she beamed on the inebriate horde as though they were her dearest and oldest friends. Moochers, panhandlers, grifters, steerers, and just plain bums and crooks got the same admiring stare as did the swanky celebrants from uptown. She loved every bit of it because it was life and she was now a part of it. From time to time her wings fluttered in appreciation.

They called to her in passing. “Hi, beautiful!” and “Hello, angel!” and “When did you leave heaven?” They blew horns in her ear and poked at her with canes and tossed confetti.

But no one questioned her person or her presence here, and Hastings heaved a sigh of relief as they approached the doorway of Madam Adam’s establishment, the Blue Pig.

“Thank goodness our troubles are over!” he exulted. But the black cat merely smiled.

Things were warming up inside the Blue Pig. They always did around this time of night, and on this particular evening the atmosphere was particularly torrid. The various permanent guests who occupied apartments, suites, rooms, cubicles or just plain holes in the wall upstairs had all drifted down into the enclosed patio on the first floor, with its small bar presided over by the genial landlady, Madam Adam herself, in the flesh.

Madam Adam certainly had an abundance of flesh to be in. A short crop of dyed red hair surmounted a long, genuinely red face. The face, in turn, rested on two hundred and fifty pounds of

foundation, enclosed in a foundation garment. To say that the little Frenchwoman was fat is superfluous—and superfluous fat is hardly a proper description of her imposing bulk.

Madam Adam was more than two hundred and fifty pounds of flesh; she was two hundred and fifty pounds of movement, of quivering, of mirth, of agitation, of excitement. She bounced through life like a big red rubber ball.

Right now she was laughing and beaming fondly on her “guests.” All of the regulars were present, and some of them had been present for six or seven hours; many of them glued to the bar stools and many of them just plastered.

Most of them were in costume, and they hardly bothered to look up as Paul Hastings entered the little patio bar flanked by an angel and a black cat.

Only Madam Adam took note of the new arrivals. She hadn’t paid much attention to her latest boarder, principally because he, in turn, hadn’t paid much rent—but tonight, what with the Mardi Gras spirit and the brandy, she felt cordial in every sense of the word.

“*Alors!*” she greeted the young man. “Is the *habitant* of the garret, I comprehend? And with such charming companionship! Permit me to perform the honors of the house. Come, have to partake of a drink upon me.”

Hastings, who was doing his best to head for the back stairs without attracting attention, tried to pull Angela along. But Madam Adam waddled out from behind the bar and wagged her finger at him—together with other portions of her anatomy.

“Please! I insist! Mount upon a stool and construct yourself at home. I am about to confuse up a drink.”

“Stuck!” Hastings groaned, under his breath. He smiled at his landlady and beckoned Angela to a bar stool; she sat down willingly

enough, and the cat jumped up into her lap. Madam Adam, true to her word, took an enormous shaker and poured the contents of several half-empty bottles into its capacious maw. Then she shook it violently. Grabbing three glasses at random she filled them from the shaker and then beamed on her young friends.

“Here is dirt in your eye!” she cried. “*A bas le hatch!*” Seeing Angela’s puzzled look she added, “Make your bottom up!”

Hastings took a swig, and a mixture of brandy, cognac and vodka exploded Bikini-fashion in his stomach. Angela sipped her drink sedately.

“My, it’s strong, isn’t it?” she said. “I’m so used to drinking nothing but ambrosia or nectar.”

“Who necked her?” demanded a raucous voice. A fat little figure in a pirate’s costume came up to the bar, followed by a masked clown and a lady who wore a kimono which may or may not have been a costume.

“My dear sir—” Hastings began, but the fat man wasn’t having any of that.

“Don’t be so formal,” he boomed. “It’s Mardi Gras, we’re all friends here, right? I got that jewelry store over on Royal—seen you pass the place a dozen times. The name is Onyx John.”

His friend, the masked clown, put his hand on Angela’s arm.

“This heah’s a rare pleasuh,” he said. “Ah do declah, such a chahmin’ lil ole gal! Permit me to intraduce mah self. Dixon’s the name—Mason Dixon.”

“I know your line,” observed Hastings, bitterly. “But please don’t rush the young lady—she’s a stranger in town.”

“That calls for a drink,” Mason Dixon told them. “Madam Adam, mix up anotheah round of mint juleps or whatevah mah lil ole friends been havin’ here.”

“I’m not your lil ole friend,” Hastings said. “And I wish you would go away.”

Instead, Mason Dixon and the fat jeweler, Onyx John, sat down on bar stools and regarded Angela with the rapt fascination of wolves running after a Siberian sleigh.

“This drink is making me woozy,” Angela giggled. To his horror, Hastings noted that it was doing just that. Even as he watched, Angela’s halo tilted forward about an inch and wobbled tipsily over her head. It was beginning to give off a noticeable glow.

“What’s that lil ole thingamajig?” demanded Mason Dixon. “Look, it’s shining.”

“She’s just lit up,” Hastings explained. But the two drunken men wouldn’t accept his answer. Onyx John noticed the halo for the first time and reached out a pudgy finger to examine it.

“Quite a costume,” he said. “Mighty fine! That looks like real gold to me.” His finger probed. “By Arthur Godfrey, it *is* real gold. Twenty-four carat or I miss my guess.”

“Of course it’s gold,” Angela told him. “I’m a real angel, too.”

Paul Hastings stared at her in horror. But the drunks weren’t taking her seriously.

“Have another drink,” Onyx John chuckled. “Then well see.”

He stared at her owlshly. “Funny. I can’t see where it’s attached to your head.”

“You can’t see any lil ole thing,” Mason Dixon chuckled. “You got a load on, man.” He inspected Angela blearily. “I can’t see nothin’, eithah. Heah, have a drink.”

They drank. The cat shifted uneasily in Angela’s lap. Paul Hastings nudged the angel girl. “Take it easy,” he said. “This stuff

is deadly.”

“But I like it,” Angela protested. “And I’m having so much fun.”

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Hastings insisted.

“But no!” Madam Adam bustled up and caught his remark. “It is that you are my guests. I cannot permit of your leaving. The evening, she is still juvenile. Observe, we are about to make of the music.”

Sure enough, Hastings turned and beheld an accordionist entering the Blue Pig, followed by a seedy-looking man who planted himself before the battered piano and proceeded to grow a melody on the keys, watering them from time to time with the sloshed contents of a beer glass.

The accordionist shifted his stomach Steinway into high and they began to play together.

Onyx John and Mason Dixon banged their glasses on the bar, keeping time. Angela, swept up by the rhythm, fluttered her wings.

“Wow, what a breeze!” Onyx John declared. “Somebody left the door open.” Then he noticed Angela. “Hey—are you doing that?” He stared at her closely. “How’s it work? You got some wires under your nightie?”

“Of course not,” Angela told him, with a seraphic smile. “I just wiggle my shoulder blades. Anybody can do it.”

“Real feathers!” Onyx John felt one pinion with a clumsy paw. “Say, I’m beginning to believe you really are an angel.”

“Of course I am,” Angela beamed. She turned and waved a finger under the jeweler’s nose. “Want to see me fly?”

Both she and Hastings were now so preoccupied that they failed to notice the behavior of Brimstone. The cat had crept up on the bar and was lapping up the rest of Angela’s drink.

Madam Adam saw the feline for the first time.

“*Eh bein*, observe the pussy!” she cooed. “It believes it is drinking of milk, no?”

Brimstone gave her a look of woozy malice. “No!” said the cat. “I believe I am drinking of rotgut. This stuff’d kill a real cat, and fast!”

