

The Witching Hour

James Gunn

An [*e - reads*] Book
New York, NY

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First e-reads publication 2003
www.e-reads.com
ISBN 0-7592-2270-3

*To Kit and Kevin, who
would like to believe in witches
and such.*

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Introduction

Fantasy is far older than science fiction. In fact, fantasy may be as old as fiction itself. Science fiction could not exist until technological and scientific change became a recognized part of human existence and authors began to speculate about the direction of change and the kinds of change, and the impact of these changes on people. Fantasy began as soon as story-tellers began to spin tall tales for the entertainment of their listeners. This may have happened very soon after humans developed speech.

If fantasy is fiction in which situations arise and events happen contrary to everyday experience, then science fiction can be considered a special case of fantasy, a variety in which the situations and events, though contrary to everyday experience, can be traced to everyday experience. In another context ("The

World View of Science Fiction”) I have defined fantasy as the literature of difference, and science fiction as the literature of change. Fantasy is the literature of the supernatural, science fiction, the literature of the natural extended in time or space.

I never was much interested in writing fantasy, maybe because I was too fascinated by the fantastic possibilities of science and technology, but I loved reading it: Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Tarzan novels captivated me not long after I began to read, and his John Carter Mars novels and Jason Gridley’s Pellucidar novels were even more entrancing; and I fell in love with A. Merritt’s romantic fantasies as soon as I discovered them in *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* in 1939. But I wanted to write science fiction.

All that changed when John Campbell created *Unknown*, as a companion fantasy magazine to *Astounding*, in 1939. Campbell’s *Unknown* offered fantasy with a difference. It was fantasy written like science fiction, what has sometimes been called “rationalized fantasy.” Campbell told his science-fiction writers, “Grant your gadgets and get on with your story.” In *Unknown* the gadgets were supernatural. Assume there is magic, say — how would it really work? If there are leprechauns, how would they exist? what would they want? what could they do? If there are ghosts, what would be their limitations? If one acquires magical powers, what is their psychological or economic cost?

Unknown (later called *Unknown Worlds*) lasted only five years, from 1939-1943. It was killed by wartime paper shortages. During its too short lifetime, it published some classics: Eric Frank Russell’s *Sinister Barrier*, L. Rob Hubbard’s *Fear, Typewriter in the Sky*, and *Slaves of Sleep*, L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt’s Harold Shea novels of magical misadventures, de Camp’s *Lest Darkness Fall* and several of the stories collected in *The Wheels of If*, Jack Williamson’s *Darker Than You Think*, Fritz Leiber’s *Conjure Wife*, Robert A. Heinlein’s *The Devil Makes the Law (Magic, Inc.)*, and dozens of short stories such as Theodore Sturgeon’s “It” and “Shottle Bop.”

I was only 16 in 1939 and never had a chance to write for *Unknown*, but fantasy magazines had a re-birth in the 1950s when I was freelancing full time. The best of these was *Beyond*, created by Horace Gold as a companion fantasy magazine to *Galaxy*, which he had created three years before. *Beyond Fantasy Fiction* aimed at the same rationalized fantasy niche that *Unknown* had established and to which Gold had contributed stories. I saw it as an opportunity to broaden my range and indulge myself in a different kind of narrative imperative.

The first story in this collection might have been published in *Beyond* but was published in *Galaxy* under the title of “Wherever You May Be.” I had given up a position as junior editor with Western Printing & Lithographing Company of Racine, Wisconsin (which at that time produced the Dell line of paperbacks) on the strength of four stories that I had sold. Fred Pohl, my agent, told me about them when I attended my first science-fiction convention, the World SF Convention of 1952, in Chicago. One of them was to *Astounding*, one to *Galaxy*. I decided to make a trip to New York to talk to editors.

Horace Gold offered me a job as assistant editor of *Galaxy*, but I know my wife wouldn’t want to live in New York, with our three-year-old son. John Campbell gave me an idea for a story. He gave the same idea to a lot of authors (he often said that he could give the same idea to a dozen writers and get a dozen different stories). The British Psychical Society, he said, had investigated poltergeist phenomena and discovered that it almost always happened in the neighborhood of a disturbed adolescent. I thought about it on the way home: what would happen, I asked myself, if someone — a psychologist, say — should find such an adolescent and make her (it should be a “her”) more disturbed until she gains control of her psychic powers.

I sat down and wrote that story in a few weeks. It was a short novel and it rolled out of my typewriter without conscious effort (unlike most stories, which are work). I called it “Happy Is the Bride” and sent it off to Fred Pohl, asking him to send it to John Campbell. But Gold was desperate for a lead short novel

for an upcoming edition of *Galaxy*, and Pohl sent it over to him. A. J. Budrys, who became the assistant editor to *Galaxy*, told me later that Gold would rather have used it in *Beyond*, but *Galaxy's* need was greater. Gold asked Budrys to add some five thousand words of explanation to "Happy Is the Bride" to make it suitable for *Galaxy*, but I've never been able to identify them. Maybe Budrys did it too well. Gold published the short novel in the May 1953 *Galaxy*, but changed my title (he was fond of changing titles; moreover, he said that my title gave away the ending). I never liked "Wherever You May Be" (too many indefinite verbs and a preposition to be memorable) and changed it, in this collection, to "The Reluctant Witch."

"The Beautiful Brew" emerged from a cartoon by Virgil Partch, a wonderfully off-beat cartoonist who signed his cartoons "VIP," that showed a couple of bar patrons admiring the work of a bartender drawing a mug of beer. The beer was foaming up into the bust and head of an attractive young woman. The caption said something like, "When he puts a head on a beer, he really puts on a head." I did a little research in Frazer's *The Golden Bough* about the spirit of the grain, spent the afternoon at the local Blatz brewery watching beer being made, and wrote "The Beautiful Brew." Gold bought it for *Beyond* without any hesitation, and it was published in the September 1954 issue. This time he didn't change my title.

"Sine of the Magus" had a more adventurous history. The idea came from a lobby bulletin board at the Muehlebach Hotel in Kansas City. If magicians had a convention, I thought, they would meet just like every other professional group, and their meetings would be announced on the lobby meeting board spelled out in those detachable white letters. And there would be something misspelled. There always is something misspelled. The magicians would behave just like every other professional group, with name tags (often with corny requests) and printed programs and dull presentations. Only these would be real magicians. I did some research on magic in Frazer and other authorities and then did some speculations of my own. Maybe, I thought, the reason spells didn't work consistently was because they weren't mathematically derived, and calculus, I learned, was invented for just this kind of task — to provide limits. What if someone had invented a calculus of magic!

I wanted to make a romantic comedy out of all this, like "The Reluctant Witch" and "The Beautiful Brew" and the fantasy novels of Thorne Smith that I had always enjoyed, like *The Night Life of the Gods*. So I wrote what I called "Beauty Is a Witch" (from a quotation, Shakespeare, I think: "Beauty is a witch against whose charms faith melteth into blood") and sent it to Gold — and he promptly rejected it. Fred Pohl sent it to Fletcher Pratt, who was launching a new fantasy magazine but one that would pay only one cent a word rather than three. Pratt liked the short novel but wanted a bit of rewriting in one of the opening scenes; before I could start on that, however, Gold asked to have the story returned. He was in dire need of a lead short novel, this time for *Beyond*. It was published in the May 1954 issue. Gold changed the title to "Sine of the Magus." Donald W. Lawler in Tymn and Ashley's reference book *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Weird Fiction Magazines* commented that the story "stands out as one of the best of *Beyond*," and it was listed as a classic by the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. I retitled it "The Magicians" for this book, and later expanded it into a novel for Scribner's under the same title. By that time *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary's Baby* had become best-sellers, and I included in the novel a satire of those novels. Nobody noticed.

James Gunn

One

The Reluctant Witch

Matt refused to believe it. Incredulity paralyzed him as he stared after the fleeing, bounding tire. Then,

with a sudden release, he sprinted after it.

“Stop!” he yelled futilely. “Stop, damn it!”

With what seemed like sadistic glee, the tire bounced high in the air and came down going faster than ever. Matt pounded dustily down the hot road for a hundred yards before he pulled even with it. He knocked it over on its side. The tire lay there, spinning and frustrating, like a turtle on its back. Matt glared at it suspiciously. Sweat trickled down his neck.

A tinkling of little silver bells. Laughter? Matt looked up quickly, angrily. The woods were thin along the top of this Ozark ridge. Descending to the lake, sparkling blue, tantalizingly cool far below, they grew thicker, but here the only person near was the young girl shuffling through the dust several hundred yards beyond the crippled car. And her head was bent down to study her feet.

Matt shrugged and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his shirt sleeve. A late June afternoon in southern Missouri was too hot for this kind of work, for any kind of work. Matt wondered if it had been a mistake.

Heat waves shimmered and a haze of red dust settled slowly as he righted the tire and began to roll it back toward the old green Ford with one bare wheel drum pointing upward at a slight angle. The tire rolled easily, as if it repented its brief dash for freedom, but it was a dirty job and Matt’s hands and clothes were soiled red when he reached the car. With one hand clutching the tire, Matt studied the road. Surely he had stopped on one of the few level stretches in these hills, but the tire had straightened up from the side of the car anyway and had started rolling as if the car were parked on a steep incline.

Matt reflected bitterly on the luck that had turned a slow leak into a flat only twenty-five miles from the cabin. It couldn’t have happened on the highway, ten miles back, where he could have pulled into a service station. It had to wait until he was committed to this rutted cow track. The tire’s escapade had been only the most recent of a series of annoyances and irritations to which bruised shins and scraped knuckles bore mute, painful witness.

He sighed. After all, he had wanted isolation. Guy’s offer of a hunting cabin in which to write his book had seemed ideal at the time; now Matt wasn’t so certain. If this was a fair sample, Matt was beginning to realize that much of his time might be wasted on the elementary problems of existence.

Cautiously Matt rolled the tire to the rear of the car, laid it carefully on its side, and completed pulling the spare from the trunk. Warily he maneuvered the spare to the left rear wheel, knelt, lifted it, fitted it over the bolts and stepped back. He sighed again, but this time it was with relief.

Kling-ng! Klang! Rattle!

Matt looked down. His foot was at least two inches from the hubcap, but it was rocking now, empty. Matt saw the last nut roll under the car.

Matt’s swearing was vigorous, systematic, and exhaustive. It concerned itself chiefly with the latent perversity of inanimate objects.

There was something about machines and the things they made that was basically alien to the human spirit. For a time they might disguise themselves as willing slaves, but eventually, inevitably, they turned against their masters. At the psychological moment, they rebelled.

Or perhaps it was the difference in people. For some people things always went wrong: their cakes fell, their boards split, their golf balls sliced into the woods. Others established a mysterious sympathy with

their tools. Luck? Skill? Coordination? Experience? It was, he felt, something more conscious and more malign.

Matt remembered a near-disastrous brush with chemistry; he had barely passed qualitative analysis. For him the tests had been worse than useless. Faithfully he had gone through every step of the endless ritual: precipitate, filter, dissolve, precipitate. And then he had taken his painfully secured, neatly written results to — what was his name — Wadsworth, and the little chemistry professor had looked at his analysis and looked up, frowning.

“Didn’t you find any whatyoumaycallit oxide?” he had asked.

“Whatyoumaycallit oxide?” Startled. “Oh, there wasn’t any whatyoumaycallit oxide.”

And Wadsworth had made a simple test, and, sure enough, there was the whatyoumaycallit oxide.

There had been the inexplicably misshapen gear he had made on the milling machine, the drafting pen that would not draw a smooth line no matter how much he sanded the point. It had convinced Matt that his hands were too clumsy to belong to an engineer. He had transferred his ambitions to a field where tools were less tangible. Now he wondered.

Kobolds? Accident prone?

Sometime he would have to write it up. It would make a good paper for the *Journal of* ...

Laughter! This time there was no possible doubt. It came from right behind him.

Matt whirled. The girl stood there, hugging her ribs to keep the laughter in. She was a little thing, not much over five feet tall, in a shapeless, faded blue dress. Her feet were small and bare and dirty. Her hair, in long braids, was mouse-colored. Her pale face was saved from plainness only by her large blue eyes. She was about thirteen, Matt estimated.

Matt flushed. “What the devil are you laughing at?”

“You!” she gasped. “Why’n’t you get a horse?”

“Did that remark just reach these parts?”

He swallowed his irritation, turned and got down on his hands and knees to peer under the car. One by one he gathered up the nuts, but the last one, inevitably, was out of reach. Sweating, he crawled into the dust under the car.

When he came out, the girl was still there. “Well, what are you waiting for?” he asked bitingly.

“Nothin’.” But she stood with her feet planted firmly in the red dust.

Kibitzers annoyed Matt, but he couldn’t think of anything to do about it. He twirled the nuts onto the bolts and tightened them, his neck itching. It might have been the effect of sweat and dust, but he was not going to give the girl the satisfaction of seeing him rub it. That annoyed him even more. He tapped the hubcap into place and stood up.

“Why don’t you go home?” he asked sourly.

“Cain’t,” she said.

He went to the rear of the car and released the jack. “Why not?”

“I run away.” Her voice was quietly tragic. Matt turned to look at her. Her blue eyes were large and moist. As he watched, a single tear gathered and traced a muddy path down her cheek.

Matt hardened his heart. He picked up the flat and stuffed it into the trunk and slammed the lid. The sun was getting lower, and on this forgotten lane to nowhere it might take him the better part of an hour to drive the twenty-five miles.

He slid into the driver’s seat and punched the starter button. After one last look at the forlorn little figure in the middle of the road, he shook his head savagely and let in the clutch.

“Mister! Hey, mister!”

He slammed on the brakes and stuck his head out the window. “Now what do you want?”

“Nothin’,” she said mournfully. “Only you forgot your jack.”

Matt jammed the gear shift into reverse and backed up rapidly. Silently he got out, picked up the jack, opened the trunk, tossed in the jack, slammed the lid. But as he brushed past her again, he hesitated. “Where are you going?”

“No place,” she said.

“What do you mean ‘no place’? Don’t you have any relatives?” She shook her head sadly. “Friends?” he asked hopefully. She shook her head again. “All right, then, go home where you belong!”

He slid into the car and slammed the door. She was not his concern. The car jerked into motion. No doubt she would go home when she got hungry enough. He shifted into second, grinding the gears. Even if she didn’t, someone would take her in. After all, he was no welfare agency.

He slammed on the brakes. He backed up and skidded to a stop beside the girl.

“Get in,” he said.

Trying to keep the car out of the ruts was trouble enough, but the girl jumped up and down on the seat beside him, squealing happily.

“Careful of those notes,” he said, indicating the bulging manila folders on the seat between them. “There’s over a year’s work in those.”

Her eyes were wide as she watched him place the folders in the back seat on top of the portable typewriter that rested between the twenty-pound sack of flour and the case of eggs.

“A year’s work?” she echoed.

“Notes. For a book I’m going to write.”

“You write stories?”

“A book. About an aspect of psychology. About poltergeist phenomena, to be precise.”

“Pol-ter-geist?”

“An old German word. ‘Polter’ means ‘uproar’ and ‘geist’ means ‘spirit.’ Uproarious spirits.”

“Oh,” she said wisely. “Spirits.” As if she knew all about spirits.

“It’s just a superstition,” Matt said impatiently. “Before people could find natural explanations for unusual events, they blamed these things on spirits. There aren’t any ghosts or spirits who knock on tables or throw things or make noises. When these things happen, someone or something is responsible. That’s what my book is going to prove. But you probably aren’t interested in books.”

“I like books.”

“I mean books like this — scholarly books.”

She nodded. “Even books about pol-ter-geists. Specially books like that.”

Matt felt unreasonably irritated. “All right, where do you live?”

She stopped bouncing and got very quiet. “I cain’t go home.”

“Why not?” he demanded. “And don’t tell me ‘I run away,’” he imitated nasally.

“Paw’d beat me again. He’d purty nigh skin me alive, I guess.”

“You mean he hits you?”

“He don’t use his fists — not often. He uses his belt mostly. Look!” She pulled up the hem of her dress and the leg of a pair of baggy drawers that appeared to be made from some kind of sacking.

Matt looked quickly and glanced away. Across the back of one thigh was an ugly, dark bruise. But the leg seemed unusually well rounded for a girl of thirteen. Matt frowned. Had he read somewhere that girls in the hills mature early?

He cleared his throat. “Why does he do that?”

“He’s just mean.”

“He must have some reason.”

“Well,” she said thoughtfully, “he beats me when he’s drunk ’cause he’s drunk, and he beats me when he’s sober ’cause he ain’t drunk. That covers it mostly.”

“But what does he say?” Matt asked desperately.

She glanced at him shyly. “Oh, I cain’t repeat it.”

“I mean what does he want you to do?”

“Oh, that!” She brooded over it. “He thinks I ought to get married. He wants me to catch some strong young feller who’ll do the work when he moves in with us. A gal don’t bring in no money, he says, leastwise not a good one. That kind only eats and wants things.”

“But you’re too young to get married.”

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. “I’m sixteen,” she said. “Most girls my age got a couple of young ‘uns. One, anyways.”

Matt looked at her sharply. Sixteen! It seemed impossible. The dress was shapeless enough to hide almost anything — but sixteen! Then he remembered the thigh.

She frowned. “Get married, get married! You’d think I didn’t want to get married. ‘Tain’t my fault no

feller wants me.”

“I can’t understand that,” Matt said sarcastically.

She smiled at him. “You’re nice.”

She looked almost pretty when she smiled. For a hill girl.

“What seems to be the trouble?” Matt asked hurriedly.

“Partly Paw,” she said. “No one’d want to have him around. But mostly I guess I’m just unlucky.” She sighed. “One feller I went with purty near a year. He busted his leg. Another nigh drowned when he fell in the lake. Don’t seem right they should blame me, even if we did have words.”

“Blame you?”

She nodded vigorously. “Them as don’t hate me say it’s courtin’ disaster ‘stead of a gal. The others ain’t so nice. Fellers stopped comin’. One of ’em said he’d rather marry up with a catamount. You married, Mister — Mister —?”

“Wright,” Matt said. “Matthew Wright. No, I’m not married.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “Wright,” she said slowly. “Abigail Wright. That’s purty.”

“Abigail *Wright*?”

She looked innocent. “Did I say that? Now, ain’t that funny? My name’s Jenkins.”

Matt gulped. “You’re going home,” he said with unshakable conviction. “You can tell me how to get there or you can climb out of the car right now.”

“But, Paw —” she began.

“Where the devil did you think I was taking you?”

“Wherever you’re going.”

“For God’s sake, you can’t go with me. It wouldn’t be decent.”

“Why not?” she asked innocently.

Grimly Matt began to apply the brakes.

“All right,” she sighed. She wore an expression the early Christians must have worn before they were marched into the arena. “Turn right at the next crossroad.”

Chickens scattered in front of the wheels, fluttering and squawking; pigs squealed in a pen beside the house. Matt stopped in front of the shanty, appalled. If the two rooms and sagging porch had ever known paint, they had enjoyed only a nodding acquaintance and that a generation before.

A large figure brooded on the porch, rocking slowly in a rickety chair. He was dark, with a full black beard and a tall head of hair.

“That’s Paw,” Abigail whispered.

Matt waited uneasily, but the broad figure of her father kept on rocking as if strangers brought back his

daughter every day. *Maybe they do*, Matt thought.

“Well,” he said nervously, “here you are.”

“I cain’t get out,” Abigail said. “Not till I find out if Paw’s goin’ to whale me. Go talk to him. See if he’s mad at me.”

“Not me,” Matt said with certainty, glancing again at the big, black figure rocking slowly, ominously silent. “I’ve done my duty in bringing you home. Good-by. I won’t say it’s been a pleasure knowing you.”

“You’re nice and mighty handsome. I’d hate to tell Paw you’d taken advantage of me. He’s a terror when he’s riled.”

For a horrified moment Matt stared at Abigail. Then, as she opened her mouth, he opened the door and stepped out. Slowly he walked to the porch and put one foot on its uneven edge.

“Uh,” he said. “I met your daughter on the road.”

Jenkins kept on rocking.

“She’d run away,” Matt went on.

Jenkins was silent. Matt studied the portion of Jenkins’s face that wasn’t covered with hair. There wasn’t much of it, but what there was Matt didn’t like.

“I brought her back,” Matt said desperately.

Jenkins rocked and said nothing. Matt spun around and walked quickly back to the car. He went around to the window where Abigail sat. He reached through the window, opened the glove compartment and drew out a pint bottle. “Remind me,” he said, “never to see you again.”

He marched back to the porch. “How about a drink?”

One large hand reached out, smothered the pint and brought it close to faded blue overalls. The cap was twisted off by the other hand. The bottle was tilted toward the unpainted porch ceiling as soon as the neck disappeared into the matted whiskers. The bottle gurgled. When it was lowered, it was only half-full.

“Weak,” the beard said. But the hand that held the bottle held it tight.

“I brought your daughter back,” Matt said, starting again.

“Why?”

“She had no place to go. I mean — after all, this is her home.”

“She run away,” the beard said. Matt found the experience unnerving.

“I realize that teenage daughters can be annoying, and after meeting your daughter, I think I can understand how you feel. Still in all, she is your daughter.”

“Got my doubts.”