“*Helas!*” Madam Adam began to quiver rapidly in all directions. Eyes rolling, she gripped Hastings by the shoulder. “The puss—do you not hear of it speaking to me?”

“No,” Hastings lied. “I don’t hear anything.”

“You must be drunk,” the cat told her. “You know darn well I can’t talk.”

“Oh,” said Madam Adam, reassured.

“But I heard!” Onyx John wheeled suddenly. “Say, just what’s coming off here? A talking cat, and a gal with wings like an angel—what gives?”

“Yes,” added Mason Dixon. “And bless mah lil ole soul, if she isn’t carryin’ a hahp.”

“A what?”

“A hahp.”

“He means ‘harp’, stupid!” the inebriated cat explained.

“You play the harp?” asked Onyx John. “Where?”

“Why up in—”

“—up in Shreveport,” Hastings finished, quickly. “And that reminds me, we’ve got ten minutes to make a train. Come on, Angela, let’s go!” He tugged her from the bar stool, but the slightly flushed angel was too excited to pay attention. She took the harp from around her neck and, after noting the beat of the pianist and accordionist, began to accompany them in a perfect rendition of

their current selection—which happened to be “Basin Street Blues.”

“Good Lord!” gasped Onyx John. “I never heard anything like *that* before!”

“She is an angel!” agreed his companion.

“*C’est incroyable,*” wheezed Madam Adam.

“Not bad at all,” hiccuped the cat.

And their comments were justified. Because when Angela let loose with her harp, boogie beat or no, things happened. The celestial tones filled the ears of the listeners and came out of their eyes in the form of moisture.

Within half a minute the women, the regular patrons in the background, the accordionist, the pianist, and the group at the bar were all contributing to a puddle of tears.

Crying with delight, they harkened to the harpist. Paul Hastings sniffled, then realized this was his one chance of escape. Noting the rapt absorption of all present, he seized the opportunity to take Angela by the arm. “Come on,” he whispered. “Now let’s make a break for it out of here.”

“Where are we going?” whispered the girl, without missing a note.

“To my room, of course.”

“And where’s that?”

“Four flights up,” Hastings told her. “It’s a long climb, but I can’t help it.”

“I can,” said Angela. Still strumming the harp, still smiling serenely, Angela fluttered her wings. “Grab hold,” she commanded.

Hastings, having no other choice, grabbed hold. Brimstone

leaped from the bar and landed on Angela's shoulder. Still playing, still entrancing the drunken audience with a magic born of immortal melody, the angel flapped her wings and rose from the ground.

Straight up in the air she went, carrying Paul Hastings and the cat with her. Up above the palms of the patio, past the second and third story windows—Angela reached the fourth floor, swooped lightly over to the glass pane high in Hastings' garret, and pushed it open.

Madam Adam, mouth agape in astonishment, eyes blurred by a combination of tears, brandy, cognac and vodka, watched the flying trio disappear into Hastings' tiny room. The music faded and died.

"Maybe she *is* an angel!" whispered Onyx John.

"Maybe we're goin' crazy!" gurgled Mason Dixon.

"Maybe we should imbibe of another drink," sighed Madam Adam.

And that's just what they, and the rest of the patrons of the Blue Pig, proceeded to do. In fact, fortunately for Paul Hastings and his little bundle from heaven, the patrons proceeded to drink so quickly and so much that within an hour they had managed to completely forget the whole incident. No one was certain of just what had been seen and heard, and memory of the episode was submerged in alcohol.

By the time the sun rose over Bourbon Street and cast a disapproving eye on the Blue Pig, its occupants had drifted away to dreamland. Which is as good a place to leave them as any...

As for Paul Hastings, he would just as soon have stayed in dreamland forever. But when he opened his eyes the following afternoon and rose from the armchair in which he had slept, he realized that things were not solved that simply.

Angela lay on the bed, wings folded sedately over the side. Brimstone nestled alongside her—and it was obvious that she hadn't heard the cat conversing last night, because she still cuddled the tiny fiend closely to her bosom.

There they were, the angel and the demon, ready to face the coming day—or the coming night. For twilight was slipping and getting ready to fall.

Hastings tiptoed down the hall to the community washroom and shaved. He hated to look at himself in the mirror—hated to see the face of the man who was going to betray an angel to the Devil.

But nothing had altered overnight. Sleep had not knit the raveled sleeve of his care. His care didn't have any sleeve; it was like a straightjacket that bound him in its grip no matter how he struggled and raved.

He couldn't face his face, and he couldn't face his problem. He still had to go through with it, like it or no. The angel was on earth with no way of returning, and he was scheduled to play a long future engagement in Hell. Meanwhile, eat, drink and—

“Be wary,” purred a familiar voice from behind him. Brimstone had tiptoed through the door. “Good afternoon, brother. Getting yourself slicked up for Old Nick?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that come sundown, we're off to see the Big Dealer. Just got a telepathic communication a moment or so ago—woke me up. We're going out to keep a date with him over in Jefferson Parish. If you listen, I'll tell you how to get there.”

Hastings listened—what else could he do?—and the cat gave him the route to follow.

“No tricks, now,” warned Brimstone. “This is a very important matter to the Big Casino. I'll be watching every move

you make and one slip—” The cat drew its tail across the black throat and made a snicking noise.

Hastings cut himself on the lip with the razor and nodded soberly. “All right,” he said. “I’ll go through with it. But in return, remember—no more of that talking. I can’t bear to have Angela find out what you are.”

“Or what you are,” purred the cat. “I understand. Come on, let’s wake her.”

They returned to the garret, but Angela was already sitting up and stretching her wings.

“How do you feel?” asked Hastings, solicitously.

“Just heavenly,” the angel told him. “My but we had fun last night, didn’t we, Paul?”

“Oh—sure. You have no hangover or anything?”

“Certainly not. Look at the way my halo is shining.”

Paul looked and a glow brighter than that of the halo suffused his being. She looked very young and very lovely there, and he opened his mouth to tell her the truth—but Brimstone arched his back and hissed, and his tail formed a big black question mark.

“Come on,” Hastings said. “Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“For a ride.” He felt like cutting his tongue out, but there was no escape. “Thought maybe we could see the sights.”

“Fine.” Paul opened the door. “Is the cat coming too?” she asked.

“I’m afraid so.” The cat ran past him and led the way to the back stairs.

“Good idea,” Hastings noted. “We’ll take this route and avoid being seen.”

They tiptoed down the stairs and into the twilight. Hastings stationed Angela and the cat in the doorway. “I forgot!” he exclaimed. “The car is somewhere on Canal. Now what?”

“Taxi, mister?”

The harsh voice came out of nowhere. Paul Hastings blinked as a redfaced man suddenly bobbed up in the doorway.

“Well—I don’t know—we’d planned on going for a ride, but—”

“I know just where to take you,” leered the cabby. He tilted his cap slightly and Hastings caught a glimpse of two little black horns growing out of his forehead. “I’ve come to get you specially,” the cabby continued. “Understand?”

“Yes.” Hastings beckoned to the girl. “We might as well go.”

The redfaced cabby led them to a red cab—certainly unlike any other cab Hastings had ever seen in town—and the trio of animal, human and angelic beings settled themselves on the back seat.

The cab bounced down Bourbon, outside Esplanade, and away. Soon the city stretched behind them in the dusk, and the silver sweep of the Huey Long Bridge shimmered in the distance to their left.

“Lovely,” Angela exclaimed. “I’m so glad I came. You know, I scarcely remembered how wonderful it was to be alive—and what I missed when I left earth.”

“Look, honey,” Paul began. “I may be out of line, asking this, but I’m still interested. What were you, I mean when you were alive, and what happened to you when—” He stopped, embarrassed.

Angela drew in her lower lip and the hint of a furrow ploughed its way across her brow. “It isn’t considered right to talk about the past up there, you know. But I’ve been back on earth for

almost a day now, and nobody seems to have noticed anything, yet.”

“I wondered about that,” Hastings admitted. “Here you are, AWOL, and I should think somebody would be worried about you.”

“Well, I’m not worried. Maybe it’s wrong for me to say it, but I’m glad you brought me back. I like it here. Why, I’ve had more fun in the last day than I had in the whole twenty years that I was—”

She paused and looked away into the darkness rushing past outside the cab.

“Go on,” whispered the young man.

“There’s really nothing to tell. I was just a girl, an ordinary girl living in an ordinary small town. I went to high school, lived with my folks, and when school ended I got a job. It was the last year of the war, and the government had a big chemical factory outside of town. So I worked there, and one day was like another.

“I never went out on dates, because all the young fellows were in service. I used to wish I’d meet somebody some day—somebody to talk to, to have fun with. Somebody,” and here her voice dropped, “like you, Paul.”

Hastings shifted uneasily in his seat, but the angel came closer.

“As a matter of fact, that’s what I was wishing when it happened.”

“What happened?”

“The explosion. At least, I guess that’s what it must have been. Because when I woke up again—” She made a little gesture that managed to include the robe, the harp and the halo.

“That’s all,” she said. “Maybe I shouldn’t have told you, but I

feel better now, whatever happens.”

“Whatever happens.” Hastings stuck out his jaw. He glanced down at Brimstone, but his jawline remained firm. “All right. I’ve got something to tell you, too—whatever happens. It’s about me, and the reason you’re here. Angela, here’s the truth. You’re not back on earth by any accident. Right now we’re on our way to—”

“Quiet, brother!”

Brimstone rose from the angel’s lap and glared.

She stared at the cat and her mouth formed a little red hole filled with astonishment.

“You’re talking!”

“Of course I’m talking. And you listen to me, not to my servant.”

“Your servant?” Paul cried. “But you’re supposed to be *my* servant!”

The cat chuckled, and each note tingled against Hastings’ spine. “Do you think for one moment that the Big Gun would trust you that far? He planned all this, and he knew something would happen with a weakling like you. That’s why we’re taking no chances.”

“Betcha!” The cab driver turned around and thrust his red mask over the seat. His hat had slipped off, and the two knobby black horns rose in menacing spires from his rounded forehead. “We’ve got you right where we want you, and you’d better keep your mouth shut!”

“Paul! What’s happening? What kind of a creature is this?” gasped the angelic girl.

“I’m not a creature,” snarled the cab driver. “I’m a hard working, respectable demon.”

“And I’m a hard working, respectable fiend,” the cat told her.

“The only phony in the crowd is this weak-kneed mortal, whose soul belongs to Satan.”

“But I don’t understand—”

“You will, soon enough. And if you don’t believe that he’s sold you out lock, stock and halo to the Devil, you can ask His Unholiness himself in about five minutes, when you see him!”

Angela turned to Hastings. “No!” she whispered. “Say it isn’t true—it can’t be true.” Hastings averted his eyes as she continued. “What does the Devil want of me?”

“I don’t know,” he answered. “That’s the truth, Angela. I really don’t know. And I’m trying to explain to you how it all happened, but—”

“Not another word,” rasped Brimstone. “Or I’ll claw your eyes out.”

Hastings ignored the cat. He gripped the angel by the shoulders. “Haven’t you some power to overcome evil?” he muttered. “Isn’t there something about this you can do?”

She shook her head, halo and all. “Not on earth. I have no power here. You’re the only one who can save me.”

“Then I’ll save you!” Hastings threw himself back and opened the door of the moving cab. “Quick—jump for it! Spread your wings and fly!”

“No you don’t!” The cat barred the way, back arched, claws extended, eyes twin fountains of flame.

Paul Hastings faced the cat, ready to do battle, but Angela grabbed his arms.

“Don’t, Paul. I know you didn’t mean to get me into this fix, but we’re in it together, and I won’t leave you now. Whatever happens, we’ll both stay together and see it through.”

“That’s the spirit,” approved the cat. “Close the door,

brother—we're almost there.”

The cabby drove like a demon (and who had a better right?) and they whirled along a side road, over a slight rise, and descended to a private driveway. At the end stood a vast, deserted barnlike structure; its unlighted windows staring like blind eyes into the night.

They passed under an arch that had once borne an incandescent sign. Paul Hastings could just make out the lettering.

“DEAL ME INN,” he read, aloud. Then, “I know where we are! This used to be a gambling casino, but it's closed now.”

“Not to the Devil,” the cat explained. “He's a good friend of the owner. Borrowed it for the meeting.”

The cab stopped on a hypothetical dime before the unlit entrance to the DEAL ME INN and the cabby ran around to the side and opened the door. Brimstone and Angela stepped out, then Hastings. The cabby grabbed his arm.

“Not so fast,” he said. “That'll be three bucks, even.”

“You mean on top of everything I have to *pay* for the ride?” Hastings complained.

“Why not? Even a demon's got to eat,” the cabby explained. He opened his mouth and for the first time displayed the long ivory razors of his teeth. “Unless, of course, you'd like to see me scrounge around for my own food.”

Paul Hastings paid him quickly, without a word.

“All right, let's get going.” The cabby stepped to the darkened doorway, followed by Brimstone, who kept his slitted eyes upon the mortal and the immortal alike.

“Got a key?” the cat demanded.

For answer the cabby bent his head forward and slipped one knobby horn into the door lock. There was a grating click and the

door swung open upon a black abyss.

They moved forward slowly into the barnlike building. The DEAL ME INN had been a typical gambling casino in its gaudy day; half a block long and almost again as wide—an expanse built on the general dimensions of a roller rink.

In the darkness, Hastings' eyes gradually discerned the dim outlines of the covered green tables, the roulette wheels shrouded by dustcloths, the octagonal poker and blackjack layouts, the empty chuck-a-luck cages. He could almost imagine the casino as it had used to be; alight and alive with hundreds of gamboling gamblers, dozens of dealers, spotters, steerers; he could hear the shouts, the murmurs, the invocations and imprecations directed to Fortune, mingled with the clink of silver and the rich rustle of greenbacks.

But now it was quiet, quiet and dark. They stumbled along through the sable silence, with the cat's eyes to guide them in the gloom. The cat's eyes—and the cabby's, which were worse. They glowed redly as Hastings and Angela tiptoed along up to a platform at the end of the room. They mounted it and stood staring out at the empty expanse of the casino. It held nothing but darkness.

Then, suddenly, the darkness was dispelled by a glow, a gleam, a glare from the eyes of a thousand cats, a thousand cabbies. As if on signal, the entire casino was filled with rubies, living jewels that floated in pairs six feet or more from the floor.

There came a murmur and a whisper, a grumble and a growl, and beneath it the sulphurous susurrations of baleful breathing.

“The boys have arrived,” grunted Brimstone. Hastings strained his eyes to see that which he did not desire to behold; but it was no use. All he saw was the eyes—hundred and hundreds of red eyes ravaging in the darkness.

They stood on the platform and Angela shivered close to him. The cat hissed and the cabby had disappeared now, disappeared to join the black brotherhood on the floor below.

“This is it,” Brimstone purred.

This was indeed it, or rather, him.

He came out of darkness, out of nothingness, out of the everywhere into the here. One minute the platform beside them was empty and the next it was filled; filled with a red and raging fire that shimmered and seared, then coalesced into a cohesive flame. The flame sent out six shoots—two arms, two legs, a head and a tail.