Matt took a deep breath and tried once more. “A happy family demands a lot of compromise, give and

take on both sides. Your daughter may have given you good cause to lose your temper, but beating a child is never sound psychology. Now, if you —”

“Beat her?” Jenkins rose from his chair. It was an awesome sight, like Neptune rising out of the sea in all his majesty, gigantic, bearded and powerful. Even subtracting the six-inch advantage of the porch, Jenkins loomed several inches over Matt’s near six feet. “Never laid a hand to her. Dassn’t.”

My God, thought Matt, *the man is trembling!*

“Come in here,” said Jenkins. He waved the pint toward the open door, a dark rectangle. Uneasily Matt walked into the room. Under his feet things gritted and cracked.

Jenkins lit a kerosene lamp and turned it up. The room was a shambles. Broken dishes littered the floor. Wooden chairs were smashed and splintered. In the center of the room, a table on its back waved three rough legs helplessly in the air; the fourth sagged pitifully from its socket.

“She did this?” Matt asked weakly.

“This ain’t nothin’.” Jenkins’s voice quavered; it was a terrible sound to come from that massive frame. “You should see the other room.”

“But, how? I mean —*why?*”

“I ain’t sayin’ Ab done it,” Jenkins said, shaking his head. His beard wobbled near Matt’s nose; Matt resisted an impulse to sneeze. “But when she gets onhappy, things happen. And she was powerful onhappy when that Duncan boy tol’ her he warn’t comin’ back. Them chairs come up from the floor and slam down. That table went dancin’ round the room till it come a cropper. Them dishes come a-flyin’ through the air. Look!”

His voice was full of self-pity as he turned his head around and parted his long, matted hair. On the back of his head was a large, red swelling. “I hate to think what happen to that Duncan boy.”

He shook his head sorrowfully. “Now, mister, I guess I got ever’ right to lay my hand to that gal. Ain’t I?” he demanded fiercely, but his voice broke.

Matt stared at him blankly.

“But whop her? Me? I sooner stick mah hand in a nest of rattlers.”

“You mean to say those things happened all by themselves?”

“That’s what I said. I guess it kinder sticks in your craw. Wouldn’t have believe it myself, even seein’ it and feelin’ it” — he rubbed the back of his head — “if it ain’t happen afore. Funny things happen around Ab, ever since she started fillin’ out, five, six year ago.”

“But she’s only sixteen.”

“Sixteen!” Jenkins glanced warily around the room and out the door toward the car. He lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. “Don’t let on I tol’ you, but Ab allus was a fibber. Why, she’s past eighteen!”

From a shelf a single unbroken dish crashed to the floor at Jenkins’s feet. He jumped and began to shake. “See!” he whispered plaintively.

“It fell,” Matt said.

“She’s ‘witched,” Jenkins said, rolling his eyes. He took a feverish swallow from the bottle. “Maybe I ain’t been a good paw to her. Ever since her maw died, she run wild and got herself all kinda queer notions. ‘Tain’t allus been bad. Ain’t had to go fer water fer years. Seems like that barrel by the porch is allus filled. But ever since she got to the courtin’ age and started bein’ disappointed in fellers round about, she been mighty hard to live with. No one’ll come nigh the place. And things keep a-movin’ and a-jumpin’ around till a man cain’t trust his own chair to set still under him. It gits you, son. A man kin only stand so much!”

To Matt’s dismay, Jenkins’s eyes began to fill with large tears. “Got no friend no more to offer me a drink now and again, sociablelike, or help me with the chores times I got the misery in my back. I ain’t a well man, son. Times it’s more’n I kin do to git outa bed in the mornin’.

“Look, son,” Jenkins said, “yore a city feller. Yore right nice-lookin’. You got an edycation. Ab likes you, I reckon. Why’n’t you take her with you?” Matt started backing toward the door. “She’s right purty when she fixes up and she kin cook right smart. You’d think a skillet was part of her hand the way she kin handle her. You don’t have to marry up with her lessen you feel like it.”

Matt backed, white-faced and incredulous, shaking his head vigorously. “You must be mad. You can’t give a girl away like that.” He turned to make a dash for the door.

A heavy hand fell on Matt’s shoulder and spun him around. “Son,” Jenkins said, “any man that’s alone with a girl more’n twenty minutes, it’s thought proper in these parts they should get married up quick. Since yore a stranger, I ain’t a-holdin’ you to it. But when Ab left me, she stopped bein’ my daughter. Nobody ask you to bring her back. That gal,” he said woefully, “eats more’n I do.”

Matt reached into his hip pocket. He pulled out his billfold and extracted a twenty-dollar bill.

“Here,” he said, extending it toward Jenkins. “Maybe this will make life a little more pleasant.”

Jenkins looked at the money wistfully, started to reach for it and jerked his hand away. “I cain’t do it. It ain’t worth it. You brung her back. You kin take her away.”

Matt glanced out the doorway toward the car and shuddered. He added another twenty to the one in his hand.

Jenkins sweated. His hand crept out. Finally, desperately, he crumpled the bills into his palm. “All right,” he said hoarsely. “Them’s mighty powerful reasons.”

Matt ran to the car as if he had escaped from bedlam. He opened the door and slipped in. “Get out. You’re home.”

“But, Paw —”

“From now on he’ll be a doting father.” Matt reached across and opened the door for her. “Good-by.”

Slowly Abigail got out. She rounded the car and walked slowly to the porch. But when she reached the porch, she straightened. Jenkins, who was standing in the doorway, shrank from his five-foot-tall daughter as she approached.

“Dirty, nasty old man,” she said.

Jenkins flinched. After she had passed, he raised the bottle hastily to his beard. His hand must have slipped. By some unaccountable mischance, the bottle kept rising in the air, mouth downward. The bourbon gushed over his head.

Pathetically, looking more like Neptune than ever, Jenkins peered toward the car and shook his head.

Feverishly Matt turned the car and jumped it out of the yard. It had undoubtedly been an optical illusion. Abottle does not hang in the air without support.

Guy's cabin should not have been so difficult to find. Although the night was dark, the directions were explicit. But for two hours Matt bounced back and forth along the dirt roads of the hills. He got tired and hungry.

For the fourth time he passed the cabin which fitted the directions in all instances but one: it was occupied. Lights streamed from the windows into the night. Matt turned into the steep driveway. He could, at least, ask directions.

As he walked toward the door, the odor of frying ham drifted from the house to tantalize him. Matt knocked, his mouth watering. Perhaps he could even get an invitation to supper.

The door swung open. "What kept you?"

Matt blinked. "Oh, no!" he said. For a frantic moment it was like the old vaudeville routine of the drunk in the hotel who keeps staggering back to knock on the same door. Each time he is more indignantly ejected until finally he complains, "My God, are you in *all* the rooms?"

"What are you doing here?" Matt asked faintly. "How did you —? How *could* you —?"

Abigail pulled him into the cabin. It looked bright and cheerful and clean. The floor was newly swept; a broom leaned in the corner. The two lower bunks on opposite walls were neatly made up. Two places were laid at the table. Food was cooking on the wood stove.

"Paw changed his mind," she said.

"That's not fair. I mean — he couldn't, I gave him —"

"Oh, that," she said. She reached into a pocket of her gingham dress. "Here."

She handed him the two crumpled twenty-dollar bills and a handful of silver and copper that Matt dazedly added up to one dollar and thirty-seven cents.

"Paw said he'd have sent more, but it was all he had. So he threw in some vittles."

Matt sat heavily down in a chair. "But you couldn't — I didn't know where the place was myself, exactly. I didn't tell you —" "I've always been good at findings things," she said. "Places, things that are lost. Like a cat, I guess."

"But — but — how did you get here?"

"I rode," she said. Instinctively Matt's eyes switched to the broom in the corner. "Paw loaned me the mule. I let her go. She'll git home all right."

"But you can't stay here. It's impossible!"

"Now, Mr. Wright," Abigail said. "My maw used to say a man should never make a decision on an empty stomach. You just set there and relax. Supper's all ready. You must be nigh starved."

"There's no decision to be made!" Matt said, but he watched while she put things on the table — thick slices of fried ham with cream gravy, corn on the cob, fluffy biscuits, butter, homemade jelly, strong black

coffee that was steaming and fragrant. Abigail's cheeks were flushed from the stove, and her face was peaceful. She looked almost pretty.

"I can't eat a bite," Matt said morosely.

"Nonsense." Abigail filled his plate.

Glumly Matt sliced off a bite of ham and put it in his mouth. It was so tender it almost melted. Before long he was eating as fast as he could get the food to his mouth. The food was delicious; everything was cooked just the way he liked it. He never got it that way. He could never tell anyone how to fix it that way. But that was the way it was.

He pushed himself back from the table, teetering against the wall on the back legs of his chair, lit a cigarette, and watched Abigail pour him a third cup of coffee. He was swept by a wave of contentment. "If I'd had time, I'd have made a peach pie. I make real good peach pie," Abigail said.

Matt nodded lazily. There would be compensations in having someone around to —

"No!" he said violently, thumping down on the two front legs of his chair. "It won't work. You can't stay here. What would people say?"

"Who'd care? Paw don't. Anyways, I could say we was married."

"No!" Matt said hoarsely. "Don't do that! Please don't do that!" "Please, Mr. Wright. Let me cook and do for you. I wouldn't be no trouble, Mr. Wright, honest I wouldn't."

"Look, Abbie!" He took her hand. It was soft and feminine, and she stood beside his chair obediently, her eyes cast down. "You're a nice girl, and I like you. You can cook better than anyone I've ever known, and you'll make some man a good wife. You don't want to ruin your good name and your chances by staying here alone with me. You'll have to go back to your father, now."

The life seemed to flow out of her. "All right," she said, so low that Matt almost couldn't hear her.

Dazed at his sudden success, Matt got up and walked toward the door. She followed behind him. Matt could almost feel the tears welling in her eyes. At the door, Matt stepped aside to let Abbie leave first. She walked out into the warm night. Matt opened the car door for her and helped her in. He circled the front of the car and slid into the driver's seat. Abbie huddled against the far door, small and forlorn, not looking at him.

Since Matt's speech, she hadn't said a word. Suddenly Matt felt very sorry for her and ashamed, as if he had hit a child. *The poor little thing!* he thought. Then he caught himself. He shook his head. *Don't be a fool!*

He thumbed the starter button. The motor growled, but it didn't catch. Matt let it whine to a stop and pressed again. The motor moaned futilely. Matt checked the ignition. Again and again he pushed the button. The moans got weaker.

He glanced suspiciously at Abigail. *But that's absurd*, he thought. She hadn't been out of the house since he drove up. Since he had met Abbie, his thoughts had taken on a definite paranoid tinge. It was absurd to blame everything that went wrong on a little hill girl.

Before the battery wore out completely, he gave up.

"All right. I can't put you out this far from home. You'll have to sleep here tonight."

Silently she followed him into the cabin. Without a word, she helped him tack blankets to the upper bunks on each side of the cabin. They made an effective curtain around the lower beds. As they worked closely, Matt found himself uncomfortably aware of her. She had a sweet, womanly smell. He began to enjoy the accidental brushes of their bodies.

When they finished, Abbie reached down and grasped the hem of her dress to pull it over her head.

“No, no,” Matt said. “Why do you think we tacked up those blankets?” He gestured to the bunk on the left-hand wall. “Dress and undress in there.”

She let the hem of her dress fall, nodded meekly and climbed into the bunk.

Matt stared after her for a moment and released his breath. He turned and climbed into his own bunk, undressed and slipped under the blanket. He stared at the slats in the bunk above him. He had forgotten to turn out the lamps.

He rose on one elbow and heard a soft padding on the floor. The lamps went out, one by one. The padding faded to the other side of the room. Rustling sounds. Darkness and silence.

“Good night, Mr. Wright.” It was a little child’s voice in the night.

“Good night, Abbie,” he said softly. And then after a moment, firmly, “But don’t forget — back you go first thing in the morning.”

Before the silence wove a pattern of sleep, Matt heard a little sound from the other bunk. He couldn’t quite identify it. Was it a sob? A snore? Or a muffled titter?

The odor of frying bacon and eggs and boiling coffee crept into Matt’s nightmare that he was fleeing, terrified, pursued by an implacable and invisible enemy. Matt opened his eyes. The bunk was bright with diffused sunlight; the dream faded. Matt sniffed hungrily and pushed aside the blanket to look out.

All the supplies from the car had been unloaded and neatly stowed away. On a little corner table by the window was his typewriter and precious manila folders and a stack of blank white paper.

Matt dressed hurriedly in his cramped quarters. When he emerged from his cocoon, Abbie was humming happily as she set breakfast on the table. She wore a different dress this morning, a brown calico that did horrible things for her hair and coloring, but fitted better than the blue gingham. The dress revealed a slim but unsuspectingly mature figure.

How would she look, he wondered idly, in good clothes and nylons and shoes and makeup?

The thought crumbled before a fresh onslaught to his senses — the odor and sight of breakfast. The eggs were cooked perfectly, sunnyside up, the white firm but not hard. Abbie had anticipated his preferences with strange precision. At first glance, he thought that she had overestimated his appetite, but he stowed away three eggs. Abbie ate two heartily.

He pushed back his plate with a sigh and lit a cigarette. “Well,” he began. She got very quiet and stared at the floor. He took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. He felt too contented; a few hours more wouldn’t make any difference. Tonight would be time enough for her to go back. “Well,” he repeated, “I guess I’d better get to work.”

Abbie sprang to clear the table. Matt walked to the corner where the typewriter was waiting. He sat down in the chair and rolled in a sheet of paper. The table was well arranged for light; it was just about the right height. Everything considered, it was just about perfect for working.

He stared at the blank sheet of paper. He leafed through his notes. He resisted an impulse to get up and walk around. He rested his fingers lightly on the keys and after a moment lifted them, crossed one leg over the other knee, put his right elbow on the raised leg and began to finger his chin.

There was only one thing wrong: he didn't feel like working.

Finally he typed in the middle of the page:

POLTERGEIST PHENOMENA

and below that:

The Psychological Truth About Those Traditional "Uproarious Spirits"

He double-spaced and stopped.

It wasn't that Abbie was noisy; she was too quiet, with a kind of purposeful restraint that is worse than chaos. With one ear Matt listened to her hushed little sounds of dishwashing and stacking. And then silence.

Matt stood it as long as he could and turned. Abbie was seated at the rough table. She was sewing up a hole in the pocket of his other pair of work pants. Matt could almost see the aura of bliss that surrounded her.

Like a child, Matt thought, playing at domesticity. You be the papa, and I'll be the mama. And they lived happily ever after. But there was something mature about it, too, a mature and basic fulfillment. If we could all be happy with so little, Matt thought. And, It's a pity, with so small an ambition, to find its realization so elusive.

As if she felt him looking at her, Abbie glanced around and beamed. Matt turned back to his typewriter. It still wouldn't come.

Belief in the supernatural, he began hesitantly, is the attempt of the primitive mind to bring order out of chaos. It is significant, therefore, that superstition fades as an understanding of the natural workings of the physical universe grows more prevalent.

He let his hands drop. It was all wrong, like an image seen in a distorted mirror. He swung around: "Who wrecked your father's house?"

"Libby," she said.

"Libby?" Matt echoed. "Who's Libby?"

"The other me," Abbie said. "Mostly I keep her bottled up inside, but when I feel sad and unhappy, I can't keep her in. Then she gets loose and just goes wild. I can't control her."

Good God! Matt thought. *Schizophrenia!* "Where did you get an idea like that?" he asked cautiously.

"When I was born," Abbie said, "I had a twin sister, but she was born dead. Maw said I was stronger and just crowded the life right out of her. When I was bad, Maw used to shake her head and say Libby'd never have been mean or cross or naughty. So when something happened, I started sayin' Libby done it. It didn't stop a lickin', but it made me feel better."

What a thing to tell a child! Matt thought.

“Purty soon I got to believin’ it, that Libby done the bad things that I got licked for, that Libby was part of me that I had to push deep down so she couldn’t get out and get me in trouble. After I” — she blushed — “got older and funny things started happening, Libby come in real handy.”

“Can you see her?” Matt ventured.

“Course not,” Abbie said. “She ain’t real.”

“Isn’t,” Matt corrected automatically.

“Isn’t real,” Abbie said. “Things happen when I feel bad. I cain’t do anything about it. But you got to explain it somehow ... I use Libby.” Matt sighed. Abbie wasn’t so crazy — or stupid either. “You can’t control it — ever?”

“Well,” Abbie reflected, “maybe a little. Like when I felt kind of mean about that liquor you gave Paw, and I thought how nice it would be if Paw had somethin’ wet on the outside for a change.”

“How about a tire and a hubcap full of nuts?” Matt suggested.

She laughed. It was like a tinkling of little silver bells. “You did look funny.”

Matt frowned. But slowly his expression cleared and he began to chuckle. “I guess I did.”

He swung back to the typewriter before he realized that he was accepting the events of the last eighteen hours as physical facts and Abbie’s explanation as theoretically possible. Did he actually believe that Abbie could — how to express it? — move objects with some mysterious, intangible force? By wishing? Of course, he didn’t. He stared at the typewriter. Or did he?

He called up a picture of a pint bottle hanging unsupported in midair, emptying its contents over Jenkins’s head. He remembered a dish that jumped from a shelf to shatter on the floor. He thought of a hubcap that dumped its contents into the dirt when his foot was two inches away. And he saw a tire straighten up and begin to roll down a level road.

You can’t just dismiss things, he thought. In any comprehensive scheme of the universe, you must include all valid phenomena. If the accepted scheme of things cannot find a place for it, then the scheme must change.

Matt shivered. It was a disturbing thought.

The primitive mind believed that inanimate objects had spirits that must be propitiated, that could be influenced: trees and rocks, rivers and winds and rain. With a little sophistication came mythology and its personifications — nymphs and sprites, Poseidon and Aeolus; and folklore with its kobolds and poltergeists.

Sir James Frazer said something about the relationship between science and magic. Man, he said, associates ideas by similarity and by contiguity in space or time. If the association is legitimate, it is science; if illegitimate, it is magic, science’s bastard sister. But if the associations of magic are legitimate, then those of science must be illegitimate, and the two reverse their roles and the modern world is standing on its head.

Matt felt a little dizzy.

Suppose the primitive mind is wiser than we are. Suppose you can insure good luck by the proper ritual or kill your enemy by sticking a pin in a waxdoll. Suppose you can prove it.

You had to have some kind of explanation of unnatural events, the square pegs that do not fit into any of science's round holes. Even Abbie recognized that. Matt knew what the scientific explanation would be: illusion, delusion, hypnosis, anything that demanded the least possible rearrangement of accepted theory, anything that, in effect, denied the existence of the phenomenon. Matt thought about Charles Fort and his *Book of the Damned*, that strange and wonderful book that lists and documents the phenomena that science cannot explain in its own terms and which it therefore relegates to the inferno of the unacceptable.

How could you explain it? How could you explain Abbie? Did you believe in the spirits of inanimate objects that Abbie could direct when she was in the proper mood? Did you believe in poltergeists that Abbie ordered about? Did you believe in Libby, the intangible, projectable, manipulative external soul?

There had to be room for Abbie in your universe. You had to explain Abbie or your cosmology was worthless.

That man at Duke — Rhine, the parapsychologist — he had a word for it. Telekinesis. An attempt to incorporate psychic phenomena into the body of science. Perhaps — better — an attempt to alter the theoretical universe in order to fit that phenomena into it.

But it didn't explain anything.

Then Matt thought of electricity. *You don't have to explain something in order to use it. You don't have to understand it in order to control it. It helps, but it isn't essential. Understanding is a psychological necessity, not a physical one.*

Matt stared at the words he had written. Poltergeists. Why was he wasting his time? He was supposed to be a scientist, a psychologist. And he was writing a book about a phenomenon he had never seen, as if he knew something about it. He had a chance to find out the truth for himself. More important, he had stumbled on something that might set the whole world on its ear, or perhaps stand it on its feet again.

Matt turned. Abbie was sitting at the table, her mending finished, staring placidly out the open doorway into the summer sky. Matt stood up and walked toward her. She turned her head to look at him, smiling slowly. Matt turned his head, searching the room.

"Kin I get you something?" Abbie asked.

Matt looked down at her. "Here!" he said. He plucked the needle from the spool of darning thread. He forced it lightly into the rough top of the table so that the needle stood upright. "Now," he said defiantly, "make it move."

Abbie stared at him. "Why?"

"I want to see you do it," Matt said. "Isn't that enough?"

"But I don't want to. I never wanted to do it. It just happened."

"Try!"

"No, Mr. Wright," Abbie said firmly. "It never brung me nothing but misery. It scared away all my fellers and all Paw's friends. Folks don't like people who can do things like that. I don't ever want it to happen again."

"If you want to stay here," Matt said flatly, "you'll do as I say."

"Please, Mr. Wright," she begged. "Don't make me do it. It'll spoil everythin'. It's bad enough when a

person cain't help it. But it's sinnin' when you do it a-purpose — somethin' terrible will come of it."

Matt just looked at her. Her pleading eyes dropped. She bit her lip. She stared at the needle. Her smooth, young forehead tightened.

Nothing happened. The needle remained upright.