Glowing, literally glowing, with pleasure, the Devil stepped forward on the stage.

“Meeting will please come to order,” he mumbled. “And all that sort of rot.”

A cheer arose from the darkness, but the Devil raised his tail for silence.

“No time for nonsense,” he drawled. “Right down to business here. We’ve work to do.” For the first time he turned to Paul Hastings and a smile lit up his fiery countenance. “I see you’ve brought our angel,” he said. “Good!”

“Not so good.” Each word was a dead weight forced up from deep down inside him, but Hastings managed. “I’m not going to let you harm her.”

“Harm her? But my dear chap, I have no intention of harming her—none whatsoever! I merely want to sketch her!”

“Sketch her?”

“Precisely,” answered the Devil. He extended his tail in Angela’s direction. Flame shot from the tip, a circle of flame that limned her beauty and made it visible to all the hungry eyes down in the darkness. He traced the angel’s outline in fire.

“That’s a hot sketch!” wheezed Brimstone, from somewhere down around Paul Hastings’ feet.

Hastings stared at the girl-angel as she stood within the circle of fire, noted that her halo still glowed with a luminance of its own. That alone gave him a faint irrational vestige of hope.

A chorus of hoots and howls greeted the glowing apparition of the angel on the platform.

Satan stepped forward again and signaled for silence with his all-purpose caudal appendage.

“I told you chaps I had a surprise,” he began. “And here it is! Yes, I assure you it’s quite real. A real angel.”

Again the yammering from the infernal legions. Again the signal for silence.

“At this time,” said the Devil, “I should like to express my personal appreciation to Mr. Paul Hastings, who has gone to great lengths—literally moved heaven and earth, as it were—to supply us with an angel. I am sure we all tender Mr. Hastings our very warmest regards.”

“But I don’t want your warm regards,” Hastings protested.

“You’d better get used to the heat, brother,” observed Brimstone. “When you’re one of us, you’ll get a lot of it.”

Angela was staring at the young man from within the circle of fire. He couldn’t meet her eyes. Better to face the Devil himself than that. So he faced the Devil.

“You can’t harm her,” he gasped. “You can’t!”

“I could,” Satan answered. “But I won’t. As I said, I merely want to sketch her. But you’ll understand everything, if only you’ll cease this—pardon the expression—infernal racket, and listen to what I am about to tell the audience.”

The Devil stepped forward and stood poised on the cloven hoof. The omnipresent tail flicked forward and pointed at Angela.

“Why is the angel here?” he asked. “And why the mortal

man? The answer is also the answer to one of my most cherished dreams. For I must confess it, I too have my dreams. How often have I twisted and turned on my bed of coals o' nights, envisioning this moment—the moment when I could exchange my dominion over demons for sovereignty o'er angels!”

“Did I get your double-talk right?” spluttered Brimstone, indignantly. “Did you say you were going to chuck us fiends and get angels instead?”

“Exactly!” Satan smiled.

A low groan rose from the darkness, gathering into a rumbling roar of protest. Once more the Devil stilled it with the talisman of his tail.

“But wait! You're not abandoned. My dream runs thusly; to procure an angel, inspect it at firsthand, study its celestial metabolism, analyze, and reproduce it, reproduce it a thousandfold, by creating in essence an authentic disguise. A disguise all of you present will wear. You, all of you, shall become my angels!”

Laughter screeched upwards, slashing the darkness into shrieking ribbons.

“ 'Tis not a jest. Angels you'll become, all of you, properly attired in robes, of whitest damask. Wings will sprout from your backs, halos glitter above your heads. And thus accoutred, you'll have all earth to walk—all earth to rule.”

There was a certain majesty in Satan's utterance that Hastings could not help but acknowledge; the grotesqueness of the entire nightmare became real when embodied in that ancient evil voice. He puzzled over it as the Devil continued.

“Aye, that's the dream, and this is the realization of it! To own an angel, copy it, superimpose its shape on fiends, and then loose them upon earth!

“And that's where mortal help is needed. For we live, as you

know, in a decadent age. No longer do most miserable humans seek me out for black boons or sell their souls for favors. We, all of us—the legion of the damned—are passé, if you please: ‘old hat’ and ‘figments of the imagination’ to the vulgar. But there are many mortals who likewise scoff at heaven and its works, who have discarded seraphim and cherubim from their new theology.

“So I have contrived a way of snaring these skeptical souls. A modern, mortal way, with modern, mortal help. You fiends disguised as angels will not walk the earth as such: no, one step further is contemplated. You will appear as robots in the shape of angels, and you’ll not be *given* to the mortals—you’ll be *sold!*”

The Devil paused to allow the meaning of his words to sink in. But even Hastings was puzzled, until Satan continued.

“Yes, sold! By the modern magic of advertising. By the modern devilry of a human invention called ‘public relations’ which is far fouler than anything I could devise.

“This young man here,” and the Devil indicated Hastings, “is an expert in this evil art. With certain monies I have obtained from the former owner of this gambling—you’ll pardon the expression—hell, he will proclaim to the world that he has launched a new business. Using the powers of air and darkness united in mortal sins called radio, television, and newspapers, he will let it be known that he has invented and is manufacturing a new kind of robot—a mechanical servant.

“It is a robot, he will tell the world, that is attuned by electronic impulse to the brainwaves of the individual. It is a robot that acts as a part of the brain itself, independent of the body, and serves as a mechanical monitor. In other words, a friendly advisor, wiser than the mind itself, who will direct the efforts of the individual to praiseworthy and profitable ends. A mechanical conscience. Truly, a Guardian Angel!”

Again the Devil paused and waited for his meaning to

permeate the darkness behind the red and winking eyes.

“Yes, a Guardian Angel! What man would not welcome the latest scientific miracle—a second brain attuned to his own, a brain that is guaranteed to keep him from harm, keep him from evil action, direct him to pleasure, peace, security, and (since we are dealing, remember, with human beings) profit?”

“Not every man, of course, will be able to afford the luxury of a Guardian Angel. A thousand, perhaps, will be in a position to buy. From the flood of requests which I anticipate, *we* shall select that thousand. A thousand of the highest-minded, noblest men and women of the world; a thousand we could never hope to reach by any other enticement. They will come to us willingly, pay this young man handsomely, for the privilege of undergoing an electronic psychoanalysis and having a personal Guardian Angel constructed to guide them! Savor the delicious humor of it all—they’ll heap a fortune on this young man to obtain a Guardian Angel, and the Guardian Angel will be one of you in disguise!

“Can you imagine how you will guard your human charges? How you will direct their destinies? How you will act as a conscience and rule their actions?”

“Within a year, those thousand mortals who possess you will have the world turned topsy-turvy. Their damnation will in turn damn millions of others, in a widening circle of corruption. War, pestilence, red ruin—and all of us in power!”

They understood, now, and the screams rising from the darkness clawed along Hastings’ spine and burrowed into his brain. For he understood now, too; knew how he would get rich on the Devil’s dream, and at what cost to himself and the world.

“Begone!” Satan continued. “Avant! And—for the benefit of you newcomers who have never sat at the feet of Avon’s Bard, scam out of here! When next I call you, it will be to don the angelic robes. But now, farewell, fare ill!”

The eyes winked out like fireflies dying in the darkness, and Satan turned to Angela and Hastings on the platform.

“There you have it,” he said. “My dream, your riches. It is a simple scheme, but sound. We live in an age where the wildest fantasy of yesterday is but today’s commonplace. Now, I shall instruct you fully in your duties.”

“Don’t bother,” Hastings murmured.

“What’s this? Do I detect a note of insubordination in your voice?”

“In plain English,” Hastings said, “I advise you to go to hell.”

“Home?”

“Call it that if you like. But I won’t cooperate. Take me with you if you wish—I understand from Brimstone that you’ve tricked me into losing my soul anyway, so I might as well go. But I’m not going to stay here and act as front man for your dirty schemes!”

Hastings faced Angela. “Now you know what I did,” he said. “I’m to blame for everything, and there’s nothing I can say to help you now. Except that I’d count myself well damned if only all this had never happened to you.”

Angela mustered a smile. “I know,” she answered. “And it’s not your fault, really. You *did* try to protect me, once you realized the truth. And you’re sorry, now. I—I still have faith in you, Paul.”

The Devil tugged at his spade beard, and a sardonic grin flared forth and glowed.

“Very touching,” he commented. “So you’d refuse to help me, now that plans are all arranged?”

“Why not?” Hastings retorted. “I’ve found out one thing—there are limits to what I’ll do for money. Besides, why should I help you? I’m damned if I do and damned if I don’t.”

“Shall I tell you why you should help me?” asked Satan, gently. “Shall I tell you why you are going to help me, willingly, as much as I wish?”

“Why?” asked Hastings, in spite of himself.

For answer, the tail reared itself towards Angela.

“That’s the reason,” the Devil said. “I told you no harm would befall her, and I meant it. All I need to do is use her as a blueprint on which to pattern my angelic disguises; study her, copy her, and release her. So go my plans.”

“However, if you prove stubborn and refuse to cooperate—I’ll not stop there. I’ll not release her. I’ll drag her down beyond your reach, beyond the reach of heaven itself, to mine own kingdom!”

There was a moment of pregnant silence which soon gave birth to horrified realization of his words.

“Now,” snapped Satan. “What say you? Will you cooperate? Or—”

Hastings glanced at Angela. “No,” whispered the angel. “You can’t consent! I’ll be all right, I’d gladly go with him rather than let him do this to the world. Don’t do it, Paul.”

“I must,” Hastings sighed, “I owe it to you.”

The Devil smiled. “Then we’re agreed! We start tomorrow to make plans. Money shall be provided. This place will be transformed, outwardly, into a factory. I, unfortunately, cannot attend you in this matter—there are wars to be waged elsewhere, requiring my presence. But Brimstone will remain with you as my own personal representative. He shall give counsel, lend his aid. One month is all I require; at the end of that time, Angela is free and you will be rich. It can all be arranged very quickly if you follow the plan, and Brimstone.

“Within a month, then—GUARDIAN ANGELS,

INCORPORATED will be launched upon the world!”

The month passed swiftly; too swiftly. It passed in a blur, passed in a kaleidoscope, passed in a whirlwind of activity, unreality, and pure nightmare. It was all a dream—indeed, a diabolical dream come true.

The money was on the table in the garret when they returned; thousands of dollars in nice, crisp bills. Hastings never saw the gambler who provided it; he saw nothing but Angela’s predicament and his own, talked to no one about it but Brimstone.

For Brimstone was always present, always on hand to break up any opportunity to discuss an escape or a solution. At first Hastings entertained a wild hope that heavenly powers might somehow take note of this blasphemous scheme and intervene; as the days passed without a sign, his hopes faded.

And then the mad whirl took over. The gambling casino, made over in Hastings’ name now, became a factory to all outward appearances. GUARDIAN ANGELS, INCORPORATED was really incorporated. Hastings moved to a suite of offices uptown, and he and Angela shared a suite in a hotel; Brimstone chaperoning, of course.

The presence of an angel caused comment, naturally, and Hastings capitalized on that. He swung into action as a public relations man.

No, Angela was not an angel. She was a robot, a mechanical creation. Yes, he was the inventor. No, there was nothing at all supernatural about this electronic development. Plastic body, synthetic flesh, a mechanism intricately contrived. Secret formula? Well, he couldn’t say just yet. But manufacturing had started and within a month he would be ready for an important announcement.

Thus for the *Times-Picayune* and the *New Orleans Item* and the AP and the UP and the INS, and for the eager beavers from *Time*

and *Life* and *Newsweek* who tried without success to get past the barbed wire and into the factory, who tried to ferret out the details of Hastings' singularly anonymous past, who tried to interview Angela alone, who speculated and puzzled and scoffed and predicted and hinted until the entire nation, the entire world had heard about this mysterious GUARDIAN ANGELS, INCORPORATED that was about to revolutionize human life.

The pastors denounced and the scientists screamed and the commentators yelled. Within two weeks the airwaves were polluted with angel jokes, twelve songwriters had turned out numbers with the word "angel" in the title, three movie studios were working on quickies embodying the angel theme, and the firms that specialized in making toys with Hopalong Cassidy tie-ups were bidding for rights on angel dolls, angel dresses, angel wings, and angel submachine guns.

At first it was all a gag, something to talk about, something to feed the readers and the listening audience; a new distraction from war and worry. At first it was a wild rumor, a bad joke, a crazy notion. Then, as pictures of Angela appeared, complete with wings and halo—as the newsreels and the television screens showed carefully-staged interviews which ended with Angela actually flying through the air—then and only then did people begin to wonder. And wondering, believe.

Yes, people believed. They believed because they wanted to believe.

Paul Hastings, working as he had never worked before, working as no publicity or advertising man had ever worked—with a genuine product to sell—began to find out things about his fellowman.

Of course he was still cynical about motives. Folks, he realized, were out after the dollar. They were gullible, easily deceived.

But that had nothing to do with their belief in GUARDIAN ANGELS, INCORPORATED. They had faith in the notion because they wanted to have faith. The whole world, he discovered, was searching for security. Security against others, and security against themselves.

For as the campaign moved into high, Hastings dispelled the element of mystery. Working with Brimstone's coaching, he gradually "planted" stories and interviews in the proper places.

He began to "explain" the theory behind GUARDIAN ANGELS; gave out releases dealing with the idea of a mechanical brain acting as a conscience which could do no wrong.

Using scientific gobbley-gook coated with metaphysical jargon, he let it be known to all the world that there *was* a solution to mankind's problems after all—a solution far beyond orthodox religion, orthodox science, beyond the psychiatric approach. A thousand GUARDIAN ANGELS would soon be available for use: a thousand people would be initially selected as a mass experiment to undergo conditioning which would make them eligible to employ a personal Conscience.

Statesmen, scientists, military and religious leaders, business men, creative artists were invited—if they could pay the fee, of course—to participate in this earth-shattering new development which might logically result in a new and better world.

The response convinced Hastings beyond all doubt that the world was basically a far better place than he had dreamed; that people were far better than he'd ever imagined.

For the letters and requests poured in. Letters from the great, letters from the rich, letters from the high and mighty of the world. They came in a steady stream, the stream became a torrent, but the torrent was merged in the oceans of mail and communications from ordinary men and women.

The poor wrote. The sick wrote. The broken in spirit and the

despairing, the lost and lonely ones. “I haven’t got much money, but if there’s only a chance, you see my father is a good man but he’s got an awful temper and he beats up on my mother and us kids all the time and if he had one of those angels now, well—”

“I never knew it,” Hastings told Angela, over and over again. “I never realized it. People really *want* to be good, they’ll do anything to be good. It’s only that they don’t know *how*. They’re weak, bewildered, afraid of themselves. All they want is peace and security—these letters show that.

“I don’t have to sell this idea to the world. The world wants to buy it. People know what’s wrong with each other, and with themselves. If only it were true!”

This last thought always brought Hastings up short. Again and again, during the last few days, he told Angela, “We must think of some way out. We *must!* We can’t let this thing go through!”