Abbie took a deep breath. "I cain't, Mr. Wright," she wailed. "I just cain't do it."

"Why not?" Matt demanded. "Why can't you do it?"

"I don't know," Abbie said. Automatically her hands began to smooth the pants laid across her lap. She looked down and blushed. "I guess it's 'cause I'm happy."

After a morning of experimentation, Matt's only half-conscious need was still unsatisfied. He had offered Abbie an assortment of objects: a spool of thread, a fountain-pen cap, a dime, a typewriter eraser, a three-by-five note card, a piece of folded paper, a bottle. The last Matt considered a stroke of genius. But tip it as he would, the bottle, like all the rest of the objects, remained stolidly unaffected.

He even got the spare tire out of the trunk and leaned it against the side of the car. Fifteen minutes later it was still leaning there.

Finally, frowning darkly, Matt took a cup from the shelf and put it down on the table. "Here," he said. "You're so good at smashing dishes, smash this."

Abbie stared at the cup hopelessly. Her face seemed old and haggard. After a moment, she seemed to collapse all at once. "I cain't," she moaned. "I cain't."

"Can't!" Matt shouted. "Can't! Are you so stupid you can't say that? Not 'cain't' — 'can't'!"

Her large blue eyes lifted to Matt's dark ones in mute appeal. They began to fill with tears. "I can't," she said. Asob came from her throat. She put her head down on her arms. Her thin shoulders began to quiver.

Moodily Matt stared at her back. Was everything that he had seen merely an illusion? Or did this phenomenon only evidence itself under certain, very rigid conditions? Did she have to be unhappy?

It was not without a certain logic. Neurotic children had played a large if undefinable part in the history of witchcraft. In one of the English trials, children had reportedly fallen into fits and vomited crooked pins. They could not pronounce such holy names as "Lord," "Jesus," or "Christ," but they could readily speak the names "Satan" or "Devil." Between the middle of the fifteenth century and the middle of the sixteenth, one hundred thousand persons had been put to death for witchcraft. How many had come to the rack or the stake or the drowning pool through the accusations of children? A child saw a hag at her door. The next moment she saw a hare run by and the woman had disappeared. On no more convincing evidence than that, the woman was accused of turning herself into a hare by witchcraft.

Why had the children done it? Suggestibility? A desire for attention? Whatever the reason, it was tainted with abnormality.

In the field of psychic phenomena as well. The investigations of the Society of Psychical Research, on which his book was to be based, were full of instances in which neurotic children or neurotic young women played a distinct if unexplainable role — especially in cases of poltergeist phenomena.

Did Abbie have to be unhappy? Matt's lips twisted. If it was true, it was hard on Abbie.

“Get your things together,” Matt said harshly. “You’re going home to your father.”

Abbie stiffened and looked up, her face tear-streaked but her eyes hot. “I ain’t.”

“You are not,” Matt corrected.

“I are not,” Abbie said fiercely. “I are not. I are not.”

Suddenly the cup was sailing toward Matt’s head. Instinctively Matt put out his right hand. The cup hit it and stuck. Matt looked at it dazedly and back at Abbie. Her hands were still in her lap. They had not moved.

“You did it!” Matt shouted. “It’s true!”

Abbie looked pleased. “Do I have to go back to Paw?”

Matt thought a moment. “Not if you’ll help me.”

Abbie’s lips tightened. “Ain’t — isn’t once enough, Mr. Wright? You know I can do it. Won’t you leave it alone now? It’s unlucky. Something awful will happen. I got a feeling.” She looked up at his implacable face. “But I’ll do it, if you want.”

“It’s important,” Matt said gently. “Now. What did you feel just before the cup moved toward me?”

“Mad.”

“No, no. I mean what did you feel physically or mentally, not emotionally.”

Abbie’s eyebrows were thick. When she concentrated, they made a straight line across the top of her nose. “Gosh, Mr. Wright, I cain’t —” She looked at him quickly. “I can’t find the words to tell about it. It’s like I wanted to pick up the nearest thing and throw it at you, and then it was like I had thrown it. Kind of a push from all of me, instead of just my hand.”

Matt frowned. He put the cup back on the table. “Try to feel exactly like that again.”

Obediently Abbie concentrated. Her face worked. Finally she sagged in her chair. “I cai — I can’t. I just don’t feel like it.”

“You’re going back to your father!” Matt snapped.

The cup rocked.

“There!” Matt said quickly. “Try it again before you forget!”

The cup spun around.

“Again!”

The cup rose an inch from the table and settled down.

Abbie sighed. “It was just a trick, wasn’t it, Mr. Wright? You aren’t really going to send me back?”

“No, but maybe you’ll wish I had before we’re through. You’ll have to work and practice until you have full, conscious control of whatever it is.”

“All right,” Abbie said submissively. “But it’s terrible tiring work when you don’t feel like it.”

“Terribly,” Matt corrected.

“Terribly,” Abbie repeated.

“Now,” Matt said. “Try it again.”

Abbie practiced until noon. Her maximum effort was to raise the cup a foot from the table, but that she could do very well.

“Where does the energy come from?” Matt muttered.

“I don’t know,” Abbie sighed, “but I’m powerful hungry.”

“Very,” Matt said.

“Very hungry,” Abbie repeated. She got up and walked to the cupboard. “How many ham sandwiches do you want, two?”

Matt nodded absently. When the sandwiches came, he ate in silence, thoughtfully.

It was true, then. Abbie could do it, and she had to be unhappy to have full power and — presumably — full control.

“Try it on the mustard,” he said.

The jar only rocked and toppled over on its side.

“I’m so full,” Abbie explained contentedly. She had eaten three sandwiches.

Matt stared at the yellow jar, unseeing. It was quite a problem.

All afternoon Matt was very kind to Abbie. He helped her dry the dishes, although she protested vigorously. He talked to her about his life and about his studies at the University of Kansas. He told her about the book and how research was part of a professor’s life.

“Psychology,” he said, “is only an infant science. It isn’t really a science at all but a metaphysics. It’s a lot of theorizing from insufficient data. The only way you can get the data is by experimentation, and you can’t experiment because psychology is people, living people. Science is a ruthless business of observation and setting up theories and then knocking them down in laboratories. Physicists can destroy everything from atoms to whole islands; biologists can destroy animals; anatomists can dissect cadavers. But psychologists have no true laboratories; they can’t be ruthless because public opinion won’t stand for it, and cadavers aren’t much good. Psychology will never be a true science until it has its laboratories where it can be just as ruthless as the physical sciences. It has to come.”

Matt stopped. Abbie was a good listener; he had forgotten he was talking to a hill girl.

“Tell me more about K.U.,” she sighed.

He tried to answer her questions about what the coeds wore when they went to classes and when they had dates and when they went to dances. Her eyes grew large and round.

“It would be romantic,” Abbie sighed. “How far do they let a fellow go if they ain’t — aren’t serious?”

He puzzled about her question for a moment. “I guess it depends on the girl.”

Abbie nodded. “But I can’t understand why they go to the university.”

“They want an education, just like the men.”

“And then what do they do?”

“Some of them got jobs.”

“They don’t get married?” Abbie exclaimed.

“Most of them — and mostly within a year of graduation if they don’t get married before.”

Abbie nodded wisely. “Oh ... they go to the university to find a fella.”

Matt chuckled. “So it’s been said. The university is a great pool of eligible bachelors — some ten, eleven thousand of them.”

“All those purty clothes. All those men. They must be awful — very slow not to get married right after they get there. Four years! They’d be twenty-one, twenty-two. Can’t they get married at home without waiting so long?”

“They meet a better class of men at the university, men who will have chances at exciting careers, men who will make more money.”

“Oh,” Abbie said. She shrugged. “That’s all right, I guess, but it’s a terrible long time to wait.”

“What do *you* want?”

“I just want to get married,” Abbie said.

“To anybody?”

“Maybe once I’d a said yes. Not now.”

“I just can’t understand why the fellows aren’t swarming around you like bees.”

“I reckon sometimes the honey’s hid too good,” Abbie said softly, “and sometimes it’s too hard to get to even when a fellow knows it’s there.”

“I can’t believe that. I reckon the fellows around here just don’t have good judgment.”

So it went. Matt paid Abbie little compliments on her appearance, and she blushed and looked pleased. He bragged expansively on the supper she cooked and swore that he had never tasted better spoon bread — and as for the peach pie! Um-m-m! (And that was true.)

Abbie had never been happier. She almost danced around at her tasks. Everything worked well for Abbie. Things cooperated. The dishes were done almost as soon as they were started.

Matt walked out on the porch. He sat down on the edge. “Come on out,” he called. Abbie settled herself beside him, quietly, not touching him, her hands in her lap.

The cabin was built on the top of a ridge. It was night, but the moon had come up big and yellow, and they could look far out over the valley. Silvery, in a dark green setting of trees, the lake glimmered far below. The day had been hot, but up here the breeze was cool.

“Ain’t — isn’t it purty?” Abbie sighed, folding her hands.

“Pretty,” Matt said automatically.

“Pretty.” Abbie sighed.

They sat in silence. Matt sensed her nearness. It stirred him. There was something intensely feminine about Abbie that was very appealing at times, in spite of her plain face and shapeless clothes and bare feet and lack of education. Even her single-minded ambition was a striving to fulfill her true, her basic function. In a way it was more vital and understandable than all the confused sublimations of the girls he had known.

Abbie, at least, knew what she wanted and what she would pay to get it. What she wanted was simple and uncomplicated, and she was willing to pay all she had. She would make someone a good wife. Her one goal would be to make her husband happy. She would cook for him and clean for him and bear his strong, healthy children with a great and thrilling joy. She would be silent when he was silent, unobtrusive when he was working, merry when he was gay, infinitely responsive when he was passionate. And the wonder of it — the transcendent wonder — was that she would be fulfilling her finest function in doing it; she would be serenely happy, blissfully content.

Matt hastily lit a cigarette. He glanced at her face by the light of the match. She was staring peacefully out over the valley.

“What is courting like here in the hills?” he asked.

“Sometimes we walk,” Abbie said dreamily, “and look at things together and talk a little. Sometimes there’s a dance at the schoolhouse. If a fella has a boat, you can go out on the lake. There’s huskin’ bees an’ church socials an’ picnics. But mostly, when the moon is ashinin’ an’ the night is warm, we just sit on a porch an’ hold hands and do whatever the girl’s willin’ to allow.”

Matt reached out and took one of her hands and held it in his. It was cool and dry and strong. It clung to his hand.

She turned her face to him, her eyes searching for his face in the darkness. “Do you like me a little bit, Mr. Wright?” she asked softly. “Not marryin’-like, but friendly-like?”

“I think,” Matt said, “that you’re the most feminine girl I’ve ever met.” (And that was true.)

Almost without volition on either part, they seemed to lean together, blending in the night. Matt’s lips sought her pale little-girl lips and found them, and they weren’t pale or little girlish at all, but warm and soft and passionate. Matt felt her lips part and her little tongue came out timidly and touched his lips. Matt broke away, breathing quickly.

Abbie half-turned to nestle against his shoulder, his arm held tightly around her. She sighed contentedly. “I reckon I wouldn’t be unwillin’,” she said, “whatever you wanted to do.”

“I can’t understand,” Matt said, “why you didn’t get married long ago.”

“I guess it was me,” Abbie said. “I wasn’t rightly satisfied with any of my fellows. I’d get mad at them for no reason at all, and then something bad would happen to them and pretty soon no one would come courtin’. Maybe I expected them to be what they wasn’t. I guess I wasn’t really in love with any of them. Anyways, I’m glad I didn’t get married up.” She sighed.

Matt felt the stirrings of something that felt oddly like compunction. *What a louse you are, Matthew Wright!*

“What happened to them — your fellows?” he asked. “Was it something you did?”

“Folks said it was,” Abbie said. There was a trace of bitterness in her voice. “They said I had the evil eye. I don’t see how. There isn’t anything wrong with my eyes, is there?” She looked up at him; her eyes were large and dark blue, with little flecks of silvery moonlight in them.

“Not a thing,” Matt said. “They’re very beautiful.” (And that was true.)

“I don’t see how it could have been any of my fault,” Abbie said. “Of course, when Hank was late that evenin’, I told him he was so slow he might as well have a broken leg. Right after that, he was nailin’ shingles on a roof, and he fell off and broke his leg. But I reckon he’d have broke it anyways. He was always right careless.

“And then Gene, he was so cold I told him he should fall in the lake and warm up. But a person who does a lot of fishin’, I guess he falls in a lot anyways.”

“I guess so,” Matt said. He began to shiver.

“You’re shivering, Mr. Wright,” Abbie said. “Let me go get your jacket.”

“Never mind,” Matt said. “It’s about time for bed anyway. You go in and get ready. Tomorrow — tomorrow we’re going to drive to Springfield for some shopping.”

“Really, Mr. Wright?” Abbie said incredulously. She got up, her eyes shining. “I haven’t never been to Springfield.”

“Really?” Matt said. “Go on in now.”

She went in. She was almost dancing.

Matt sat on the porch for a few minutes longer, thinking. It was real funny what happened to fellows that disappointed Abbie. Real funny.

When he lit a cigarette, his hand was shaking.

Abbie had a way of being many different persons. Already Matt had known four of them: the moody little girl with braids down her back shuffling along a dusty road or bouncing gleefully on a car seat; the happy, placid housewife with cheeks rosy from the stove; the unhappy vessel of strange powers, tearful and reluctant; the girl with the passionate lips in the moon-streaked darkness. Which one was Abbie, the true Abbie?

The next morning Matt had a fifth Abbie to consider. Her face was scrubbed and shining until it almost rivaled her eyes. Her braided hair was wound in a coronet around her head. She was wearing a different dress, made of a shiny blue quilted material with a red lining. Matt scanned his small knowledge of dress materials. Taffeta? The color did terrible things to her hair. The dress had a V-shape neck and back and fitted better than anything she had worn yet. On one hip was a large artificial rose. Her stockingless feet were enclosed in a pair of black, patent-leather sandals.

My God! Matt thought. *Her Sunday best! I’ll have to walk with that down the streets of Springfield.* He shuddered, and resisted the impulse to tear off that horrible rose.

“Well,” he said, “all ready?”

Abbie blushed, “Are we really going to Springfield, Mr. Wright?”

“We are,” Matt said, “if the car will start.”

“Oh, it’ll start,” Abbie said confidently.

Matt gave her a thoughtful sidelong glance. That was another thing.

After the usual hearty breakfast, with fried potatoes on the side, they got into the car. It started without hesitation.

The drive was more than fifty miles, half of it over dirt roads that were roller-coaster washboards, and they drove it in silence. Every few miles Matt would glance at Abbie out of the corner of his eye and shudder. As excited as she was, like a child, Abbie was contented to sit quietly and enjoy the ride, particularly when they swung off the dirt road onto highway 65.

When they came into Springfield, Abbie’s face was alive with wonder. She stared at the buildings as if they had sprung magically into being especially for her. Then she began to inspect the people walking along the streets. The women received her closest attention.

Suddenly Matt noticed that Abbie was very quiet. He glanced toward her. She was still, staring down at her hands resting in her lap.

“What’s the matter?” Matt asked.

“I guess,” she said, her voice a little unsteady, “I guess I look pretty funny. I guess you’ll feel ashamed having me along. If it’s all right with you, Mr. Wright, I’ll just sit in the car.”

“Nonsense,” Matt said heartily. “You look fine.” *The little devil*, he thought. *She has an uncanny talent for understanding things. She’s either unusually perceptive or — what?* “Besides, I’ll need you to try on some clothes.”

“Clothes, Mr. Wright!” She seemed to find it hard to speak. “You’re going to buy some clothes?”

Matt nodded. He parked the car in front of Springfield’s biggest department store. He came around to Abbie’s door and helped her out. For a moment Abbie’s face was level with his; her blue eyes met his dark ones in a look that Matt refused to analyze. They walked into the store, Abbie holding his arm tightly. He could feel her heart beating. Matt stopped to study the directory.

“Second floor,” he said.

Abbie held back as Matt started off. “Kin we — can we look around here — for just a second?” Abbie asked.

Matt glanced at her and shrugged. “I suppose so.”

Abbie started off determinedly toward some unseen destination, leading Matt down innumerable aisles. All the way to the back of the store they went and emerged miraculously into the kitchenware department. Abbie stopped on the threshold, gazing rapturously at the gleaming pots and pans and beaters and knives and gadgets, as if they were jewels. She dismissed with a glance the stoves and electrical appliances, but the cooking utensils brought forth long sighs. After a moment she moved among them, staring at them, touching them with one timid finger. She made little crooning sounds deep in her throat.

Matt had to drag her away.

They were almost to the stairs when Matt noticed that she was hugging something to her breast. He stopped. He stared aghast. She was holding a tiny frying pan of shiny aluminum and dully gleaming copper.

“Where did you get that?” he demanded.

“Back there,” she said innocently. “They got so many. They’ll never miss a little thing like this.”

“But you can’t do that?” Matt moaned. “That’s stealing.”

“‘Tain’t stealing when they got so much and I got so little.”

“You’ve got to take it back!” Matt made a futile grab for the frying pan. Abbie hugged it to her with both arms.

“Don’t take it away from me!” she wailed. “Please don’t make me take it back!”

Matt glanced around nervously. So far no one seemed to be watching them. He turned back to Abbie. “Sh-h-h!” he said. “Be quiet now. Please be quiet.” He looked at her pleadingly. She hugged the frying pan tighter. “All right,” he sighed. “Stay here! Don’t move! Don’t say anything!”

Quickly he walked back to kitchenwares. He caught the attention of the clerk. “How much are those?” he asked, pointing to the frying pans.

“Twenty-four-fifty, sir. Shall I wrap one up?”

“Twenty-four-fifty!”

“Yes, sir,” the man said. “We have some cheaper ones in all aluminum —”

“Never mind,” Matt said hurriedly. He pulled out his billfold. “Here. Give me a receipt and a sack.”

The clerk picked up a frying pan.

“No, no,” Matt said, “I don’t want one. I just want a receipt and a sack.”

“But, sir,” the man said bewilderedly. “You said —”

“Don’t argue with me,” Matt said. “Just give me a receipt and a sack!”

The clerk rang up the sale, tore off the receipt, dropped it in a sack and handed it to Matt with a dazed expression on his face.

“Anything else, sir?” he asked automatically.

“I hope not,” said Matt, and hurried away. When he looked back, the clerk was still staring after him.

Abbie was standing by the stairs where he had left her.

“Put the frying pan in here,” he whispered.

She gave him a look of admiration. “Oh, that was real clever of you.”

Matt mopped his forehead. “Yes, wasn’t it?” He took her arm and hurried her up the stairs. At the top Matt stopped and looked around. Abbie stared at the racks upon racks of dresses.

“I never knew,” she whispered, “there was so many dresses in the world.”

A saleswoman finally approached them. Matt drew the saleswoman to one side, leaving Abbie standing among the dresses.

“The girl over there,” he said. “I want you to take her to the beauty parlor and give her the works. Haircut, shampoo, facial, eyebrows thinned and shaped, makeup — no permanent. Then get her a new outfit from the skin out. Can you do all that?”

The saleswoman looked pleased. “This is the kind of assignment we dream about.”

Matt took out his billfold and peered into it. Slowly he extracted one traveler’s check for five hundred dollars and then another. It left him only three hundred dollars for the rest of the summer. Matt sighed and countersigned the checks. “Try to keep it under this,” he said heavily. “If you can.”

“Yes, sir,” said the saleswoman and hesitated, smiling. “Your fiancée?”

“Good God, no!” Matt said, startled. “I mean — she’s my niece. It’s her birthday.”

He walked over to Abbie, breathing heavily. “Go with this woman, Abbie. Do what she tells you.”

“Yes, Mr. Wright,” Abbie said, but her expression didn’t change. She walked away as if she were entering into fairyland.

Matt turned, chewing on the inside of his lip. He felt slightly sick.

Time passed interminably. Matt browsed along the aisles, glanced through a poor selection of books, all current, and on impulse went into the lingerie department. He regretted it almost immediately. Once he had seen a woman come into a pool hall; he must, he thought, wear the same sheepish, out-of-place expression.

He swallowed his qualms — they were a hard lump in his throat — and walked up to the counter.

“Yes, sir,” said the young woman brightly, “what can I do for you?”

Matt avoided looking at her. “I’d like to buy a *négligée*,” he said in a low voice.

“What size?”

Matt began to motion with his hands and then dropped them hastily at his sides. “About five feet tall. Slim.”

The woman led him along the counter. “Any particular color?”

“Uh — black,” Matt said hoarsely.

The clerk brought out a garment that was very black, very lacy, very sheer. “This is ninety-nine ninety-eight.”

Matt stared at it. “That’s awfully — black,” he said.

“We have some others,” the clerk began, folding the *négligée*.

“Never mind,” Matt said quickly. “Wrap it up.” Furtively he slipped the money over the counter.

When he came out, the package under his arm, he was sweating freely.

One hour. Matt went out, put the package in the back seat of the car and put another nickel in the parking meter. He browsed along the aisles some more and bought a carton of cigarettes.

Two hours. He fed the parking meter again. He sat down in a chair upholstered in red leather and tried to look as if he were trying it out for size and comfort.

Three hours. He fed the parking meter and began to feel hungry. He went back to the chair. From it he could keep an eye on the stairs.

Women went up and came down. None of them was Abbie. He wondered, with a flash of fear, if she had been caught trying to make off with something else.

Matt tried not watching the stairs on the theory that a watched pot never boils. Never again, he vowed, would he go shopping with a woman. Where the devil was Abbie?

“Mr. Wright.” The voice was tremulous and low.

Matt looked up and leaped out of his chair. The girl standing beside him was blonde and breathtaking. The hair was short and fluffed out at the ends; it framed a beautiful face. A soft, simple black dress with a low neckline clung to a small but womanly figure. Slim, long legs in sheer stockings and small black shoes with towering heels.

“Good God! Abbie! What have they done to you?”

“Don’t you like it?” Abbie asked. The lovely face clouded up.

“It’s — it’s marvelous,” Matt spluttered. “But they bleached your hair!”

Abbie beamed. “The woman who worked on it called it a ‘rinse.’ She said it was natural, but I should wash it every few days. Not with laundry soap, either.” She sighed. “I didn’t know there was so much a girl could do to her face. I’ve got so much to learn. Why, she —”

Abbie rattled on happily while Matt stared at her, incredulous. Had he been sleeping in the same small cabin with this girl? Had she been cooking his meals and darning the holes in his pockets? Had he really kissed her and held her in his arms and heard her say, “I reckon I wouldn’t be unwillin’ whatever you wanted to do”?

He wondered if he would act the same again.

Matt had expected a difference but not such a startling one. She wore her clothes with a becoming sureness. She walked on the high heels as if she had worn them all her life. She carried herself as if she were born to beauty. But then, things always worked well for Abbie.

Abbie opened a small black purse and took out five dollars and twenty-one cents. “The woman said I should give this back to you.”

Matt took it and looked at it in his hand and back at Abbie. He shrugged and smiled. “The power of money. Have you got everything?”

Under her arm she carried a large package that contained, no doubt, the clothes and shoes she had worn. Matt took it from her. She refused to give up the package that held the frying pan.

“I couldn’t wear this,” she said. She reached into her purse and pulled out something black and filmy. She held it up by one strap. “It was uncomfortable.”

Matt shot nervous glances to the right and left. "Put it away." He crammed it back into the purse and snapped the purse shut. "Are you hungry?"

"I could eat a hog," Abbie said.

Coming from the beautiful blonde creature, the incongruity set Matt to laughing. Abbie stared with wide eyes. "Did I say something wrong?" she asked plaintively.

"Nothing," Matt got out. He led her toward the door.

"You got to tell me," Abbie said appealingly. "There's so much I don't know."

Matt located the most expensive restaurant in town. It was a romantic place, with soft lights and soft recorded music and a soft-spoken waiter, but Matt had chosen it because it specialized in seafood. He wanted to be sure that Abbie had things to eat she had never tasted before.

Matt ordered for both of them: shrimp cocktail, assorted relishes, chef's salad with Roquefort dressing, broiled lobster tails with drawn butter, French-fried potatoes, broccoli with a cheese sauce, frozen éclair, coffee. The food was good, and Abbie ate everything with great wonderment, as if it were about to disappear into the mysterious place from which it had come.

She stared at the room and the decorations and the other diners and the waiter, and seemed oblivious of the fact that other men were staring admiringly at her. The waiter puzzled her. "Is this all he does?" she asked timidly. Matt nodded. "He's very good at it," Abbie conceded.

"Try to move the coffee cup," Matt said when they finished.

Abbie stared at it for a moment. "I can't," she said softly. "I tried awful — very hard, but I can't. I'd do anything you wanted, Mr. Wright, but I can't do that."

Matt smiled. "That's all right. I just wanted to see if you could."

Matt found a place they could dance. It was a cocktail lounge and had no orchestra, of course, but a jukebox played mellowly in a corner. Matt ordered a couple of drinks. Abbie sipped hers once, made a face and wouldn't touch it again.

She danced lightly and gracefully in her high-heeled shoes. They brought the top of her head level with his lips. She rested her head blissfully against his shoulder and pressed herself very close. For a moment Matt relaxed and let himself enjoy the pleasures of the after-math of a good meal and a beautiful girl in his arms. But Abbie seemed to be in a private Eden of her own, as if she had found her way by mistake into paradise and was afraid to speak for fear that the spell would break.

During the long drive home, she spoke only once. "Do people live like that all the time?"

"No," Matt said. "Not always. Not unless they have a lot of money."

Abbie nodded. "That's the way it should be," she said softly. "It should happen only a long ways apart."

When they arrived at the cabin, Matt reached into the back seat for the package he had bought.

"What's that?" Abbie asked.

"Open it," Matt said.

She held it up a little, lacy and black in the moonlight. Then she turned to look at Matt, her face

transparent, her eyes shining. “Wait out here a minute, will you?” she asked breathlessly.

“All right.” Matt lit a cigarette and stood on the porch, looking out over the valley, hating himself.

After a few minutes, he heard a little whisper. “Come in, Mr. Wright.”

He opened the door and went in and stopped, stunned. One kerosene lamp lit the room dimly. The new clothes were draped carefully over the edge of a chair. Abbie was wearing the *négligée*. That was all. Through its lacy blackness she gleamed pink and white, a lovely vision of seductiveness. She stood by the table, staring at the floor. When she looked up, her cheeks were flushed.

Suddenly she ran lightly across the floor and threw her arms around Matt’s neck and kissed him hard on the lips. Her lips moved. She drew back a little, looking up at him.

“There’s only one way a girl like me can thank a man for a day as wonderful as this,” she whispered. “For the clothes and the trip and the dinner and the dancing. And for being so nice. I never thought anything like this would ever happen to me. I don’t mind. I guess it isn’t bad when you really like someone. I like you awful — very well. I’m glad they made me pretty. If I can make you happy — just for a moment —”

Gently, feeling sick, Matt took her hands from around his neck. “You don’t understand,” he said coldly. “I’ve done a terrible thing. I don’t know how you can forgive me. Somehow you misunderstood. Those clothes, the *négligée* — they’re for another girl, the girl I’m going to marry — my fiancée. You’re about her size and I thought — I don’t know how I could have misled ...”

He stopped. It was enough. Abbie had crumpled. Slowly, as he spoke, the life had drained out of her, the glow had fled from her face, and she seemed to shrink in upon herself, cold and broken. She was a little girl, as she felt her greatest moment of joy, slapped across the face by the one she trusted most.

“That’s all right,” she said faintly. “Thanks for letting me think they was mine — that it was for me — for a little while. I’ll never forget.”

She turned and went to the bunk and let the blanket fall around her.

It was the sobbing that kept Matt from going to sleep that night. Or maybe it was because the sobs were so soft and muffled that he had to strain to hear them.

Breakfast was a miserable meal. There was something wrong with the food, although Matt couldn’t quite pin down what it was. Everything was cooked just the same, but the flavor was gone. Matt cut and chewed mechanically and tried to avoid looking at Abbie. It wasn’t difficult; she seemed very small today, and she kept her eyes on the floor.

She was dressed in the shapeless blue gingham once more. She moved her food around on her plate with her fork. Her face was scrubbed free of makeup, and everything about her was dull. Even her newly blonde hair had faded.

Several times Matt opened his mouth to apologize again and shut it without saying anything. Finally he cleared his throat and said, “Where’s your new frying pan?”

She looked up for the first time. Her blue eyes were cloudy. “I put it away,” she said lifelessly. “Do you want it back?”

“No, no,” Matt said hurriedly. “I was just asking.”

Silence fell again, like a sodden blanket. Matt sat and chain-smoked while Abbie cleaned up the table and washed the dishes.

When she finished, she turned around with her back to the dishpan. "Do you want me to move things for you? I can do it real good today."

Matt saw the little pile of packages in the corner and noticed for the first time that the new clothes were gone. He steeled himself. "How do you know?"

"I got a feeling."

"Do you mind?"

"I don't mind. I don't mind anything." She came forward and sat down in the chair. "Look!"

The table between them lifted, twisted, tilted on one leg and crashed on its side to the floor.

"How did you feel?" Matt said excitedly. "Can you control the power? Was the movement directional or accidental?"

"It felt like it was kind of a part of me," Abbie said. "Like my hand. But I didn't know exactly what it was going to do."

"Lift it," Matt said. "Set it on its feet."

The table jerked upward hesitantly. "Easy. Just a little." The table straightened, moved more steadily. "Hold it there." The table hovered motionless in the air. "Let it down now, easy. Slow." The table settled gently to the floor, like a drifting feather. It rested between them again.

"Remember the feeling you had," Matt said. "In your mind and your body. Now, lift the table just this far ..."

They practiced with the table for an hour. At the end of that time, Abbie had it under perfect control. She could raise it a fraction of an inch or rocket it to the ceiling, where it would remain, legs pointing stiffly toward the floor, until she lowered it. She balanced it on one leg and set it spinning like a top.

Distance did not seem to diminish Abbie's control or power. She could make the table perform equally well from any point in the room, from outside the cabin, or from a point to which she shuffled dispiritedly several hundred yards down the road.

"How do you know where it is and what it's doing?" Matt asked, frowning.

Abbie shrugged listlessly. "I just feel it."

"With what?" Matt asked. "Do you see it? Feel it? Sense it? If we could isolate the sense —"

"It's all of those," Abbie said, "and something more. If you don't mind now, Mr. Wright, I got a headache. I'd like to lie down."

She lay in her bunk, not moving, her face turned to the wall, but Matt knew that she wasn't asleep. When she didn't get up to fix lunch, Matt opened a can of soup and tried to get her to eat some of it.

"No, thanks, Mr. Wright," Abbie said. "I ain't hungry."

"I'm not hungry," Matt corrected.

Abbie didn't respond. In the evening she got slowly out of her bunk to fix supper, but she didn't eat more than a few mouthfuls. After she washed the dishes, she went back into her bunk and pulled the blanket around it.

Her appetite wasn't any better in the morning. She looked tired, too, as if she hadn't slept. Matt stared at her for a moment thoughtfully. He shrugged and put her to work.

In a few minutes, Abbie could duplicate her feats with the table of the day before with a control that was, if anything, even finer. Matt experimented.

"Let's isolate the source," he said. "Relax. Try to do it with the mind alone. Will the table to move?"

Matt jotted down notes. At the end of half an hour he had the following results:

Mind alone — negative.

Body alone — negative.

Emotions alone — negative.

It was crude and uncertain. It would take days or months of practice to be able to use the mind without a sympathetic tension of the body, or to stop thinking or to wall off an emotion. But Matt was fairly sure that the telekinetic ability was a complex of all three and perhaps some others that he had no way of knowing about, which Abbie couldn't describe. But if any of the primary three were inhibited, consciously or unconsciously, Abbie could not move a crumb of bread.

Two of them could be controlled. The third was a product of environment and circumstances. Abbie had to be unhappy.

A muscle twitched in Matt's jaw, and he told Abbie to try moving more than one object. He saw a cup of coffee rise in the air, turn a double somersault without spilling a drop and sit down gently in the saucer that climbed to meet it. Matt stood up, picked the cup out of the air, drank the coffee and put the cup back. The saucer did not wobble.

There were limits to Abbie's ability. The number of dissimilar objects she could manipulate seemed to be three, regardless of size; she could handle five similar objects with ease, and she had made six balls of bread do an intricate dance in the air. It was possible, of course, that she might improve with practice.

"My God!" Matt exclaimed. "You could make a fortune as a magician."

"Could I?" Abbie said without interest. She pleaded another headache and went to bed. Matt said nothing. They had worked for an hour and a half.

Matt lit a cigarette. The latent telekinetic power could explain a lot of things, poltergeist phenomena, for instance, and in a more conscious form, levitation and the Indian rope trick and the whole gamut of Oriental mysticism.

He spent the rest of the day making careful notes of everything Abbie did, the date and time, the object and its approximate weight and its movements. When he finished, he would have a complete case history — complete except for the vital parts which he did not dare put down on paper.

Several times he turned to stare at Abbie's still, small form. He was only beginning to realize the tremendous potentialities locked up within her. His awareness had an edge of fear. What role had he chosen for himself? He had been fairy godmother, but that no longer. Pygmalion? He felt a little like

Pandora must have felt before she opened the box. Or, perhaps, he thought ruefully, more like Doctor Frankenstein.

Abbie did not get up at all that day, and she refused to eat anything Matt fixed. Next morning when she climbed slowly from her bunk, Matt's apprehension sharpened.

Abbie had been thin before. Now she was gaunt, and her face had a middle-aged, haggard look. Her blonde hair was dull and lifeless and snarled. Matt had already cooked breakfast, but she only went through the motions of eating. Matt urged her, but she put her fork down tiredly.

"It don't matter," she said.

"Maybe you're sick," Matt fretted. "We'll take you to a doctor."

Abbie looked at Matt and shook her head. "What's wrong with me a doctor won't fix."

That was the morning Matt saw a can of baking powder pass through his chest. Abbie had been tossing it to Matt at various speeds, gauging the strength of the push necessary. Matt would either catch it or Abbie would stop it short and bring it back to her. But this time it came too fast, bullet-like. Involuntarily, Matt looked down, tensing his body for the impact.

He saw the can go in ...

Abbie's eyes were wide and frightened. Matt turned around dazedly, prodding his chest with trembling fingers. The can had shattered against the cabin wall behind him. It lay on the floor, battered, in a drift of powder.

"It went in," Matt said. "I saw it. But I didn't feel a thing. It passed right through me. What happened, Abbie?"

"I couldn't stop it," she whispered. "So I just sort of wished it wasn't there. For just a moment. And it wasn't."

That was how they found out that Abbie could teleport. It was as simple as telekinesis. She could project or pull objects through walls without hurting either one. Little things, big things. It made no difference. Distance made no difference either, apparently.

"What about living things?" Matt asked.

Abbie concentrated. Suddenly there was a mouse on the table, a brown field mouse with twitching whiskers and large, startled black eyes. For a moment it crouched, frozen, and then it scampered for the edge of the table, straight toward Abbie.

Abbie screamed and reacted. Twisting in the air, the mouse vanished. Matt looked up, his mouth hanging open. Abbie was three feet in the air, hovering like a hummingbird. Slowly Abbie came down to her chair.

"It works on people, too," Matt whispered. "Try it again. Try it on me."

Matt felt suddenly nauseated, as if he had unexpectedly stepped off the Earth. The room shifted around him. He looked down. He was floating in the air about two feet above the chair he had been sitting on. He was turning slowly, so that the room seemed to revolve around him.

He looked for Abbie, but she was behind him now. Slowly she drifted into view. "That's fine," he said.

Abbie looked happier than she had looked for days. She almost smiled.

Matt began to turn more rapidly. In a moment he was spinning like a top; the room flashed into a kaleidoscope. He swallowed hard. "All right!" he shouted. "That's enough."

Abruptly he stopped spinning and dropped. His stomach soared up into his throat. He thumped solidly into the chair and immediately hopped up with a howl of anguish. He rubbed himself with both hands.

"Ouch!" he shouted. And then accusingly, "You did that on purpose."

Abbie looked innocent. "I done what you said."

"All right, you did," Matt said bitterly. "From now on, I resign as a guinea pig."

Abbie folded her hands in her lap. "What shall I do?"

"Practice on yourself," Matt said.

"Yes, Mr. Wright." She rose sedately in the air. "This is wonderful." She stretched out as if she were lying in bed. She floated around the room. Matt was reminded of shows in which he had seen magicians producing the same illusion, passing hoops cleverly around their assistant's body to show that there were no wires. Only this wasn't magic, this wasn't illusion; this was real.

Abbie settled back into the chair. Her face was glowing. "I feel like I could do anything," she said. "Now what shall I try?"

Matt thought a moment. "Can you project yourself?"

"Where to?"

"Oh, anywhere," Matt said impatiently. "It doesn't matter."

"Anywhere?" she repeated. There was a distant and unreadable expression in her eyes.

And then she vanished.

Matt stared at the chair she had been in. She was gone, indisputably gone. He searched the room, a simple process. There was no sign of her. He went outside. The afternoon sun glared at him, exposing everything in a harsh light.

"Abbie!" Matt shouted. "Abbie!" He waited. He heard only the echo drifting back from the hills across the lake. For five minutes he roamed about the cabin, shouting and calling, before he gave up.

He went back into the cabin. He sat down and stared moodily at the bunk where Abbie had slept. Where was she now? Was she trapped in some extra dimension, weird and inexplicable to the senses, within which her power could not work? There had to be some such explanation for teleportation — a fourth dimensional shortcut across our three. Was Abbie dead? Perhaps that would be the most merciful thing that could have happened.

As he brooded, remorse came to him slowly, creeping in so stealthily that awareness of it was like a blow. The whole scheme had been madness. He could not understand now the insane ambition that had led to this tinkering with human lives and the structure of the universe. He had justified it to himself with the name of science. But the word had no mystic power of absolution. His motive had been something entirely different. It was only a sublimated lust for power, and thinly disguised at that. The power of knowledge. The power to topple a whole system of ideas. The power to hold the truth in his hands like a

club. And for that lust, which she could never understand, an innocent, unsophisticated girl had suffered.

Ends can never justify means, Matt realized now. They are too inextricably intertwined ever to be separated. The means inevitably shape the ends. In the long view, there are neither means nor ends, for the means are only an infinite series of ends, and the ends are an infinite series of means ...

And Abbie appeared. Like an Arabian genie, with gifts upon a tray, streaming a mouth-watering incense through the air. Full-formed, she sprang into being, her cheeks glowing, her eyes shining.

“Abbie!” Matt shouted joyfully. His heart gave a sudden bound, as if it had suddenly been released from an unbearable weight. “Where have you been?”

“Springfield.”

“Springfield!” Matt gasped. “But that’s over fifty miles.”

Abbie lowered the tray to the table. She snapped her fingers. “Like that, I was there.”

Matt’s eyes fell to the tray. It was loaded with cooked food: shrimp cocktail, broiled lobster tails, French-fried ...

Abbie smiled. “I got hungry.”

“But where —?” Matt began. “You went back to the restaurant,” he said accusingly. “You took the food from there.”

Abbie nodded happily. “I was hungry.”

“But that’s stealing,” Matt moaned. And he realized for the first time the enormity of the thing he had done, what he had let loose upon the world. Nothing was safe. Neither money nor jewels nor deadly secrets. Nothing at all.

“They won’t ever miss it,” Abbie said. “And nobody saw me.” She said it simply, as the ultimate justification.

Matt was swept by the staggering realization that where her basic drives were concerned Abbie was completely amoral. There was only one small hope. If he could keep her from realizing her civilization-shattering potentialities! They might never occur to her.

“Sure,” Matt said. “Sure.”

Abbie ate heartily, but Matt had no appetite. He sat thoughtfully, watching her eat, and he experienced a brief thankfulness that at least she wasn’t going to starve to death.

“Didn’t you have any trouble?” he asked. “Getting the food without anyone seeing you?”

Abbie nodded. “I couldn’t decide how to get into the kitchen. I could see that the cook was all alone.”

“You could see!”

“I was outside, but I could see into the kitchen, somehow. So finally I called ‘Albert!’ And the cook went out and I went in and took the food that was sitting on the tray and came back here. It was really simple, because the cook was expecting someone to call him.”

“How did you know that?”

“I thought it,” Abbie said, frowning. “Like this.”

She concentrated for a moment. He watched her, puzzled, and then he knew what she meant. Panic caught him by the throat. If she had that ability, too! There were things she shouldn't know. Because he was trying so hard to bury them deep, they scuttled across his consciousness. He half-rose in his chair.

Telepathy!

And as he watched her face, he knew that he was right.

Her eyes grew wide and incredulous. Slowly something hard and cruelly cold slipped down over her face like a mask.

Oh, Abbie! My sweet, gentle Abbie!

“You —” she gasped. “You devil! There ain't nothin' too bad for anyone who'd do that!”

I'm a dead man, Matt thought.

“You with your kindness and your handsome face and your city manners,” Abbie said pitifully. “How could you do it? You knew I liked you better'n anyone I ever saw, so you made me fall in love with you. It wasn't hard, was it? All you had to do was hold a little hill girl's hand in the moonlight and kiss her once, and she was ready to jump into bed with you. But you didn't want anything as natural as that. All the time you was laughin' and schemin'. Poor little hill girl!

“You make me think you like me so well you want me to look real purty in new clothes and new hair and a new face. But it's just a trick. All the time it's a trick. When I'm feeling happiest and most grateful, you take it all away. I'd sooner you hit me across the face. Poor little hill girl! Thinkin' you wanted her. Thinkin' maybe you were aimin' to marry her. I wanted to die. Even Paw was never that mean. He never done anything a-purpose, like you.”

White-faced, Matt watched her, his mind racing.

“You're thinking you can get around me somehow,” Abbie said, “and I'll forget. You can make me think it was all a mistake. ‘Tain't no use. You cain't, not never, because I know what you're thinking.”

What *had* he been thinking? Had he actually thought of marrying her? Just for a second? He shuddered. It would be hell. Imagine, if you can, a wife who is all-knowing, all-powerful, who can never be evaded, avoided, sighed to, lied to, shut out, shut up. Imagine a wife who can make a room a shambles in a second, who can throw a dish, a chair, a milk bottle, or a cow, and hit the bull's eye every time. Imagine a wife who can be any place, any time, in the flicker of a suspicion. Imagine a wife who can see through walls and read minds and maybe wish you a raging headache or broken leg or aching joints.