And Angela only smiled. “I have faith, Paul,” she said. “You must have faith, too.”

Which was poor consolation, whenever Hastings got through with yet another session of lies to the press, or returned from another conference with Brimstone.

The fiendish cat was exultant. “Wonderful!” he purred. “Everything going according to schedule. They think we’re turning out angels at the factory, and when the time comes we’ll produce ‘em right as promised. We’ll select our thousand suckers, run them through that silly test with the machines I’m rigging up; give them three days of buzzing noises and electric arcs straight out of those old mad-scientist movies. And then we tell them they’ve passed, the adjustments are made synchronizing them with the robots, and they’ll get their angels. Oh, will they get theirs!”

The cat chuckled, and Hastings shuddered. He shuddered still more during the last two days.

For it was then that anticipation mounted to almost unprecedented heights; the papers abandoned their panic over wars and rumors of wars and concentrated on Hastings, the miracle-man, the man who was going to solve the problems of the world.

April 1st was the deadline; and it almost became, in the popular mind, “National Angel Day.”

On March 31st came the crowning event—the personal phone call from the White House, asking for a private conference, followed quickly by a secret invitation from the UN to address the delegates at Lake Success. The highest powers, aroused at last, were in one accord—if the world could beg, borrow or buy a Conscience for its leaders, then government would pay the price.

The FBI was moving in. A special plane landed at Maisant International Airport, ready to transport Hastings, Angela, and Brimstone—“My mascot,” as Hastings always told the press—to the capital. Before the historic meeting, still other initial-studded authorities made their request. NBC, CBS, and ABC wanted a combination radio and television broadcast to the world from the airport.

Oh, it was a crazy month, and no mistake. Angel food cake became a popular article of diet. *The Wall Street Journal* hinted at a communist plot, and the *Daily Worker* muttered about capitalist conspiracy. The Kiplinger Letter dealt with a rumored “mass production of angels in the low-price field by GM, with models scheduled to go on sale in chain stores throughout the country.” Bookstores sold Modern Library editions of *Look Homeward, Angel* to the profit of Thomas Wolfe’s estate; little theatre groups were playing *Angel Street* in revival, and the usual idiocies of popular taste were again demonstrated.

But over and above it was the White House request, the UN meeting, the radio broadcast, and the unleashing of the Devil’s dream upon the world.

A haggard Hastings, eight pounds lighter than the month before, rode in an unlicensed automobile to the airport. Brimstone sat snugly, smugly, on his lap—Brimstone wasn't taking any chances, with the FBI man driving and the two network vice-presidents in the back seat. Angela sat between them, peering forward at Hastings, and trying to act like an angelic robot for the benefit of the other passengers.

"Mind if we touch it?" asked the first v.p., nervously, as he poked Angela with a stubby finger.

"My, feels just like flesh!" commented his companion. "And those wings—it really flies, doesn't it?"

"Careful," cautioned the driver, an FBI man who had seen too many Lloyd Nolan movies. "I've got my orders, remember—no tampering with the angel. Security measure."

"This all seems incredible to me, Mr. Hastings," worried the second v.p. "Now about that broadcast. It's scheduled for 2 p.m., right before your take off, and if you'd only consent to use our script, we'd be okay. I mean, we've had the very best staff men in to do the writing, and it's timed down to the split second."

"No script," Hastings muttered, grimly. "As a matter of fact, I have no idea what I'm going to say."

Brimstone's claws dug into his ribs in a silent, painful reminder that he'd better say the right thing, and Hastings subsided in his seat.

"Beats me how you do it," marveled the first v.p. "I hope you'll explain everything over the air. I mean, how you get this halo effect, and the reason for the harp and stuff like that."

"I get it," mused the second v.p. "Actually, he could of made any kind of robot he wanted; man, or woman, or one of these metal men. But the angel idea, that ties in with most people's notion of what a conscience looks like—get it? The old symbolism! Mighty

clever! You're going to make a fortune with this idea, Mr. Hastings."

"You're going to make History!" breathed his companion.

Hastings nodded.

Yes, he was going to make History, all right. Had there ever been a more fantastic situation in all the world, in all the age-old war between heaven and Satan? He, one man, held the balance now—and he'd be holding it, in just a few moments, before the eyes of all the world, the ears of all the world.

Eyes, ears. Red eyes of fiends. Ears of Brimstone the cat, perked to catch the wrong word, even the wrong inflection. Eyes of Angela, blue and trusting, angelic. Ears of his own, his real private and personal conscience.

They were all riding with him now, riding in the big black limousine, riding with him to his doom. There was the airport, there was the field, there was the plane—a real plane, this time, not the Devil's dream-ship. The plane that took him to Washington, to New York, to the high places of the world which he would drag down to Hell.

Yes, and there were the microphones and the booms and the TV cameras and the trucks. And pop! went the flashbulbs, and the cops held the crowds back, and now he was getting out of the car with Angela and the cat minced on behind... and the FBI man was moving him forward and the network directors were ushering him to the mike and the cameramen were sighting... and somebody was introducing him, saying something about "Hastings" and "GUARDIAN ANGELS," and now, this was it, he was on the air, on camera, he was facing the world.

He stared straight ahead and he opened his mouth and he said:

"This is Paul Hastings. I've come here today to tell the world

that it's all a fake.”

There were noises now, noises all around, and from the crowd murmurs he picked out an angry hissing from between his feet which meant Brimstone was there, spitting in protest.

But Angela was also there, holding his hand, and Hastings continued.

“Yes, let me say it again. I've deceived you. It's a fraud, a hoax. There are no, mechanical Consciences to guide you. GUARDIAN ANGELS, INCORPORATED is a myth.

“But you mustn't be disappointed. If I cannot give you what I promised, I can give you something better, something greater. The knowledge that you don't need me!

“No, you don't need an artificial conscience. Nobody does. For each of you has something much more important—a *real* conscience. You cannot buy it, and I implore you not to sell it. Just listen to it, use it, act according to its dictates. If each of you does that, then the world will be the kind of place you want it to be. A good place, a place in which to live rather than a place in which to fight and kill and be killed.

“You're puzzled now, and confused. You're wondering, for one thing, what this means.” Hastings indicated Angela for the benefit of the television cameras. “Well, she's no fake. She *is* an angel. A real angel. You've seen her fly, and I've men here who have touched her, known her reality. She's as real as the angel that dwells inside all of you, and you must believe in her just as you must believe in yourself!”

“Liar!” It sounded human, but it was—Hastings realized—Brimstone's voice.

“It's true!” Angela stepped forward now. “Every word of it is true. If I could only make you understand somehow, make you believe—” She hesitated, and her fluttering hands fell to the

harpstrings about her neck. Suddenly she smiled and took the harp in her hands. Her fingers moved across the strings.

Angela played.

There are no words to describe her playing. It was April Fool's Day, and the crowd at the airport, the millions huddled around their radios and television sets had just been dealt the cruelest April Fool joke of all. But Angela played, and they listened. Angela played and they cried. Angela played—and as heaven's own harmony soared forth, they *believed*.

The world could doubt Hastings, doubt Angela's appearance, doubt the halo and the wings. But the world could not doubt the ear-borne evidence of the heavenly music.

Angela played, and Hastings knew that somehow, he had won. His hand patted his coat pocket, feeling the straight razor he'd concealed there, concealed against failure. He wouldn't use it now. He'd live. The world would live. That was the promise of the celestial music, soaring in triumph against all evil.

Then the music was blotted out in a black blur of nightmare. Something leaped, something hissed, something clawed, tearing the harpstrings to shreds.