It would be worse than hell. The torments of the damned would be pleasant compared to that.

Abbie's chin came up. “You don't need to worry. I'd sooner marry up with a rattlesnake. At least he gives you warnin' before he strikes.”

“Kill me!” Matt said desperately. “Strike me dead!”

Abbie smiled sweetly. “Killin's too good for you. I don't know anything that ain't too good for you. But don't fret, I'll think of somethin'. Now go away and leave me alone.”

Thankfully Matt started to turn. Before he could complete the movement, he found himself outside the

cabin. He blinked in the light of the sinking sun. He began to shiver. After a little he sat down on the porch and lit a cigarette. There had to be some way out of this. There was always a way.

From inside the cabin came the sound of running water. *Running water!* Matt resisted an impulse to get up and investigate the mystery. "Leave me alone," Abbie had said, in a tone that Matt didn't care to challenge.

A few minutes later he heard the sound of splashing and Abbie's voice lifted in a sweet soprano. Although he couldn't understand the words, the tune sent chills down his back. And then a phrase came clear:

"Root-a-toot-toot, three times she did shoot

Right through that hardwood door.

He was her man, but he done her wrong...."

Matt began to shake. He passed a trembling hand across his sweaty forehead and wondered if he had a fever. He tried to pull himself together. He had to think clearly. The situation was obvious. He had done a fiendishly cruel thing — no matter what the excuse — and he had been caught and the power of revenge was in the hands of the one he had wronged, never more completely. The only question was: What form would the revenge take? When he knew that, he might be able to figure out a way to evade it. There was no question in his mind about waiting meekly for justice to strike.

The insurmountable difficulty was that the moment he thought of a plan it would be unworkable because Abbie would be forewarned. And she was already armed. He had to stop thinking.

How do you stop thinking? he thought miserably. *Stop thinking!* he told himself. *Stop thinking ,damn you!*

He might be on the brink of the perfect solution. But if he thought of it, it would be worthless. And if he couldn't think of it, then —

The circle was complete. He was back where he started, staring at its perfect viciousness. There was only one possi —

Mary had a little lamb with fleece as white as snow and everywhere that Mary went (Relax!) the lamb (Don't think!) was sure (Act on the spur of the moment) to go. Mary had a ...

"Well, Mr. Wright, are you ready to go?"

Matt started. Besides him were a pair of black suede shoes filled with small feet. His gaze traveled up the lovely, nylon-sheathed legs, up the clinging black dress that swelled so provocatively, to the face with its blue eyes and red lips and blonde hair.

Even in his pressing predicament, Matt had to acknowledge the impact of her beauty. It was a pity that her other gifts were so terrible. "I reckon your fiancée won't mind," Abbie said sweetly. "Being as you ain't got a fiancée. Are you ready?"

"Ready?" Matt looked down at his soiled work clothes. "For what?"

"You're ready," Abbie said.

Awave of dizziness swept him followed by a wave of nausea. Matt shut his eyes. The sensations

receded. When he opened his eyes again, he had a frightening sensation of disorientation. Then he recognized his surroundings. He was on the dance floor in Springfield. Abbie came into his arms. “All right,” she said. “Dance!”

Shocked, Matt began to dance, mechanically. People were staring at them as if they had dropped through a hole in the ceiling. Matt wasn't sure they hadn't. Only two other couples were on the small floor, but they had stopped dancing and were looking puzzled. As Matt swung Abbie slowly around, he saw that the sprinkling of customers at the bar had turned to stare, too. A waiter in a white jacket was coming toward them, frowning determinedly.

Abbie seemed as unconcerned about the commotion she had caused as the rainbow-hued jukebox in the corner. It thumped away just below Matt's conscious level of recognition. Abbie danced lightly in his arms.

The waiter tapped Matt on the shoulder. Matt sighed with relief and stopped dancing. Immediately he found himself moving jerkily around the floor like a puppet or a paretic. Abbie, he gathered, did not care to stop.

The waiter followed doggedly. “Stop that!” he said bewilderedly. “I don't know where you came from or what you think you're doing, but you can't do it here and you can't do it dressed like that.”

“I — I c-can-n't s-st-stop-p!” Matt said jerkily.

“Sure you can,” the waiter said soothingly. He plodded along after them. “There's lots of things a man can't do, but he can always stop whatever you're doing. I should think you'd be glad to stop.”

“I-I-I — w-would,” Matt got out. “S-st-stop-p!” he whispered to Abbie.

“Tell the man to go 'way,” Abbie whispered back.

Matt decided to start dancing again. It was easier than being shaken to pieces. “I think you'd better go away,” he said to the waiter.

“Go away?” the waiter said. “You're the one who's going to go. Come along, now ...”

Matt felt Abbie stiffen. “Please,” he told the waiter frantically, “please go away.”

“We don't like to use force,” the waiter said, frowning, “but we have to keep up a standard. Come along quietly” — he jerked on Matt's arm — “or —”

The grip on Matt's arm suddenly was gone. The waiter vanished. Matt looked around wildly.

The jukebox had a new decoration. Dazed, opaque-eyed, the waiter squatted on top of the box, his white jacket and whiter face a dark fool's motley in the swirling lights.

Abbie pressed herself close. Matt shuddered and swung her slowly around the floor. On the next turn, he saw that the waiter had climbed down from his perch. He had recruited reinforcements. Grim-faced and silent, the waiter approached, followed by another waiter, a lantern-jawed bartender, and an ugly bulldog of a man in street clothes. The manager, Matt guessed.

They formed a menacing ring around Matt and Abbie.

“Whatever your game is,” growled the bulldog, “we don't want to play. If you don't leave damn quick, you're going to wish you had.”

Matt, looking at him, believed it. He tried to stop. Again his limbs began to jerk uncontrollably.

“I-I c-can-n’t,” he said. “D-d-don’t-t y-you th-think I-I w-would if I-I c-could?”

The manager stared at him with large, awed, bloodshot eyes. “Yeah,” he said. “I guess you would.” He shook himself. His jowls wobbled. “Okay, boys. Let’s get rid of them.”

“Watch yourself,” said the first waiter uneasily. “One of them has a trick throw.”

They closed in. Matt felt Abbie stiffen against him.

They vanished, one after the other, like candles being snuffed. Matt glanced unhappily at the jukebox. There they were on top of the box, stacked in each other’s laps like a totem pole. The pile teetered and collapsed in all directions. Dull thuds made themselves heard even above the jukebox.

Matt saw them get up, puzzled and wary. The bartender was rubbing his nose. He doubled his fists and started to rush out on the floor. The manager, a wiler sort, grabbed his arm. The four of them went into consultation. Every few seconds one of them would raise his head and stare at Matt and Abbie. Finally the first waiter detached himself from the group and with an air of finality reached behind the jukebox. Abruptly the music stopped; the colored lights went out. Silence fell. The four of them turned triumphantly toward the floor.

Just as abruptly, the lights went back on; the music boomed out again. They jumped.

Defiantly the manager stepped to the wall and pulled the plug from the socket. He turned, still holding the cord. It stirred in his hand. The manager looked down at it incredulously. It wriggled. He dropped it hurriedly, with revulsion. The plug rose cobra-like from its coils and began a slow, deadly, weaving dance. The manager stared, hypnotized with disbelief.

The cord struck. The manager leaped back. The bared metal fangs bit into the floor. They retreated, all four of them, watching with wide eyes. Contemptuously the cord turned its back on them, wriggled its way to the socket, and plugged itself in.

The music returned. Matt danced on with leaden legs. He could not stop. He would never stop. He thought of the fairy tale about the red shoes. Abbie seemed as fresh and determined as ever. As the jukebox came into sight again, Matt noticed some commotion around it. The bartender was approaching the manager with an axe, a glittering fee axe. For one whirling moment, Matt thought the whole world had gone mad. Then he saw the manager take the axe and approach the jukebox cautiously, the axe poised in one hand ready to strike.

He brought it down smartly. The cord squirmed its coils out of the way. The manager wrenched the axe from the floor. Bravely he advanced closer. He looked down and screamed. The cord had a loop around one leg; the loop was tightening. Frantically the manager swung again and again. One stroke hit the cord squarely. It parted. The music stopped. The box went dark. The headless cord squirmed in dying agonies.

Abbie stopped dancing. Matt stood still, his legs trembling, sighing with relief.

“Let’s go, Abbie,” he pleaded. “Let’s go quick.”

She shook her head. “Let’s sit.” She led him to a table which, like the rest of the room, had been suddenly vacated of patrons. “I reckon you’d like a drink.”

“I’d rather leave,” Matt muttered.

They sat down. Imperiously Abbie beckoned at the waiter. He came toward the table cautiously. Abbie looked inquiringly at Matt.

“Scotch,” Matt said helplessly. “Straight.”

In a moment the waiter was back with a bottle and two glasses on a tray. “The boss said to get the money first,” he said timidly.

Matt searched his pockets futilely. He looked at the manager, standing against one wall, glowering, his arms folded across his chest. “I haven’t any money on me,” Matt said.

“That’s all right,” Abbie said. “Just set the things down.”

“No, ma’am,” the waiter began, and his eyes rolled as the tray floated out of his hand and settled to the table. He stopped talking, shut his mouth and backed away.

Abbie was brooding, her chin in one small hand. “I ain’t been a good daughter,” she said. “Paw would like it here.”

“No, no,” Matt said. “Don’t do that. We’ve got enough trouble —”

Jenkins was sitting in the third chair, blinking slowly, reeking of alcohol. Hastily Matt reached for the bottle and sloshed some into a glass. He raised it to his lips and tossed it off. The liquor burned his throat for a moment and then was gone. Matt waited expectantly as he lowered the glass to the table. He felt nothing, nothing at all. He looked suspiciously at the glass. It was still full.

Jenkins focused his eyes. “Ab!” he said. He seemed to cringe in his chair. “What you doin’ here? You look different. All fixed up. Find a feller with money?”

Abbie ignored his questions. “If I ask you to do somethin’, Paw, would you do it?”

“Sure, Ab,” Jenkins said. His eyes lit on the bottle of bourbon. “Anything.” He raised the bottle to his lips. It gurgled pleasantly and went on gurgling.

Matt watched the level of amber liquid drop in the bottle, but when Jenkins put it down and wiped his bearded lips with one large, hairy hand, the bottle was half-empty and stayed that way. Jenkins sighed heavily. Matt raised his glass again and tilted it to his lips. When he lowered it, the glass was still full and Matt was still empty. He stared moodily at the glass.

“If I asked you to hit Mr. Wright in the nose,” Abbie went on, “I reckon you’d do it?”

Matt tensed himself.

“Sure, Ab, sure,” Jenkins said. He turned his massive head slowly. He doubled his fist. The expression behind the beard was unreadable. Matt decided it was better that way. “Ain’t you been treatin’ mah little gal right?” Jenkins demanded. “Say, son,” he said with concern, “you don’t look so good.” He looked back at Abbie. “Want I should hit him?”

“Not now,” Abbie said. “But keep it in mind.”

Matt relaxed and seized the opportunity to dash the glass to his mouth. Futilely. Not a drop of liquor reached his stomach. Hopelessly Matt thought of Tantalus.

“Police!” Jenkins bellowed suddenly, rising up with the neck of the bottle in one huge hand.

Matt looked. The bartender was leading three policemen into the front of the room. The officers advanced stolidly, confident of their ultimate strength and authority. Matt turned quickly to Abbie.

“No tricks,” he pleaded. “Not with the law.”

Abbie yawned. “I’m tired. I reckon it’s almost midnight.”

Jenkins charged, bull-like, bellowing with rage. And the room vanished.

Matt blinked, sickened. They were back in the cabin, Abbie and he. “What about your father?” Matt asked.

“Next to liquor,” Abbie said, “Paw likes a fight best. I’m going to bed now. I’m real tired.”

She left her shoes on the floor, climbed into her bunk, and pulled the blanket around it.

Matt walked slowly to his bunk. *Mary had a little lamb* . He sat down on it and pulled off his shoes, letting them thump to the floor. *With fleece as white as snow* . He pulled the blanket around his bunk and made rustling sounds, but he lay down without removing his clothes. *And everywhere that Mary went* . He lay stiffly, listening to the immediate sounds of deep breathing coming from the other bunk. *The lamb was sure to go* ...

Two tortured hours crawled by. Matt sat up cautiously. He picked up his shoes from the floor. He straightened. Slowly he tiptoed toward the door. Inch by inch, listening to Abbie’s steady breathing, until he was at the door. He slipped it open, only a foot. He squeezed through and drew it shut behind him.

A porch board creaked. Matt froze. He waited. There was no sound from inside. He crept over the pebbles of the driveway, suppressing exclamations of pain. But he did not dare stop to put on his shoes.

He was beside the car. He eased the door open and slipped into the seat. Blessing the steep driveway, he released the brake and pushed in the clutch. The car began to roll. Slowly at first, then picking up speed, the car turned out of the driveway into the road.

Ghostlike in the brilliant moon, it sped silently down the long hill. After one harrowing, tree-darkened turn, Matt switched on the lights and gently clicked the door to its first catch.

When he was a mile away, he started the motor.

Escape!

Matt pulled up to the gas pump in the gray dawn that was already sticky with heat. Through the dusty, bug-splattered windshield the bloodshot sun peered at him and saw a dark young man in stained work clothes, his cheeks and chin stubbled black, his eyes burning wearily. But Matt breathed deep; he drew in the wine of freedom.

Was this Fair Play or Humansville? Matt was too tired and too hungry to remember. Whichever it was, all was well.

It seemed a reasonable assumption that Abbie could not find him if she did not know where he was, that she could not teleport herself anywhere she had not already been. When she had disappeared the first time, she had gone to the places in Springfield she knew. She had brought her father from his two-room shanty. She had taken Matt back to the cabin.

The sleepy attendant approached, and with him came a wash of apprehension to knot his stomach.

Money! He had no money. Hopelessly he began to search his pockets. Without money he was stuck here, and all his money was back in his cabin with his clothes and his typewriter and his manila folder of notes.

And then his hand touched something in his hip pocket. Wonderingly he pulled it out. It was his billfold. He peered at its contents. Four dollars in bills and three hundred in traveler's checks. "Fill it up," he said.

When had he picked up the billfold? Or had he had it all the time? He could have sworn that he had not had it when he was in the cocktail lounge in Springfield. He was almost sure that he had left it in his suit pants. The uncertainty made him uneasy. Or was it only hunger? He hadn't eaten since toying with Abbie's stolen delicacies yesterday afternoon.

"Where's a good place to eat?" he asked as the attendant handed him change.

It was an old fellow in coveralls. He pointed a few hundred feet up the road. "See those trucks parked outside that diner?" Matt nodded. "Usual thing, when you see them outside, you can depend on good food inside. Here it don't mean a thing. Food's lousy. We got a landmark though. Truckers stop to see it." The old fellow cackled. "Name's Lola."

As Matt pulled away, the old man called after him. "Don't make no difference, anyway. No place else open."

Matt parked beside one of the large trailer trucks. Lola? He made a wry face as he got out of the car. He was through with women.

The diner, built in the shape of a railroad car, had a long counter running along one side, but it was filled with truckers in shirt sleeves, big men drinking coffee and smoking and teasing the waitress. Tiredly Matt slipped into one of the empty booths.

The waitress detached herself from her admirers reluctantly and came to the booth with a glass of water in one hand, swinging her hips confidently. She had a smoldering, dark beauty, and she was well aware of it. Her black hair was cut short, and her brown eyes and tanned face were smiling. Her skirt and low-cut peasant blouse bulged generously in the right places. Sometime — and not too many years in the future — she would bulge too much, but right now she was lush, ready to be picked by the right hand. Matt guessed that she would not be a waitress in a small town long. As she put the water on the table, she bent low to demonstrate just how lush she was.

"What'll you have?" the waitress said softly.

Matt swallowed. "A couple of — hotcakes," he said, "with sausages."

She straightened up slowly, smiling brightly at him. "Stack a pair," she yelled, "with links." She turned around and looked enticingly over her shoulder. "Coffee?"

Matt nodded. He smiled a little to show that he appreciated her attentions. There was no doubt about the fact that she was an attractive girl. In anyone's mind. Any other time . . .

"Ouch!" she said suddenly and jerked. She rubbed her rounded bottom vigorously and cast Matt a hurt, reproachful glance. Slowly her pained expression changed to a roguish smile. She wagged a finger at Matt. "Naughty, naughty!" the finger said. Matt stared at her as if she had lost her senses. He shook his head in bewilderment as she vanished behind the counter. And then he noticed that a couple of the truckers had turned around to glower at him, and Matt became absorbed in contemplating the glass of water.

It made him realize how thirsty he was. He drank the whole glassful, but it didn't seem to help much. He was just as thirsty, just as empty.

Before he put down the glass Lola was back with his cup of coffee. She carried it casually and efficiently in one hand, not spilling a drop into the saucer. But as she neared Matt, the inexplicable happened. She tripped over something invisible on the smooth floor. She stumbled. The coffee flew in a steaming arc and splashed on Matt's shirt as if it had been thrown deliberately.

Lola gasped, her hand to her mouth. Matt leaped up, pulling his shirt away from his chest, swearing. Lola grabbed a handful of paper napkins and began to dab at his shirt.

"Golly, honey, I'm sorry," she said warmly. "I can't understand how I came to trip."

She pressed herself close to him. Matt could smell the odor of gardenias.

"That's all right," he said, drawing back. "It was an accident. It's beginning to cool already."

She followed him, working at his shirt. Matt noticed the truckers all watching, some darkly, the rest enviously. He slipped back into the booth.

One of the truckers guffawed. "You don't have to spill coffee on me, Lola, to make me steam," he said. The rest of the truckers laughed with him.

"Oh, shut up!" Lola told them. She turned back to Matt. "You all right, honey?"

"Sure, sure," Matt said wearily. "Just bring me the hotcakes." The coffee had cooled now. His shirt felt clammy. Matt thought about acci-dent prones. It had to be an accident. He glanced uneasily around the diner. The only girl here was Lola.

The hotcakes were ready. She was bringing them toward the booth, but it was not a simple process. Matt had never seen slippery hotcakes before, but these were definitely slippery. Lola was so busy that she forgot to swing her hips.

The hotcakes slithered from side to side on the plate. Lola juggled them, tilting the plate back and forth to keep them from sliding off. Her eyes were wide with astonishment; her mouth was a round, red O; her forehead was furrowed with concentration. She did an intricate, unconscious dance step to keep from losing the top hotcake.

As Matt watched, fascinated, the sausages, four of them linked together, started to slip from the plate. With something approaching sentience, they skidded off and disappeared down the low neck of Lola's blouse.

Lola shrieked. She started to wriggle, her shoulders hunched. While she tried to balance the hotcakes with one hand, the other dived into the blouse and hunted around frantically. Matt watched; the truckers watched. Lola hunted and wiggled. The hand that held the plate flew up. The hotcakes scattered.

One hit the nearest trucker in the face. He peeled it off, red and bellowing. "Who's the joker?" He dived off the stool toward Matt.

Matt tried to get up, but the table caught him in the stomach. He climbed up on the seat. The hotcake the trucker had discarded landed on the head of the man next to him. He stood up angrily.

Lola finally located the elusive sausages. She drew them out of their intimate hiding place with a shout of triumph. They whipped into the open mouth of the lunging trucker. He stopped, transfixed, strangling.

“Argh-gh-uggle!” he said.

Acup crashed against the wall close to Matt’s head. Matt ducked. If he could get over the back of this booth, he could reach the door. The place was filled with angry shouts and angrier faces and bulky shoulders approaching. Lola took one frightened look and grabbed Matt around the knees.

“Protect me!” she said wildly.

The air was filled with missiles. Matt reached down to disengage Lola’s fear-strengthened arms. He glanced up to see the trucker spitting out the last of the sausages. With a maddened yell, the trucker threw a heavy fist at Matt. Hampered as he was, Matt threw himself back hopelessly. Something ripped. The fist breezed past and crashed through a window.

Matt hung over the back of the booth, head downward, unable to get back up, unable to shake Lola loose. Everywhere he looked he could see raging faces. He closed his eyes in surrender.

From somewhere, above the tumult, came the sound of laughter, like the tinkling of little silver bells.

Then Matt was outside with no idea of how he had got there. In his hand was a strip of thin fabric. Lola’s blouse. Poor Lola, he thought, as he threw it away. What was his fatal fascination for girls?

Behind him the diner was alive with lights and the crash of dishes and the smacking of fists on flesh. Before long they would discover that he was gone.

Matt ran to his car. It started to life when he punched the button. He backed it up, screeched it to a stop, jerked into first and barreled onto the highway. Within twenty seconds he was doing sixty.

He turned to look back at the diner and almost lost control of the car as he tried to absorb the implications of the contents of the back seat.

Resting neatly there were his typewriter, his notes and all his clothes.

When Matt pulled to a stop on the streets of Clinton, he was feeling easier mentally and much worse physically. The dip in a secluded stream near the road, the change of clothes, and the shave — torturing in the cold water — had refreshed him for a while. But that had worn off, and the lack of a night’s sleep and twenty-four hours without food were catching up with him.

Better that, he thought grimly, than Abbie. He could endure anything for a time.

As for the typewriter and the notes and the clothes, there was probably some simple explanation. The one Matt liked best was that Abbie had had a change of heart; she had expected him to leave and she had made his way easy. She was, Matt thought, a kindhearted child underneath everything.

The trouble with that explanation was that Matt didn’t believe it.

He shrugged. There were more pressing things — money, for instance. Gas was getting low, and he needed to get something in his stomach if he was to keep up his strength for the long drive ahead. He had to cash one of his checks. That seemed simple enough. The bank was at the corner of this block. It was eleven o’clock. The bank would be open. They would cash a check.

But for some reason Matt felt uneasy.

Matt walked into the bank and went directly to a window. He countersigned one of the checks and presented it to the teller, a thin little man with a wispy mustache and a bald spot on top of his head. The

teller compared the signatures and turned to the shelf at his side where bills stood in piles, some still wrapped. He counted out four twenties, a ten, a five and five ones.

“Here you are, sir,” he said politely.

Matt accepted it only because his hand was outstretched and the teller put the money in it. His eyes were fixed in horror upon a wrapped bundle of twenty-dollar bills which was slowly rising from the shelf. It climbed leisurely over the top of the cage.

“What’s the matter, sir?” the teller asked in alarm. “Do you feel sick?”

Matt nodded once and then tore his eyes away and shook his head vigorously. “No,” he gasped. “I’m all right.” He took a step back from the window.

“Are you sure? You don’t look well at all.”

With a shrinking sensation, Matt felt something fumble its way into his right-hand coat pocket. He plunged his hand in after it. His empty stomach revolved in his abdomen. He could not mistake the touch of crisp paper. He stooped quickly beneath the teller’s window. The teller leaned out. Matt straightened up, the package of bills in his hand.

“I guess you must have dropped this,” he muttered. The teller glanced at the shelf and back at the sheaf of twenties. “I don’t see how — but thank you! That’s the funniest —”

Matt put the bills in the slot under the grillwork. “Yes, isn’t it?” he agreed. “Well, thank you.”

“Thank you!”

Matt lifted his hand. The money lifted with it. The package stuck to his hand as if it had been attached with glue.

“Excuse me,” he said feebly. “I can’t seem to get rid of this money.” He shook his hand. The money clung stubbornly. He shook his hand again, violently. The package of bills did not budge.

“Very funny,” the teller said, but he was not smiling. From his tone of voice, Matt suspected that he thought money was a very serious business indeed. The teller reached under the bars and caught hold of one end of the package. “You can let go now,” he said. “Let go!”

Matt tried to pull his hand away. “I can’t,” he said, breathing heavily.

The teller tugged, Matt tugged. “I haven’t time to play games,” the teller panted. “Let go!”

“I don’t want it,” Matt said frantically. “But it seems to be stuck. Look!” He showed his hand, fingers spread wide.

The teller grabbed the bundle of bills with both hands and braced his feet against the front of his cubicle. “Let go!” he shouted.

Matt pulled hard. Suddenly the tension on his arm vanished. His arm whipped back. The teller disappeared into the bottom of the cubicle. Something clanged hollowly. Matt looked at his hand. The bills were gone.

Slowly the teller’s head appeared from the concealed part of the cubicle. It came up, accompanied by groans, with a red swelling in the middle of the bald spot. After it came the teller’s hand, waving the package of twenties triumphantly. The other hand was rubbing his head.

“Are you still here?” he demanded, slamming the bills down at his side. “Get out of this bank. And if you ever come back, I’ll have you arrested for — for disturbing the peace.”

“Don’t worry,” Matt said. “I won’t be back.” His face suddenly grew pale. “Stop!” he said frantically, waving his arms. “Go back!”

The teller stared at him fearfully, indecisively.

The bundle of twenties was rising over the top of the cage again. Instinctively Matt grabbed them out of the air. His mind worked rapidly. If he was to keep out of jail, there was only one thing to do. He advanced on the teller angrily, waving the bills in the air. “What do you mean by throwing these at me!”

“Throwing money?” the teller said weakly. “Me?”

Matt shook the bills in front of the teller’s nose. “What do you call this?”

The clerk glanced at the money and down at his side. “Oh, no!” he moaned.

“I have a good mind,” Matt said violently, “to complain to the president of this bank.” He slammed the bills down. He closed his eyes in a silent prayer. “Tellers throwing money around!”

He took his hand away. Blissfully the money stayed where it was on the counter. The teller reached for it feebly. The package shifted. He reached again. The bills slid away. He stuck both hands through the slot and groped wildly. The money slipped between his arms into the cage.

Matt stood shifting his weight from foot to foot, paralyzed between flight and fascination. The bundle winged its way around in the cage like a drunken butterfly. Wide-eyed and frantic, the teller chased it from side to side. He made great diving swoops for it, his hands cupped into a net. He crept up on it and pounced, catlike, only to have it slip between his fingers at the last moment. Suddenly he stopped, frozen. His hands flew to his head.

“My God!” he screamed. “What am I doing? I’ve gone mad!”

He reached into the piles of money on the shelf and scooped up huge handfuls. He tossed them into the air with the frenzied expression of a bacchant. The bank became filled with a green, drifting snow. “Money money money money money . . .”

Matt backed toward the door. The other clerks and tellers were running toward the center of the disturbance. Matt saw a dignified gentleman with a paunch stand up inside a railed-in office and hurdle the obstacle with fine form.

Matt turned and ran, dodging the guard at the gate. “Get the doctor!” he yelled.

From somewhere came the sound of laughter, like the tinkling of little silver bells.

There was no doubt in Matt’s mind as he gunned his car out of Clinton. Abbie was after him. He had not been free a moment. All the time she had known where to find him. He was the fleeing mouse, happy in his illusion of freedom — until the cat’s paw comes down on his back. Matt thought of the Furies — awful Alecto, Tisiphone, Megaera — in their bloodstained robes and serpent hair pursuing him across the world with their terrible whips. But they all had Abbie’s face.

Matt drove north toward Kansas City, thirsty, starving, half-dead from fatigue, wondering hopelessly where it would end.

Darkening shades of violet were creeping up the eastern sky as Matt reached Lawrence, Kansas. He had not tried to stop in Kansas City. Something had drawn him on, some buried hope that still survived feebly, and when, five miles from Lawrence, he had seen Mount Oread rise against the sunset, the white spires and red tile roofs of the university gleaming like beacons, he had known what it was.

Here was a citadel of knowledge, a fortress of the world's truth against black waves of ignorance and superstition. Here, in this saner atmosphere of study and reflection, logic and cool consideration, here, if anywhere, he could shake off this dark conviction of doom that sapped his will. Here, surely, he could think more clearly, act more decisively, rid himself of this demon of vengeance that rode his shoulders. Here he could get help.

He drove down Massachusetts Street, his body leaden with fatigue, his eyes red-rimmed and shadowed, searching restlessly from side to side. His hunger was only a dull ache; he could almost forget it. But his thirst was a live thing. Somewhere — he could not remember where — he had eaten and drunk, but they had vanished from his throat as he swallowed.

Is there no end? he thought wildly. *Is there no way out?* There was, of course. There always is. Always — *Mary had a little lamb ...*

Impulse swung his car into the diagonal parking space. First he was going to drink and eat. Come what may. He walked into the restaurant. Summer students filled the room, young men in sport shirts and slacks, girls in bright cotton prints and flat shoes, laughing, talking, eating.

Swaying in the doorway, Matt watched them, bleary-eyed, *Once I was like them*, he thought dully. *Young and alive and conscious that these were the best years I would ever know. Now I am old and used up, doomed.*

He slumped down at a table near the front, filled with a great surge of sorrow that all happiness was behind him. He was conscious that the waitress was beside him. "Soup," he mumbled. "Soup and milk." He did not look up.

"Yes, sir," she said. Her voice sounded vaguely familiar, but they are all the same, all the voices of youth. He had eaten here before. He did not look up.

Slowly he raised the glass of water to his lips. It went down his throat in dusty gulps. It spread out in his stomach in cool, blessed waves. Matt closed his eyes thankfully. The hunger pains began to return. For a moment Matt regretted the soup and wished he had ordered steak.

After the soup, he thought.

The soup came. Matt lifted a spoonful. He let it trickle down his throat.

"Feelin' better, Mr. Wright?" said the waitress.

Matt looked up. He strangled. It was Abbie! Abbie's face bending over him! Matt choked and spluttered. Students turned to stare. Matt gazed around the room wildly. The girls — they all looked like Abbie! He stood up, almost knocking over the table. He ran to the front door.

With his hand on the doorknob, he stopped, paralyzed. Staring in at him, through the glass, was a pair of bloodshot eyes set above an unruly black nest. Stooped, powerful shoulders loomed behind the face. As Matt stared back, the eyes lighted up as if they recognized him.

"Argh-gh!" Matt screamed.

He staggered back and turned on trembling legs. He tottered toward the back of the restaurant. The aisle seemed full of feet put out to trip him. He stumbled to the swinging kitchen door and broke through into odors of frying and baking that no longer moved him.

The cook looked up, startled. Matt ran on through the kitchen and plunged through the back door. The alley was dark. Matt barked his shins on a box. He limped on, cursing. At one end of the alley a street light spread a pool of welcome. Matt ran toward it. He was panting. His heart beat fast. Then it almost stopped. A shadow lay along the mouth of the alley. A long shadow with huge shoulders and something that waved from the chin.

Matt spun. He ran frantically toward the other end of the alley. His mind raced like an engine that has broken its governor. Nightmarish terror streaked through his arms and legs; they seemed distant and leaden. The other end approached slowly. He came nearer. Nearer.

A shadow detached itself from the dark black walls. But it was no shadow. Matt slowed, stopped. The shadow came closer, towering tall above him. Matt cowered, unable to move. Closer. Two long arms reached out toward him. Matt quivered. He waited for the end. The arms wrapped around him. They drew him close.

“Son, son,” Jenkins said weakly. “Yore the first familiar face I seen all day.”

Matt’s heart started beating again. He drew back, extracting his face from Jenkins’s redolent beard.

“Cain’t understand what’s goin’ on these days,” Jenkins said, shaking his head sadly, “but I got a feelin’ Ab’s behint it. Just as that fight got goin’ good, the whole shebang disappeared and here I was. Where am I, son?”

“Kansas,” Matt said. “Lawrence, Kansas.”

“Kansas?” Jenkins wobbled his beard. “Last I heard, Kansas was dry, but it cain’t be half as dry as I am. I recollect hearin’ Quantrill burned this town. Too bad it didn’t stay burnt. Here I was without a penny in my pocket and only what was left in the bottle I had in my hand to keep me from dyin’ of thirst. Son,” he said sorrowfully, “something’s got to be did. It’s Ab, ain’t it?”

Matt nodded.

“Son,” Jenkins went on, “I’m gettin’ too old for this kind of life. I should be settin’ on my porch with a jug in my lap, just a-rockin’ slow. Somethin’s got to be did about that gal.”

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that,” Matt said.

“That’s the trouble,” Jenkins said mournfully. “Been too late these six years. Son, yore an edicated man. What we gonna do?”

“I can’t tell you, Jenkins,” Matt said. “I can’t even think about it.” *Mary had a little lamb* ”If I did, it wouldn’t work. But if you want to hit me, go ahead. I’m the man who’s responsible.”

Jenkins put a large hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, son. If it weren’t you, it would’ve been some other man. When Ab gets a notion, you cain’t beat it out of her, and there ain’t no man alive can make her happy. When she’s riled, she’s worse’n all the witches in Tophet.”

Matt pulled out his billfold and handed Jenkins a ten-dollar bill. “Here. Kansas isn’t dry any more. Go get something and try to forget. Maybe when you’re finished with that, things will have changed.”

“Yore a good boy, son. Don’t do nothin’ rash.”

Mary had a little lamb ...

Jenkins turned, raising his hand in a parting salute. Matt watched the mountainous shadow dwindle, as if it was his last contact with the living. Then Jenkins rounded the corner and was out of sight.

Matt walked slowly back to Massachusetts Street. There was one more thing he had to do.

As he reached the car, Matt sensed Abbie’s nearness. The awareness was so sharp that it was almost physical. He felt her all around, like dancing motes of dust that are only visible under certain conditions, half-angel, half-devil, half-love, half-hate. It was an unendurable mixture, an impossible combination to live with. The extremes were too great.

Matt sighed. It was not Abbie’s fault. Science had got him into this — science and the pursuit of knowledge. But science has no power over a woman. It can liberate but it cannot understand. Abbie had become a woman with the powers of a goddess. Not that she wanted them. All she ever wanted was a husband. But he had forced them on her. It was his fault. Inevitably he would pay for it. The universe has an immutable law of action and reaction.

It was dark as Matt drove along Seventh Street. The night was warm, and the infrequent street lights were only beacons for night-flying insects. Matt turned a corner and pulled up in front of a big old house surrounded by an ornamental iron fence. The house was two-story stucco, painted yellow — or perhaps it had once been white — and the fence sagged in places.

Matt rang the bell. In a moment the door opened. Blinking out of the light was Professor Franklin, the chairman of his department.

“Matt!” Franklin said. “I didn’t recognize you for a second. What are you doing back so soon? I thought you were secluded in the Ozarks. Don’t tell me you have your book finished already?”

“No, Doctor Franklin,” Matt said wearily, “but I’d like to talk to you for a moment if you can spare the time.”

“Come in, come in. I’m just grading some papers.” Franklin grimaced. “Freshman papers. There always are freshman papers.”

Franklin led the way into his book-cluttered study off the living room. His glasses were resting on top of a pile of papers. He picked up his glasses, slipped them on, and turned to Matt. He was a tall man, a little stooped now in his sixties, with gray, unruly hair.

“Matt!” he exclaimed. “You aren’t looking well. Have you been sick?”

“In a way,” Matt said. “You could call it that. The question is: What is the cure? How would you treat someone who believes in the reality of psychic phenomena?”

Franklin shrugged. “Lots of people believe in it and are still worthwhile, reliable members of society. Conan Doyle, for instance —”

“And could prove it,” Matt added.

“Hallucinations? Then it becomes more serious. I suppose psychiatric treatment would be necessary. Remember, Matt, I’m a teacher, not a practitioner. But you aren’t suggesting that —?”

Matt nodded. "I can prove it, and I don't want to. Would it make the world any better, any happier?"

"The truth is always important — for itself if for nothing else. But you can't be serious —"

"Dead serious." Matt shivered. "Suppose I could prove that there were actually such things as levitation, teleportation, telepathy. There isn't any treatment, is there, when a man goes sane?"

"Matt! You are sick, aren't you?"

"Suppose," Matt went on relentlessly, "that your glasses should float over and come to rest on my nose. What would you say then?"

"I'd say you need to see a psychiatrist," Franklin said worriedly. "You do, Matt."

His glasses gently detached themselves and floated leisurely through the air and adjusted themselves on Matt's face. Franklin stared blindly.

"Matt!" he exclaimed, groping. "That isn't very funny."

Matt sighed and handed the glasses back. Franklin put them back on, frowning.

"Suppose," Matt said, "I should float in the air?" As he spoke, he felt himself lifting.

Franklin looked up. "Come down here!"

Matt came back into his chair.

"These tricks," Franklin said sternly, "aren't very seemly. Go to a doctor, Matt. Don't waste any time. And," he added, taking off his glasses and polishing them vigorously, "I think I'll see my optometrist in the morning."

Matt sighed again. "I was afraid that was the way it would be. Abbie?"

Franklin stared.

"Yes, Mr. Wright." The words, soft and gentle, came out of midair.

Franklin's eyes searched the room frantically.

"Thanks," Matt said.

"Leave this house!" Franklin said, his voice trembling. "I've had enough of these pranks!"

Matt got up and went to the front door. "I'm afraid Doctor Franklin doesn't believe in you. But I do. Good-by, Doctor Franklin. I don't think a doctor would cure what I've got."

When he left, Franklin was searching the living room.

There was something strangely final about the drive through the campus. Along Jayhawk Boulevard on top of Mount Oread, overlooking the Kaw Valley on the north and the Wakarusa on the south, the university buildings stood dark and deserted. Only the Student Union was lighted and the library and an occasional bulletin board. The long arms of the administration building were gloomy, and the night surrounded the white arches of Budig Hall.

He pulled into the parking area behind the apartment buildings and got out and walked slowly to the entrance. He hoped that Guy wouldn't be in. It was unlikely. The apartment was dark, and Guy was no

sleeper.

Matt opened the door. The apartment was empty. He turned on a living-room lamp. The room was in typical disarray. A sweater on the davenport, books in the chair.

In the dark, Matt went to the kitchen. He bumped into the stove and swore, and rubbed his hip. *Mary had a little lamb* Somewhere around here ...

Some hidden reserve kept Matt from dropping where he stood. He should have collapsed from exhaustion and hunger long ago. But soon there would be time to rest *and everywhere that Mary went* He stooped. There it was. The sugar. The sugar. He had always liked blue sugar.

He found a package of cereal and got the milk from the refrigerator. He took a sharp knife from the drawer and sliced the box in two. He dumped the contents into a bowl and poured the milk over it and sprinkled the sugar on top. The blue sugar *with fleece as white as snow* He was very sleepy.

He lifted a spoonful of the cereal to his mouth. He chewed it for a moment. He swallowed ...

And it was gone.

He grabbed the knife and plunged it toward his chest.

And his hand was empty.

He was very sleepy. His head drooped. Suddenly it straightened up. The hissing had stopped. A long time ago. He turned on the light and saw that the burner was turned off, the one that never lighted from the pilot, the one he had stumbled against.

The blue insect poison had failed and the knife and the gas.

He felt a great wave of despair. It was no use. There was no way out.

He walked back to the living room, brushed the sweater off the davenport and sat down. The last hope — beyond which there is no hope — was gone. And yet, in a way, he was glad that his tricks had not worked. Not because he was still alive but because it had been the coward's way. All along he had been trying to dodge the only solution that had faced him at every turn. He had refused to recognize it, but now there was no other choice.

It was the hard way, the bitter way. The way that was not a quick death but a slow one. But he owed it to the world to sacrifice himself on the altar he had raised, under the knife he had honed, wielded by the arm he had given strength and skill and consciousness.

He looked up. "All right, Abbie." He sighed. "I'll marry you."

The words hung in the air. Matt waited, filled with a fear that was half hope. Was it too late for anything but vengeance?

But Abbie filled his arms, cuddled against him in homely blue gingham, scarcely bigger than a child but with the warmth and softness of a woman. She was more beautiful than Matt had remembered. Her arms crept around his neck.

"Will you, Mr. Wright?" she whispered. "Will you?"

A vision built itself up in his mind. The omniscient, omnipotent wife, fearsome when her powers were unsheathed, terrible in anger or disappointment. *Noman*, he thought, *was ever called upon for greater*

sacrifice. But he was the appointed lamb.

He sighed. “God help me,” he said, “I will.”

He kissed her. Her lips were sweet and passionate.

Matthew Wright was lucky, of course, far luckier than he deserved to be, than any man deserves to be.

The bride was beautiful. But more important and much more significant —

The bride was happy.

AFTERWORD. Parapsychology was legitimized as science fiction by John Campbell. After World War II, deluged by stories about atomic war and post-nuclear dystopias, Campbell announced that atomic bombs and space flight had been used up as topics, and writers needed to turn to something new. He suggested the kind of parapsychology experiments into telekinesis (and telepathy and teleportation) that Prof. J. B. Rhine had been working on at Duke University. A lot of writers, including me, obediently responded, and for some years *Astounding* and the other magazines, including *Galaxy*, were flooded with parapsychology stories. Some of them, which used these concepts to explore the human condition, were good; some, which used them in a formulaic fashion, were bad. But telekinesis, telepathy, and teleportation still were the stuff of fantasy.

Galaxy had an arrangement with NBC. Each week NBC dramatized a story from the magazine in a half-hour radio show called “X Minus One.” The show had some great script writers, particularly Ernest Kinoy. Four of my *Galaxy* stories were dramatized on “X Minus One,” and of these my favorite was “Wherever You May Be.” Kinoy condensed the short novel into half an hour without missing a beat.

In 1959, a local company that specialized in making industrial films decided to venture into commercial film making. The company was Centron, and the energy behind the project was director Herk Harvey, who had combined forces with writer John Clifford and some local backers to make a modest horror film called “Carnival of Souls.” A distributor took over the film and then went bankrupt, so the backers got nothing, but the film later became a cult classic and still is shown on late-night television, particularly around Halloween. Now, however, Harvey had persuaded Centron itself to get into the business, and he asked me if I had a story that would make a good film. I played the “X Minus One” record of “Wherever You May Be” to the Centron management, and they agreed that this would work. I wrote a screenplay and Centron got ready to film it — until the Centron employee who was going to play Matthew Wright decided he should be paid like an actor and not as an employee. The project stopped dead.