It was Brimstone, ripping at the harp with frantic, frenzied hate. Angela gasped, but her cry was drowned in the squalling rage of the cat-fiend.

Hastings pulled the little black monster away, but it was too late. The strings were gone, the music lost forever. And then Hastings was pulled away himself, pulled away by the FBI agents. Before he quite realized it, he and Angela and the spitting cat were being hustled aboard the waiting plane.

He caught a last glimpse of the confusion and consternation seething through the crowd at the airport—a last glimpse of the bewildered network officials—a last glimpse of the earth and

sky—and then the motors were roaring, the door of the little private plane was sealed—and he felt the shaking and shuddering taxi down the long runway.

Hastings looked around. He and Angela were sitting in the rear seat of the small cabin; the two black-hatted FBI men occupied the front seat with Brimstone. The pilot ahead was invisible. The young man glanced through the small cabin window and saw the ground move away, saw New Orleans fade behind the clouds.

“I don’t get it,” he muttered, to Angela. “We told them it was a fake. Why are we going to Washington, then?”

“Washington?” It was the cat who spoke. “Who said anything about Washington?”

Hastings goggled. “You’re talking!” he warned. “And in front of those FBI men—”

For answer, the two men turned and removed their black hats. Hastings saw twin sets of horns rising from bald brows. They grinned at him, exposing serrated fangs.

“We have our own version of the FBI,” Brimstone purred, complacently. “Just a precaution. The Big Guy had a hunch you might somehow try to double-cross him.”

“I’m not afraid,” said Angela. She patted Hastings’ arm. “I’m proud of you, Paul.”

“But where are we going?” Hastings murmured.

His voice was scarcely audible above the roar of the engine. The plane dipped alarmingly, and the engine roar became a tortured scream. Air whined past them. The plane began to spiral, and to nose down, down—

“We’re crashing!”

Paul Hastings held the angel in his arms. Somewhere

Brimstone was laughing like the fiend he was, somewhere the air and earth were torn with the impact of explosion, somewhere flames rose to receive them in a fiery embrace—then all of it ended in blackness.

Blackness. Blackness and flames. That's all Hastings saw when, after a long moment, he opened his eyes. Gradually he managed to differentiate between the two. The blackness was omnipresent, eternal. The flames rose out of it, cleaving the darkness again and again without dispelling it. They came from the bottom of the blackness, from lakes and pools and oceans of fire.

Hastings felt searing heat. He breathed it, inhaled the acrid odor. And then his hearing returned, but it was scarcely a welcome addition to his senses. Because he heard the screams. The ageless, endless screams.

Quickly he sat up, realizing automatically that he was unhurt, but not caring—for his first thought was of Angela.

Angela wasn't screaming. She sat beside him on the rocky ledge. Beyond her stood the two pseudo-FBI men, and Brimstone. There was no plane, nor any wreckage of a plane in sight. Only the blackness beyond, with the flames rising up in rhythm with the screams.

Hastings didn't say, "Where are we?" He knew. He *knew*, long before the cat minced forward over the glowing ashes and purred,

"Welcome home, brother!"

The young man rose, helping Angela to her feet. "So it was a fake crash, too," he commented. "Just staged to fool the world and account for our disappearance."

"Right," acknowledged the cat. "You aren't really dead, and of course, she can't be killed. But I have a feeling you'll soon wish you were dead. I've never seen the Big Dealer quite so hot—if you know what I mean."

“All right, let’s get going,” said one of the members of the Fiendish Bureau of Investigation.

There was no question of refusing. Hastings and Angela picked their way over the rocks, hand in hand. The nearness of Angela gave him a comforting feeling. With his free hand he patted the razor, but its presence brought no relief. What good is a razor in Hell?

“You won’t need a shave here, brother,” remarked the cat. With a start, Hastings realized that Brimstone could still read his mind whenever there were no outward noises to interfere.

Shortly, however, the noises began. They constituted a racket; literally an infernal racket.

Dante Alighieri, who claimed to have paid a visit to Hell during the early years of the fourteenth century, left a very definitive account of the shrieks of the damned, the moans and outcries of lost souls, the cacophony of fiends. John Milton, a later commentator who whitewashed Satan under the guise of Lucifer, paid his respects to the pitfalls of the Pit. Jonathan Edwards made his additions to the edition of perdition, and a host of lesser luminaries did their best—or worst—to describe the infamy of the Inferno.

But there are no words to describe the utter reality, or the uttered reality of the shrieks; no words to describe the intensity of fear and fright which rose from the darkness in a form as tangible as the odor of sulphur and brimstone.

It was, Hastings decided quite simply, a Hell of a place.

Not that he had much time for either observation or decision. The fiends were leading him a far from merry chase—stumbling over rocks, leaping over fissures filled with live steam, bypassing streams of molten lava, circling around miniature volcanoes.

Angela clung to him, wings throbbing with alarm; yet her

smile and her halo glowed as brightly as ever. For some reason she still retained the battered, stringless harp—but whether it gave her any more comfort than the razor did Hastings he could not say.

Brimstone frisked along happily, obviously pleased at his homecoming. The way became torturous and they threaded through murky tunnels, passing through large chasms and caverns where even the voices of the damned and the doomed were drowned out by the roar of the flames.

“Don’t hesitate,” Brimstone smirked. “The flames can’t hurt you as long as you’re alive.” The cat began to sing *Chloe* in an off-key wail. Then it switched to *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* with equally dismal results.

They entered a long slanting tunnel that suddenly spiraled and wound down interminably. Hastings and Angela slipped and floundered until the two fiends were forced to half-support them in their progress.

Finally, they emerged into the great vaulted cavern circled by a rim of fire. The two fiends melted unobtrusively into the shadows, leaving them in the dubious custody of Brimstone. They stood there, dwarfed under the domed igneous arena, and stared at the whirling ball of flame in the center of the cavern. The whirling ceased and disappeared.

The Devil stood before them.

“So,” he observed, calmly. “Where angels fear to tread, eh?”

“I’m not afraid!” Surprisingly enough, it was Angela who spoke.

“Then you’re a fool, like the young man,” answered Satan. “And the time has come to pay for your folly.”

“It was worth it, to stop your scheme,” Angela retorted.

“Was it? I wonder if you’ll still believe that after you pay the price.”

“What are you going to do to us?” demanded Hastings.

“A fair question. Which demands a properly foul answer.” The Devil tugged at his beard in a gesture Hastings had learned to dread. “I must confess that I haven’t given the matter sufficient thought, as yet. You see there are a number of delicate legal and theological questions to iron out. By rights, I am not supposed to have jurisdiction over an angel—even a fallen angel.” A reminiscent look crept into the flaming eyes. “A fallen angel,” he mused. “I’d almost forgotten the heights from which I myself descended. So much has happened since. So many things. I remember Prosperine, and Orpheus—”

He shook his head. The beard shed a shower of sparks. “But I digress. We were speaking of punishment; a subject which I may lay claim to handle with some authority.

“Hastings, you are my property to deal with as I see fit. I’m in no hurry; eternity is my kingdom and your prison. As for the angel, she’s beyond the reach of any aid, mortal or immortal.”

Brimstone purred his way into the presence, arching his back and rubbing his tail against the cloven hoof of his master.

“Let me have them,” he mewed. “I’ve put up with a lot from these two, and I deserve a chance.”

“Perhaps. At least, until I devise a device, I can remand them to your custody.” Satan smiled. “Good enough. Take charge of them as you wish.”

Hastings and Angela stood irresolute as the cat moved forward, blackly, balefully.