A few years later a Kansas City film maker got some backing for a film and a K.U. professor of radio-television-film introduced him to me. He decided to take over “The Reluctant Witch” script, hired some actors (including Angela Cartwright and Christopher George, who had been “the Immortal” in the TV movie and series adapted from my novel *The Immortals*), and was about to start shooting in Kansas City when the financier from Los Angeles who was supposed to show up with the money never showed up. A few years later the same K.U. professor proposed that the K.U. Endowment Association put up some money to allow him to film “The Reluctant Witch,” but that didn’t work either.

For a while I thought that more traditional film makers had been turned off by the old-fashioned look of the screenplay I had written. I had copied the form Centron used for its industrial films. In the 1990s I rewrote it with the aid of a screenplay computer program and sent it to my Hollywood agent. A couple of years later a Hollywood screenwriter inquired about the availability of the film rights and took an option on it. As a screenwriter, however, he was interested in writing his own screenplay. But he was involved in another film and by the time it was over, so was his option and his interest.

But I still think it would make a great movie.

Two

The Beautiful Brew

The head on the schooner of beer was a beauty. The rest was even lovelier.

Doris passed Jerry Blitz with the empty tray; she was small, dark and plain. Jerry put a hand on her arm.

“Have you heard from Dion?” he whispered.

She shook her head, glanced around the long, dark, mirrorlike table to see that each of them had an unlabeled bottle at his elbow and left the room.

Jerry sighed and looked back at the schooner in front of him.

It was the essence of beer captured in a glass. The hucksters, for once, couldn't oversell it. The clear, pale yellow had a sparkling brilliance; tiny bubbles streamed delicately to the top. On the sweating glass the moisture collected in beads and trickled down the sides in rivulets.

Jerry could see it on color television. The one word “BLITZ” would be above it. Below: “FIRST FOR THIRST.” The letters would be hollow like neon tubing; the tubing would be filled with the gently bubbling beer.

Jerry shuddered. It would be a sensation. But how many viewers would want to drink?

Something had piled the foam high in the center of the schooner and sculptured it into the shape of a girl. She began at the waist, a perfect three-inch replica, her arms raised, her hands smoothing long foam-hair. Jerry thought it was the most graceful thing a girl could do.

The girl preened herself for Jerry. He looked at the unchanged faces around the table. Couldn't the others see it? Gently he rotated the glass. Slowly the girl floated around to face Jerry.

But they had seen it. Baldwin was an old man; he made a dry noise swallowing. His face was a mask. He had many of them; he must have spent a lifetime perfecting them. Mask: Interested Audience. Mask: Solid Businessman. Mask: Staunch Friend. This time the mask was: Hard-headed Materialist.

Where was the real Arthur Baldwin? Where was the man who roared with laughter and moaned with passion and cried real tears? Had he been lost somewhere among the masks? Would a want ad help: “LOST — one real person; last seen wearing mask: Earnest Young Executive; answers to name of Art”?

There was no art left; it was all artifice. Jerry looked slowly around the table: Reeves, Williford, Woodbury, Alberg. Of them all, only Bill Alberg acted as if he had noticed the foam-girl on the schooner; he was taking great pains not to look at her. But he was young; he had a lot to learn.

It was a typical board meeting. Reeves was taking notes; Baldwin was talking. There was a tacit conspiracy not to mention the girl. They spoke about the “unusual head” or the “foam action.” They denied that there was anything wonderful in the room with them.

What had happened to them? They had no capacity left for wonder. All was reason; all was motive. Nothing in their lives was done just for fun.

And yet Baldwin wouldn't ignore it entirely. The girl would hand him the brewery, and Baldwin would condescend to take it. There was nothing Jerry could do.

What business did they have here? They should be directors of a railroad, not a brewery. A brewery is a place of tradition, of magic. It is a fantastic kitchen, mixing, cooking, aging. The essential ingredients were beyond absolute control. There was no use asking for precision.

A board meeting is a machine to grind out dollars. It is as stylized as a minuet. It has as much relationship to brewing as a guided tour through the brewery ...

The fifth floor. The mill room. Stacked burlap bags of the slim, gray-husked malted barley and the fine, light-yellow gravel that is corn grits. (Odor: a grain elevator or a hay loft.) "Let us follow the ingredients as gravity takes them from floor to floor, from process to process. The malt is ground in this mill into a coarse flour and measured in these bins. We use about sixty percent malt to forty percent corn grits." How can you impart the mystery that molting is, the germinating of the grain that develops the vital enzymes?

"If this is a characteristic," Baldwin was saying in his dry, measured voice, "as it seems to be, the question is: How much of this beer do we have?"

"Thirty tanks in the finishing cellar," Jerry said. "That's nineteen thousand eight hundred barrels." *Dion! Dion! Where are you?*

"My! This is more serious than I thought," Baldwin exclaimed.

Serious. Brewing is always serious. Exactly how much malt? How much adjunct? How much water? At what temperature shall I dough-in the mash? How hot shall I keep it for how long? The catalytic enzymes must have a chance to do their jobs. They must work on the starch, bring it into solution, change it into sugar. "On the fourth floor we have the adjunct cooker — that's where the corn grits are gelatinized — and the mash tub where it is joined with the malt. The heating is done with steam — the double-boiler principle, you know." Tell them. Tell them that beer is ninety-one percent water, that much of the difference in beers is due to the presence of minute amounts of hardening chemicals. See if they understand.

"Catalysts," Jerry said. Baldwin stopped talking and frowned at Jerry. "Sorry," Jerry said. "I was thinking."

"I'm asking," Baldwin said frigidly, "for a vote of disapproval on management —"

"Wait a minute," Jerry said. "You can't judge a beer by just looking at it. The taste is —"

"That won't be necessary," Baldwin said, glancing quickly at the glass in front of Jerry and away. "I — er — don't drink beer. And the appearance alone convinces me that the brew is unsalable."

Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale? Jerry thought. "This is once you'll have to compromise your principles," he said. "You can't expect to direct a brewery without knowing something about its product. Beside each of you is an open bottle and a glass. If you pour it carefully, no head will be formed."

Reluctantly, cautiously, Baldwin tilted a little into a glistening goblet. He lifted it, sniffed at it, his long nose trying to draw away, and let a few drops pass under a curling upper lip. His eyes opened. He sipped again, poured the rest of the bottle into the glass, and poured it from the glass down his throat. A beatific expression spread over his tanned, old face. He licked his lips and put down the empty glass. "This is

beer?” he asked.

“This,” Alberg said excitedly, “is beer only in the sense that champagne is wine. This *is it*. This is what brewers have dreamed about for centuries — ever since the first Babylonian baker fermented his first accidental brew. No, this isn’t beer; this is nectar.”

Jerry sat back, surprised. He hadn’t expected help from Bill. But he was promotion manager; maybe he couldn’t help himself.

Something flickered across Baldwin’s face. It was gone before Jerry could identify it. It couldn’t, he knew, be anything as straightforward and uncomplicated as greed.

“What a shame,” Baldwin said ruefully, “that the quality of the head should keep it from the market.”

One man’s misfortune is another man’s fortune. Jerry knew what Baldwin meant. For the first time in a hundred years, the brewery would be without a Blitz.

“Many a flaw,” Jerry insisted, “has been turned into a virtue. We can look on this characteristic not as a drawback but as a distinction. Let’s make the most of it.”

It was good advice, but they weren’t buying any. It set them off again, but it was all for the minutes. They had to consider it; someday these words might echo in court. But they weren’t going to let him slip away, not while he was ready to be racked.

Every business has a language of its own. The language of brewing is German: lauter, sparge, pfaff, wort. The filtered mash as it comes from the lauter tub through the pfaff is called the “wort.” Hot water is sparged through the deep bed of husks and spent grains to wash out any extractives remaining. The wort is boiled in the gleaming copper brew kettle, steam vented through the roof by the curving copper chimney. Jerry loved to stand by the lauter tub and look down over the railing at the brew kettle: sometimes he would see the wort boil through the sliding doors onto the concrete floor.

“Fantastic!” Baldwin was protesting. “Impossible!”

“Advertising can work miracles,” Jerry said doggedly. “It can make women wear sacks or sweaters. It can make men prefer blondes or beagles. It can put a nation on wheels and make the amount and shape of chromium around the wheels more important than food. It can put this over. It can make people demand this kind of beer. Picture the campaign: ‘BLITZ — THE BEER WITH THE BEAUTIFUL HEAD!’”

“By God!” Alberg exclaimed. “I think it could be done.”

Baldwin snorted. “To put this beer on the market is to take dangerous risks with the firm name.”

Risks. No, Baldwin didn’t like them; he wasn’t the man for them. He had what he wanted; why should he let it get away? The puzzle was what he wanted with a brewery. Brewing is always a risk.

How much hops? When should the green and white flower be added? Guess! Experiment! Put a couple of pounds in the brew kettle now to help clarify the wort. Half an hour later, add three pounds more to get the bitter hop flavor. Just before the boiling ends, put in a final three pounds for the delicate and elusive hop aroma. And hope. Chance played a big part. The wort might even spoil, although modern cooling methods had helped. It streamed like a foaming waterfall over ammonia-cooled pipes and was pumped up to the fermentation room.

“Alberg!” Baldwin said. Bill straightened attentively. “I’ll leave it to you. How is the beer-drinking public going to react to this — er — unusual formation of foam?”

“Well,” Bill said hopefully, “it would be a novelty.”

“A novelty,” Baldwin said scornfully. “Novelties are for children. I’ve known companies to depend on them; when the newness wore off, the public stopped buying the product. But the public doesn’t want novelties in its food and drink. They won’t touch this beer with a ten-foot straw. Eh, Alberg?”

“You’re — probably right,” Bill said in a low voice.

“We could include instructions,” Jerry suggested desperately. “You know, pour gently! Save the sparkle! For the true flavor of the beer, avoid a head — ”

“You have delusions of grandeur,” Baldwin cut in sharply. “We aren’t Schlitz or Budweiser or Pabst. We can’t afford a campaign of reeducation. Washing-machine manufacturers have struggled for years to promote sudsless detergents.”

Dion! Dion! What was the reason for it, Dion? The water? The malt? The hops? Was it the yeast? Had the mystery happened on the third floor in the chilled fermenting room? Two hundred twenty pounds of yeast, and all it took was one wild cell. Even though the strain was controlled by the laboratory, cultured from a single cell, it was a catalyst, changing the fermentable maltose sugar into alcohol and carbon dioxide, and you could never really be sure of catalysts.

Jerry imagined a new strain of yeast working in the giant metal-bound cypress tubs, fermenting a beer whose foam would be a naked girl. He looked back at the schooner. The foam had withered; the girl was sagging. Jerry glanced around the table at the busy faces and tipped a little beer from his bottle into the glass. When he looked at the schooner again, the girl was straight and proud.

She was a beautiful thing — viewed abstractly. The lines of the face were clean and young, the lips, full and a little sensual, the arms, slender and firm, the breasts, high.

“Just suppose,” Baldwin said sepulchrally, “that someone should accidentally get a head on his Blitz. Immediately: notoriety. Reporters would swarm around us like buzzards around carrion, picking us to pieces with their questions: ‘This head now; how do you explain it? Do you attribute it to design, accident, or —?’”

“The first maxim of promotion,” Alberg said, “is to get the product mentioned —”

“Some products can afford that kind of promotion,” Baldwin said with distaste. “We can’t. No food or drink can. There are three things it must be: pure, palatable, and healthful. It must *not* be notorious.” He turned back toward Jerry. “Well, if the reporters came, could you answer their questions?”

“No,” Jerry said. “No —”

Dion! Why aren’t you here? Why didn’t you tell me this would happen and why? It couldn’t have happened in the Ruh cellar where the green beer was aged. Maybe it was the finishing cellar; maybe it was one of the last few ingredients: lupulin, salt, mellow malt, gum arabic. Gum arabic — a foam binder. That could be important. And the carbon dioxide returned to the beer in the carbonation tanks from the last stages of fermentation.

“Excuse me,” Jerry said suddenly. “I’ll be right back.”

Outside the paneled room, he leaned against the door and closed his eyes, a slender young man with a

sensitive, dark face. His father would never have left his enemies alone to scheme behind his back, but he was not his father. Every moment was making that more apparent.

“Doris,” he said weakly to the girl at the desk, “have you heard from Dion yet?”

“Not yet, Mr. Blitz,” she said worriedly. “He doesn’t answer his telephone, and the clerk says he hasn’t seen him for a week.”

“Keep trying,” Jerry said. “I need him, bad. If he can’t help me, the brewery is gone.”

“Gone!” Doris echoed, startled. “What do you mean?”

“I thought you knew,” Jerry said. “Baldwin loaned Dad the money to put out the new beer. Dad put up his shares in the brewery as security. What with expenses and inheritance taxes, I can’t raise a dime. If Baldwin can discredit the new brew, he can claim the stock for nonpayment.”

“But that will give him the majority interest!”

“That’s right,” Jerry said wearily. “Also the brewery.”

“Oh, dear,” Doris said. “You do need Dion. I’ve tried the hospitals, the morgue, the police stations —”

“Have you tried the bars?” Jerry asked.

She shook her head in surprise.

“He’s my last chance,” Jerry groaned. “If he knew about the head on his brew, he might be able to fix it. He’s got to be somewhere. Leave word with any bartenders who know Dion that I need him.”

“You think he’s a drinker?” Doris exclaimed.

“Don’t you?” Jerry asked, startled. They stared at each other in silence. Then Jerry turned and went back into the board room.

“By the way,” Baldwin said, taming around to look curiously at Jerry, “where is that new brewmaster of yours? I should think you’d have him here.”

Jerry’s heart dipped into his stomach. “Dion?” he said. “He’s — on vacation.”

Baldwin’s bland expression told Jerry that the evasion was transparent. Baldwin already knew that Dion was gone and how long he had been gone. Perhaps he even knew where he was. Jerry shook his head; that was carrying surmise too far.

“But he’s only been with the company for a couple of months.” Baldwin pretended amazement. “You say he’s on vacation already?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Hm-m-m,” Baldwin mused. “An unusual fellow. In many ways, I understand. Would you mind telling us where you got him? And why you fired your father’s brewmaster of forty years’ experience?”

“Gerhardt wasn’t fired,” Jerry said quickly. “He was retired on full pension. My father left instructions to hire Dion to fill Gerhardt’s place.”

“Your father also left some heavy debts,” Baldwin said dryly. “Well, since we can’t have Dion’s expert

opinion, we must turn to someone else.”

He stood up, a small, straight reed of a man, and walked slowly to the door. Jerry sighed and looked down at the schooner. The foam had finally collapsed.

The door opened. Behind Baldwin was a portly, white-haired man. Jerry stared with surprise at the round, red German face. “*Gerhardt!*”

“Mr. Jerry,” said the old brewmaster. He had a trace of accent.

“I don’t understand,” Jerry said in bewilderment. “What are you doing here?”

“This retirement,” Gerhardt said heavily. “I am not happy doing nothing. ‘Get out,’ my wife says, ‘I don’t want you under my feet all day.’ When Mr. Baldwin says that I might work again, I like that. I am here to help.”

To help, Jerry thought. To help whom?

“I’ve asked for Mr. Gerhardt’s help,” Baldwin said. He looked around the table at the empty bottles. “We’ll need more samples.”

“Also the brew sheets,” Gerhardt said.

Jerry sighed and nodded. “I’ll have our chief chemist bring them up.” He flicked the intercom switch and told Doris to call George Fennell.

The chemist arrived with a sweating bottle in one hand, held at a respectful distance from his body, and a large, black notebook in the other. Fennell had a long, thin body and a face to match. “Gerhardt!” he said.

“Well, George, how is the brewing?” Gerhardt asked.

“Not so good,” Fennell said sadly.

Jerry took the bottle from Fennell’s limp hand, uncapped it and decanted it carefully into a tilted glass. The foam only necked the top of the beer.

Gerhardt stared curiously at Jerry as he took the glass. He held it up to the light. “Good color,” he said. “Brilliant. But what is the matter with the head?”

“Taste it first,” Jerry said.

Gerhardt shrugged and tilted the glass judiciously to his lips. When he lowered it, his small, blue eyes were blinking. “Ah!” he said, with a partial, palatal stop that almost made it “Ach!” His eyes opened wide. “Dot is the perfect beer! Let me see the sheet.”

After the long centuries of trial and error, of dreaming and experimentation, the perfect beer. Just the right blending of all the ingredients added in just the right quantities at just the right instants. The ideal alcohol content balanced against the carbohydrates, the protein, the mineral traces and the carbonation. Color, aroma, flavor, sparkle, foam.

But it wasn’t the perfect beer, of course. Not with a head like that.

Gerhardt looked up from the brew sheet, blinking blindly. “This I do not understand. These things are not unusual. The alcohol, now. It is three point six three; I would have thought it much higher.”

“I understood this was five percent beer,” Baldwin said suspiciously.

“It is,” Jerry explained. “Anything less than five and more than three point two is called five percent.”

“The chemical analysis,” Fennell said suddenly, “is the only thing I can guarantee.”

“What does that mean?” Baldwin said, turning toward the chemist.

Fennell shrugged maliciously. “Dion didn’t care for paperwork. He refused to be bothered with it. I told him that there might be variations to check back on, but he laughed. ‘The brew,’ he said, ‘will be perfect.’ I insisted. He told me to please myself. ‘Put down anything that will make you happy,’ he said. ‘It is a small thing.’”

“You let him get away with that?” Baldwin exclaimed.

“You do not understand,” Gerhardt said scornfully. “The brewmaster, he is the absolute boss.”

First Bill, Jerry thought, then Gerhardt and now George. Is there anyone who will not desert me? Oh, Dion, old friend, why have you deserted me, too? Dion! Is your name short for “Dionysus?” It would be a good name for a brewer, old vintner, old bull, old goat, old corn god, tree god, vine god. Wine is no longer the drink of the people, and you were always a people’s god. What should a Bacchus do today but brew? Oh, Dion, where are you?

“Then the brew can’t be duplicated,” Baldwin was saying sharply. “Even if the head could be — er — amputated, you couldn’t be sure you would get the same brew.”

“Dion can,” Jerry pointed out. “He did it thirty times in a row.”

“Ah,” Baldwin said, “but he isn’t here. And who knows when he will return? It seems to me that this is sloppy management!”

From around the table came a murmur of approval. Jerry bit his lip. “It brought out the best beer ever brewed,” he said.

“And it can’t be sold. Perhaps it can’t even be brewed again.” Baldwin turned to Gerhardt. “Can it?”

Gerhardt’s head was swinging back and forth between Jerry and Baldwin. “It is hard to say,” he said in bewilderment. “Brewing is not a science. It is an art. Strange things happen during the malting, the mashing, the boiling, the fermenting —”

“Beer,” Fennell broke in, “is a delicate blend of a number of ingredients which must be added in the proper quantities at the right time and the exact temperature. Organic catalysts play the biggest part, and their actions aren’t completely understood. Minute variations in temperature and timing as well as in quality make a big difference in the final product.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow —” Baldwin began.

“Well,” Fennell said patiently, “the distinctive flavor of Scotch whisky, for instance, is due to peat smoke absorbed by the barley during the kilning part of the malting process.”

“Let’s get back to beer,” Baldwin said. “The distinctive quality of our new beer is this!” He picked up the half-full bottle and emptied it into Gerhardt’s glass.

The beer gurgled creamily out of the bottle and foamed up in the glass. Out of the foam climbed a naked girl. This time she was stretching. Her hands were clasped behind her back, her arms drawn straight and

tight, her shoulders pulled back. She stared at Jerry with blind foam-eyes.

“Ach!” Gerhardt exclaimed. There was no mistake about the stop this time. “Dot’s a head!”

The bubbles moved the figure gently. The foam girl almost seemed alive.

“What,” Baldwin asked huskily, “is the reason for that?”

Gerhardt shook himself. “There could many reasons be,” he said uneasily. “The kind of malt, the mashing temperatures — but it is the yeast! Jah! Whenever I have trouble with the brew, always it is the yeast!”

“What do you think?” Baldwin asked, swinging around to face Fennell.

“The yeast is the same pure strain we’ve used for years,” Fennell said. He stared at the figure on top of the foam and licked his lips. “I insist that it’s the carbonation and the gum arabic. Somehow they’ve combined to produce this —”

“Nonsense,” Jerry said firmly. “You’ve tested it a dozen times. The carbonation is two point four two on the nose, and the gum arabic is exactly the same. You’re both wrong. It’s —”

“What?” Baldwin asked. “It’s a perfectly natural phenomenon with a perfectly natural explanation. Isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Jerry said weakly. “Yes. Dion will know.”

The paneled door flew open. A man in white coveralls stood in the doorway. “Mr. Blitz!” he shouted. “Come quick! There’s hell to pay in the racking room!”

After they passed through the chill of the finishing cellar, the racking room was warm, but the workmen were frozen in their places. It was a big room, stacked neatly with aluminum barrels. One of the barrels stood on end near the racking machine in the center; a patent spigot had been forced through the cork stopper. Quart-sized metal mugs, foaming with beer, sat on a barrel beside the racking machine.

From an overhead drum, four rigid tubes extended downward. Ordinarily there would be a barrel under each of them. They would be on their sides, bungholes pointing toward the ceiling. One would be starting to fill. One would be half-full. One would be full and foaming, the tube swiveled back out of the way while a beer-bellied, strong-armed laborer slipped a wooden bung into the hole and hammered it flat with a huge hard-rubber mallet. Other workmen would be rolling away the fourth barrel, and rolling in an empty barrel to take its place.