“You’d best obey Brimstone,” the Devil advised. “There is no possibility of resistance and no escape. A thousand fiends will rise as quickly as the flames.”

Again, Satan smiled. “Oh, I admit it’s all a little old-fashioned,” he said. “There are times when I too get sick of

fire and brimstone, horns and tails and cloven hooves. But we have our traditions to maintain—and you will find that fear and agony are old-fashioned, too.”

He turned tail abruptly with a gesture of dismissal. “We shall meet again,” said Satan. “Now, go and be damned.”

“This way, please.” Brimstone mocked and beckoned to a dark corridor. Without a word, the angel and the mortal followed.

“No sense running away.” Brimstone read their thoughts with savage accuracy. “The fiends will find you, soon enough.” He purred complacently. “Nothing can stop them, you understand. In all the ages, I know of only one man who stopped them, even for a time.”

Hastings stumbled on. He tried not to think of what he was wanting to think. Something the Devil had mentioned, something Brimstone had mentioned now—but the cat would read his mind.

Then Hell itself came to his rescue. The tunnel widened for a moment and turned off so that once again they walked through a large cavern filled with flames—and from the flames rose the deafening cries of the damned.

Brimstone couldn’t read minds when there were noises!

“Lag behind,” Hastings whispered to Angela. “Lag behind until I call you.” Angela shot him a mystified glance, but obeyed. As the cat led Hastings into still another maze of subterrenea, Angela imperceptibly lingered at the entrance. Hastings went on ahead, into the darkness, into the howling and shrieking Inferno.

What thoughts went through her angelic head will never be known. The moments were eternities of exquisite agony; the waiting was an eon of painful, anguished anticipation.

And then Hastings emerged, running, from the tunnel ahead. Without a word he grasped the harp from about her neck, and ran back to the tunnel. The ravaged instrument with its shredded

strings disappeared into the blackness.

Again Angela waited. Again the agonized ages passed. The flames shot higher, the howling rose to crescendo, and Hell's own fury rose in infernal majesty to dwarf and mock the white-robed figure of the winged girl.

There was a muted murmuring that grew to a raging roar. Suddenly, from the darkness beyond the flames, Angela saw the rising ring of red eyes, rimming her in on all sides. They were the eyes of fiends, the eyes that brooded in the blackness. Now they crept forward, and from behind them came the evil echo of a titanic tittering. They were crouching, slinking, closer and closer and closer—something had alarmed them, something had alerted them, something had summoned them. Black paws padding, curved claws raking, the dark demons closed in upon their chosen prey.

“Paul!”

Suddenly he was there. Suddenly he emerged from the tunnel and raced to her side. He thrust the harp into her hands. “Play!” he shouted. “Play—it's our only chance! Never mind them, they can't touch us if you play!”

Angela looked down at the restrung harp, then up into the darkness. Automatically her hands moved over the strings. And the angel played.

The music rose, rose above the rustling, rose above the panting, rose above the roaring of flames and the crying out of the damned.

The music rose and the voices fell, the flames subsided. A new sound took their place—an accompaniment to the celestial music. It was the sound of weeping.

“Come on,” Hastings said, leading Angela into a fissured cavity in the rock. “We'll find our way out of here. There *is* a way,

you know. If you have faith.”

Angela had faith. There was faith in her fingers, faith in the melody they produced, faith in the strength of the soaring strains.

Paul Hastings led her, but he himself was lost—lost in the music. Tears blinded him until he saw clearly, but what he saw he could never recall.

They walked unharmed through the halls of Hell, down corridors of dark despair, through pits of utter degradation, and still Angela played.

Wherever they passed, flames fell back, fiends fawned, and the cries of the doomed became a paean of remembered beauty.

Of Satan, of Brimstone, there were no signs. There was only the walking and the music, the endless wandering through corridor after corridor.

Ages afterwards the way led upward. Through cooler caverns they climbed, and still Angela’s harp made melody. The fires faded so that they toiled through darkness, and time itself was melted in the molten music.

And thus it was that they came at last—the man and the angel—to the cavern with the cool stalactites; the cavern that was somehow familiar to Hastings; the cavern where for the first time his skin tingled with recognition of the familiar air of earth.

“Don’t look back, Angela,” he shouted, above the sound of the strings. “But I think we’re safe, now. Out of it!”

But Angela did look back. She looked back, and she screamed. “Look out! The roof is falling in!”

Music—vibration—tremor—whatever it was, the result was the same. A portion of the pointed rocks over the cavern plunged to earth, to block the entrance of the tunnel from which they had emerged.

Hastings noted it, and at the same time noted their own peril. He threw himself forward, hurling Angela aside. But the rocks came down, and once again Hastings sank into blackness.

“Paul! Paul!” It was Angela’s voice, and somehow it carried a sweetness greater than the music to his ears.

He opened his eyes. She was shaking him, dragging him from the debris that littered the floor of the cavern.

“Are you all right?”

“I think so.” He stood up, shakily. “Yes, I’m all right. But—what happened to you?”

He stared at Angela. Something *bad* happened, but at first he could not comprehend the nature of the change. Then he realized it. The white-robed girl who stood before him, clung to him, and then kissed him was just *that* and nothing more. A white-robed girl, minus halo, harp and wings. And there was nothing angelic about her kiss, however heavenly it might seem.

“They’re gone!” he whispered.

“Yes—did you see them?”

“Who?”

“My visitors. You were knocked out. They came at last to tell me that I was not forgotten, you were not forgotten.”

Paul Hastings nodded, numbly. His head still whirled, whether from the shock of the blow or the shock of Angela’s transformation, or the added shock of her words.

“I’ve got good news, Paul. At least, I think it’s good news,” the girl told him. “Your soul is saved. What you did, speaking the truth and defying the Devil, atoned for the evil. But there was a price to be paid.”

“What price?”

“I forfeited my right to return to heaven. In order to return, I must stay on earth and live through another life, virtuously.”

She gazed up at Hastings. “So now I’m just a girl,” she concluded. “And you’ll have to act as my guardian angel.”

Hastings managed a rock-scarred grin. “I’ll keep you virtuous,” he promised. “But not too virtuous.”

It seemed like a nice tag line for a clinch, but before they could manage it, a sallow, sour-faced man clambered down through the cavern and approached them.

“Hey, what’s the big idea?” he demanded. “Smooching around hyar in a nightie—reckon you’uns’ll catch your death of cold.”

“Just where are we, anyway?” Hastings demanded.

The sour-faced man squirted tobacco juice at the rocks. “This here’s Mammoth Cave,” he said.

Hastings shrugged. He and Angela followed their self-appointed guide up towards the entrance, up towards the world of what passes these days for reality.

“So we start a new life,” he observed. “No wings, no halo, no harp.”

“About that harp,” Angela said. “That was a pretty wild inspiration—having me play music to keep off the damned.”

“Not my idea at all,” Hastings confessed. “Fellow name of Orpheus thought of it ages ago. Lucky thing the Devil mentioned it and Brimstone reminded me of it again as we passed through. I got to thinking, if I could distract his attention long enough we might have a chance to restring the harp and escape. And that’s just what we did.”

“One thing more,” Angela ventured.

“Yes?”

“About Brimstone—whatever happened to him?”

Hastings grinned. From his pocket he produced the straight razor.

“I took care of him when we got into the noisy darkness of that tunnel, where he couldn’t read my thoughts. That was the end of the cat—and the beginning of your music. After all, where do you think I got the new harpstrings? You may not know it, my dear, but you were playing on poor old Brimstone!”

They emerged from the cave. It was evening. Hell was below, heaven was above. Except, of course, for the little portions of both which they would carry forever in their hearts.