But the work had stopped. Four barrels were full. The tubes had swiveled back. Foam was pouring out of the barrels. And dancing seductively on the barrels like a naked chorus line were four two-foot-high foam maidens, complete to the ankles.

The men stared at them with stricken eyes, unable to move. Jerry swung toward the foreman. “Who told you to rack the new brew?”

“Nobody, sir,” he said, licking his lips nervously, “but that’s all we have left.”

Jerry was already moving down the line of barrels in the racking machine. As he approached, the girls seemed to sway sentiently toward him. He ignored them. He picked up the mallet, slipped a bung into a barrel and hammered it down. Four strokes, and the job was done. Jerry sighed and watched the foam things melt wistfully away.

“That’s all,” he said. “We won’t be racking any more beer until further notice.”

“You bet you won’t,” one of the laborers said angrily. “I quit.”

He stalked away. The other workmen followed him. The foreman turned to Jerry. “You know what that means. They’ll all go out!”

“I know,” Jerry said heavily and walked slowly to the elevator.

As he stepped back into the board room, Baldwin was reaching for the door handle on the other side.

“Oh,” he said, a little startled, “I’m glad you’re here. We’ve just taken a vote. If you can’t eliminate the objectionable head from the new brew, we’ll have to dump it. And that, of course, will mean a change in management.”

Jerry nodded wearily. “How long?”

Baldwin didn’t try to misunderstand. “Every minute wasted is money lost. We’ve got to get back into salable production. You’ve got until tomorrow morning.”

They filed past him, not looking into his face: Baldwin, Reeves, Williford, Woodbury, Alberg.

Bill stopped and drew Jerry aside. “Look, Jerry,” he muttered, “I’m sorry about —”

“Forget it,” Jerry said.

“No, listen! When Baldwin asked me about the promotion possibilities, I mean — well, I could have held out —”

“Forget it, I said,” Jerry said coolly. “You’ve got a job to look after.”

When they were gone, the room seemed strangely silent. Jerry stood in the doorway and looked at Doris. “How about you? Aren’t you leaving?”

“No, sir,” she said. “Not until I’m fired.”

Slowly Jerry relaxed. At least one person was faithful. Two persons — there was Joan. “Did you get in touch with Dion?”

She shook her head despondently. “No, sir, but I talked to a couple of bartenders who knew him. I left word with them to call you if he showed up.”

“So he drinks, eh?”

“Oh, he drinks, all right. But the bartenders said they’d never seen him drunk. They seemed to think there was something remarkable about it.”

“Maybe because he drinks so much,” Jerry said bitterly. “Damn it! I liked that man!”

“I don’t understand how you came to hire him without learning more about him.”

“My father hired him. Just before he died. That was the first time I met Dion. He and Dad seemed to be good friends. They were laughing and drinking together. Dad wasn’t feeling too well, even then, but Dion brought him to life.

“Dad was sipping an unlabeled bottle of beer. He slammed his fist down on the table and said, ‘By all the

gods, I'll *do* it!' And he turned to me and said, 'If anything happens to me, *you* do it! A man should leave something behind him besides money!'

"Do what?" I asked.

"Hire Dion as our new brewmaster! He's going to brew us the best damned beer this country has ever seen!"

Jerry was silent, remembering. Doris said, "And he did, too."

"Yes, he did." Jerry sighed. "And Dad didn't live to taste it. Dion worked hard. I don't think he left the brewery for weeks. He handled everything himself, from doughing-in to pitching the wort with yeast. And then, all at once, he got restless. He stopped showing up. And I haven't seen him since."

"A strange man," Doris said reflectively. "But I'm sure he had some good reason."

"Maybe," Jerry said wryly. "It better be. It's ruined me."

"That woman must have known," Doris said suddenly.

"That woman?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Blitz," she said. "I mean Miss Blessing. Your fiancée. She was here a little while ago. She left this."

Doris opened the wide desk drawer and picked up a ring. She dropped it into Jerry's hand. He looked at it. "Joan?" he said.

"Now, don't be upset," Doris said maternally. "She isn't worth it. She was only interested in your money. She said she never could stand the name 'Blitz.' The first trouble you get in — boom! You ought to get some nice girl," she added impulsively. "Someone who'd be interested in you just for yourself."

"Now I'd have a hard time finding any other," Jerry muttered. "How about you, Doris? Do you like the name 'Blitz'?"

"I think it's a fine —" she began, and stopped. "That is — I mean — I'm engaged, Mr. Blitz."

She held out her left hand. The diamond in the ring was a tiny flame.

"Sure," Jerry said. "Congratulations." He tossed the ring in his hand and slipped it carelessly into a pants pocket. "I'm going up to the penthouse. Have all the bottles of the new brew sent up there."

His shoulders straightened. He walked purposefully toward the door. He had lost his illusions. He had lost his girl. Within a few hours he would lose the beer and the brewery.

It was the best beer ever brewed. He might as well make the most of it.

Except for a lighted path between the living room and the kitchen, the penthouse was dark. In the living room was a coffee table. On the table was a full schooner of beer. Some of the beer had spilled over the edge; it made dark stains on the leather. On the schooner was a lovely head and a lovelier bosom.

Jerry sat behind the coffee table and held up his glass to the girl. She had her head cocked.

"Oh, many a peer of England brews

Livelier liquor than the Muse,
And malt does more than Milton can
To justify God's ways to man."

Jerry paused and nodded owlishly at the foam girl and sipped his beer.

"Ale, man, ale's the stuff to drink
For fellows whom it hurts to think."

From deep down, Jerry brought up a resounding belch. A pleased smile spread over his face. "The perfect beer!" he said, wagging a finger. "What'd beer be without it? Eh? Ale, now. Ol' Housman talks 'bout ale, an' he prob'bly didn't know first thing 'bout it. First thing 'bout ale is it's top-fermented; lagers're bottom-fermented."

He sipped the beer again. "Beer," he said, "is best served at temp'ature 'tween forty-two and forty-five degrees Fahr'nheit. Foam's best, vol'tile gases 'scape, an' del'cate 'roma an' pleasing flavor of beer're preserved."

The girl's head tilted a little farther.

"Nother words," Jerry said, "this beer's too hot an' you're looking droopy. Here!" He emptied his glass into the schooner. Foam ran over onto the table and dripped onto the thick rug. The girl straightened up.

"S better," he said. With exaggerated care, he got up and maneuvered around the table. Once free of it, he rolled toward the kitchen as if his feet were several inches off the floor. When he came back, he had two cold, unlabeled bottles in his hand. He set them down on the table and carefully flipped the cap from one of them with an ivory-handled opener. Gently he tipped the beer into his glass and set the bottle down beside a number of others on the floor.

He blinked at them and began to count, lost track, and started over. "Thirteen," he said finally. "'Tastic! Each one's 'quivalent of ounce of whisky. 'M out on feet an' don't know it."

The girl seemed to nod in agreement.

"Nope!" Jerry said, shaking his head vigorously. Three stages to drunk'ness, somebody said: bel'cose, lachr'mose, com'tose. 'Ve skipped 'em all. Stands to reason. 'Sperfect beer. I feel wonderful."

The girl nodded happily.

"'M euphoric," Jerry said triumphantly. "Who cares 'bout future?" He tried to snap his fingers. On the third attempt, he succeeded. "Let future care 'bout 'self."

He tipped a little beer from his glass into the schooner.

"Why," he asked indignantly, "should anyone 'ject to you on his beer? Most d'lightful drinking 'panion man ever had. Dec'rative, 'preciative an' silent. What more can man ask of woman? What more can man ask of beer? Eh?"

He tilted the glass to his lips and drained half of it. When he brought it down, he began to wave it back and forth in time to the rhythm of a poem.

"If all be true that I do think

There are five reasons we should drink —”

He broke off. A man was standing in the open doorway. Jerry stared at him.

“Good beer — a friend — or being dry —

Or lest we should be by and by —

Or any other reason why.”

The man had finished the quotation. “And I hope Dr. Aldrich will forgive the paraphrase.”

“Dion!” Jerry exclaimed.

The man in the doorway was a little less than medium height. He had medium-brown hair and undistinguished features. In compensation, his clothes were a blaze of individuality.

His tie was purple, his shirt, yellow, his coat, a royal blue; his slacks were Kelly green, his socks, scarlet, his shoes, white buck. He was a walking prism. But even his clothes paled beside his expression: it was a joyful defiance of everything held sacred and a sacred delight in everything found joyful. It surrounded him like an aura. Near him, a man wanted to laugh, to sing, to dance, to love, to do all things not wisely but too well.

He’s euphoric, Jerry thought, *like the beer*. At the same time, his presence seemed mildly sobering.

He looked ageless. Sometimes, like tonight, he seemed younger than the greenest brew pumped from the fermenting tubs to the Ruh cellar. At other times he seemed centuries older than the brewery itself.

“You’ve tapped the new brew,” he said, and his voice was excitement, vibrant with life to be lived. He looked down at the foamy schooner. “Nymphs and satyrs! What’s this?”

“This,” Jerry said gloomily, in a perverse reaction to Dion’s presence, “is ruin.”

“Ruin is so final,” Dion said gaily. “Many a girl has found it to be only a gateway to a fuller life. Well, let us consider the matter.” He sat down on the edge of a deep chair and studied the figure in the foam.

“Lovely. Exquisite. How is the beer?”

“Sperfect,” Jerry said, his unnatural melancholy lifting a little.

“Naturally,” Dion said, nodding. “But this creature complicates the sales, eh?”

“Stoo true,” Jerry said gravely and outlined the situation. “Where were you when I needed you?” he ended plaintively.

“Tending to some necessities. Pleasant, true, but necessities for all of that. Just as you are now. Pretty well under, aren’t you?”

“Under the table?” Jerry said with great dignity. “Of course not. Half seas over, yes. Also: fuddled, lush, mellow, merry, plastered, primed, sozzled, squiffy, topheavy, tight, oiled, and one over the eight. I am drunk as a piper, a fiddler, a lord, an owl, David’s sow, or a wheelbarrow. I feel fine. But where were you when I needed you?”

“Old Baldwin was cleverer than you thought. He had a party going night and day for a week, but the girls and the liquor were exhausted before I was. And here I am. Unless we exorcise this creature, you lose the brewery. I can’t let that happen. Did anyone have an explanation of the phenomenon?”

Jerry chuckled reminiscently. “Gerhardt said it must be the yeast. Fennell said it was a combination of carbon dioxide and gum arabic.”

“The infidels!” Dion breathed. “The joyless, materialistic infidels! Always the direct cause. Always. Never the catalyst. They’re brewers. *They* should understand catalysts. But they don’t. Nobody does. This sad, sad age. It hasn’t even recognized the most important catalyst of all.”

Jerry frowned. “What’s that?”

“Man,” Dion said breathlessly, spreading his hands. “You know the definition of a catalyst: a substance which accelerates a reaction but is itself unchanged. Isn’t that man?”

“Struth!” Jerry agreed solemnly.

“Men get glimpses of reality,” Dion said mournfully, “but they don’t piece them together. Of course, men can never see direct evidence of their catalytic action. What catalyst can? Things always happen a certain way when he’s around, and when he isn’t around, he can’t see that they happen differently.

“They have the truth in their hands, and they can’t see it. They talk about luck and premonitions, talents and green thumbs, accident-prones and the perversity of inanimate objects. If man ever applied himself to the study of his own catalytic action, he’d become a god. That, after all, was the secret of the gods.”

“Struth?” Jerry asked, open-mouthed.

Dion nodded, sighing. “But men call it superstition. The ancients knew better. They knew the obvious: a brewer is more important than his materials. You have a modern brewery. What do you have? Fantastic accuracy in the measurement of quantity, temperature and time, and microscopic control of quality. Why is it that the beer you brew isn’t half as good as that of the medieval monasteries?”

“I give up,” Jerry said breathlessly.

“You control everything except the brewer. The old wisdom has been lost. A brewer impresses his own personality on the beer. He must, first of all, be continent during the brewing —”

“Continent?” Jerry echoed. “North American, Europe, Asia —?”

“Arctic,” Dion said. “Absolutely. You can imagine the strain.”

“Certainly,” Jerry agreed.

“By the time I finished the brewing, my unnatural existence had fermented me into a frenzy. It was seek release or burst!”

Jerry thought of Dion exploding like a bottle hot with carbonation. The vision was too much for him; he buried his face in the glass and drained it.

When he looked up again, Dion had opened the other beer and was sampling it out of the bottle. “Ah!” he said appreciatively. “A true daughter of the malt. The world must have it. Whatever we have to do is worthwhile.”

“Forget it!” Jerry said with an airy wave of his hand. “Drink and be merry.”

“And tomorrow lose the brewery?” Dion said horrified. “No, no! For then this beer would be lost to the world, and I would lose my job. Even a catalyst must eat. Now! I find this head quite attractive, but I can appreciate how some drinkers might be upset. The problem: Where did it come from and how can we

get rid of it?"

"Cisely!" Jerry explained. "Logic is 'mpeccable."

"Flattery," Dion said sheepishly. "Matter of fact, my reasoning is all intuitive. These words are only a sop to Apollo; they're meaningless to me. But let's go on. The catalytic process is, by its nature, basically uncontrollable. The immaterial approach opens the gate for other immaterial aspects."

"Spirits!" Jerry said suddenly.

"Wonderful!" Dion said, clapping his hands together exuberantly. "You understand. We have in our beer spirits of alcohol in a more literal translation. Our brew has become possessed; we must exorcise it."

"To possess the brew, we must dispossess the spirit!" Jerry explained triumphantly.

"That's the spirit!" Dion applauded.

Jerry was standing. "We must denature the spirit without denaturing the alcohol."

"Now you're the one with the head on you!"

Jerry did a few wild dance steps around the room. He came to a sudden stop. "How?" he said.

"The question, exactly," Dion agreed.

"Garlic? Mistletoe? Wolfsbane? Silver bullets? Holy water? Crucifixes?"

"No, no!" Dion protested. "Rank superstition. Worthless."

"Well?"

"The girl is facing toward you now that you're standing up; she was facing toward you when you were sitting over there. Which way does she usually face?"

"That's a funny thing," Jerry said thoughtfully, "Toward me. Always. You'd think she'd face some other direction occasionally."

"Where there is a persistence of phenomena, there is a reason. Why does she face toward you?"

"I give up."

"You. You're the reason!"

Jerry shook his head. "I'm too happy to be a reason. I'd much rather be an excuse or a rationalization."

"I may have been the gate," Dion said, "but you were the goal. This spirit wants to look at you."

"At me?" Jerry exclaimed. "Incredible."

"Spirits are moved only by strong emotions," Dion warned.

"And emotions," Jerry added, "are moved only by strong spirits."

"Love and hate," Dion said. "You've done nothing to be hated for. It must be love."

"Ah!" Jerry said dazedly, sinking down into a chair. *Love*. It is something to be loved, if only by a spirit.

“What can I do? Tell it to go away?”

“We must be careful,” Dion said cautiously. “Spirits are simple things. And love is mother to hate.”

“Love has ruined me,” Jerry groaned. “What would hate do?”

“So. We must lure her out.”

“Like a fish?”

“Very like.”

“What’ll we use for a lure?”

“The best lure for the type of fish we want to hook. The perennial lure for females — a man. You!”

“I’ve always wondered what a minnow feels like,” Jerry said weakly.

“But,” Dion said, “where do we cast you?”

Jerry snapped his fingers. It worked the first time. He looked down at them in amazement. He shook himself and looked up. “Come on!”

He dashed through the front door. The elevator was standing open. As soon as Dion entered, breathing quickly with suspense, Jerry pressed the button marked “1.”

As the elevator started down, Dion said, “Ah! The finishing cellar!”

“That,” Jerry said, “will be only the beginning.”

The door slid open. They walked quickly down a long corridor. Jerry felt light-headed; he wobbled as if he felt the ground under his feet and didn’t like it. He opened a heavy door. Cold air hit them. The temperature was close to freezing. Jerry flicked on the overhead lights.

The room was filled with long, horizontal tanks; white frost was piled up under them in chunks. Jerry led the way between the tanks and through another heavy door into the racking room.

“Here,” Jerry said, kicking one of the barrels in the racking machine, “is a keg of the new brew.” He pulled the spigot out of the upright keg, ignoring the gout of beer and foam that followed it. It was old beer; the foam was ordinary foam. “Here,” he said, “is a spigot.”

Dion had set one of the barrels on end. Jerry pushed the end of the spigot through the cork stopper and down into the barrel. “Now,” he said, “let’s dash our spirit.”

He turned the tap on full. The beer streamed onto the floor in a white torrent, hit, splashed, foamed. The pungent, hoppy odor of beer made the air thick. On yellow pools formed thick, creamy blankets of foam. In the middle of the pools, the foam mounted high. It shaped itself. It became human. It became feminine. It became the girl. Her hands were outstretched.

She grew. She was a foot high. Two feet. Three feet. When she was over five feet tall, Jerry hastily slammed the tap shut. She grew a few more inches and stopped. For the first time, Jerry saw her complete, bare, beautiful and perfect, from the top of her head to the tops of her feet, just visible above the foam.

She seemed almost alive. She was a work of art, done with that loving care that can make cold marble

seem warm. The foam stirred gently as if she breathed; she swayed as if she would like to walk.

Jerry turned to Dion. "Now what?"

Dion shrugged. "Let your instincts guide you."

Hesitantly Jerry held out a hand and touched the foam. The girl stirred. Jerry jerked back his fingers and rubbed them together. His face crinkled up. "That felt — funny," he said. He took a deep breath and reached toward her again.

This time the foam-hand seemed to reach out to meet his hand. He jerked it back. The foam came with him; the girl came with the foam, stepping out of the yellow pool as if she had legs, standing on the pavement as if she had feet. Her creamy chest rose and fell. Her eyes opened. They were deep blue, like a summer sky mirrored in a mountain pool.

"Venus," Dion murmured, "rising out of the foam."

Jerry pulled his hand away. "That's not foam," he said weakly. "That's skin. It's warm."

"That," Dion said softly, "is the power of love."

The girl opened her mouth. "Love," she said. It was, with a peculiar appropriateness, her first word.

Her lips were red; her tongue moving between them was pink. Her hair was long and blonde tumbling around her shoulders. Her skin was creamy white. She stood in front of them, naked and unashamed.

"It was, after all," Dion said judiciously, "a full-bodied beer."

Jerry pushed a tentative finger toward her. "May I?" he asked dazedly.

She arched toward him. "Please do," she said softly.

Jerry jerked his hand back. "Never mind," he said hastily. "I'll take your word for it."

"I do mind," she said. Her eyes followed him adoringly. "I've loved you for so long."

"How long?" Dion asked interestedly.

"Ever since I came here with the barley," she said, noticing Dion for the first time. "I was the Barley-Bride. You know, the last barley cut in the field."

"Ah!" Dion said wisely. "I see. But you have made a great deal of trouble."

Her eyes widened. "Have I? For Jerry? Oh," she said passionately, "I could kill myself. But it was the only way I could make Jerry aware of me."

"You did," Jerry muttered. "Oh, baby, you really did."

"Everybody was so mean to Jerry," the girl said, her eyes blazing like pellets of potassium dropped into water. "Especially that Joan creature."

Joan! The thought of her was like being drenched with icy water. Jerry took a quick, sharp breath. "If you don't mind," he said with sudden clarity, "I think I'll be going."

"I don't mind," she said, stepping forward eagerly to stand beside him. "Where shall we go?"

“Go?” he said in alarm. “You don’t understand! I want to be alone.”

“That sounds like fun,” she agreed happily. “Let’s do it.”

Jerry looked at her with horror-filled eyes, as if he were seeing her for the first time. “I want to be alone all by myself!”

“How dull!” she said, pouting. “And it’s not fair. You lured me into this world. It’s only right that you take care of me. In justice, you belong to me.”

“Oh, no!” Jerry protested. Joan had wanted to own him; now this naked girl out of the foam. It was too much! “I don’t want to belong to anybody.”

He turned and ran, back through the heavy door into the finishing cellar, between the long carbonating tanks, and through the doorway into the corridor.

“But I belong to you!” he heard her shout behind him.

Jerry ran a little faster. He glanced back. She was chasing him, running lightly and swiftly on bare toes.

With a terrorized burst of speed, Jerry sprinted up the concrete steps to the second floor. The copper brew kettle gleamed dully in the darkness like a wet, shiny brontosaurus raising its long neck out of a Jurassic swamp. Jerry hesitated beside the brewmaster’s office, but two sides of it were windows. He turned toward the concrete steps leading to the third floor. The girl was whitely luminescent behind him. She was closer.

The third floor was only a balcony. Jerry looked longingly at the lautering tub. If he could slip through the man-sized opening and lower himself into the sheltering darkness, the foam thing might pass by, unaware. But it was a fatal trap if she suspected.

The laboratory, on the left, had the same disadvantages as the brewmaster’s office below it. Jerry pulled open the heavy, insulated door to the fermentation room and dived in among the tall cypress tubs and the heavy odor of yeast.

He crouched behind a row of tubs, shivering in the thirty-six-degree temperature, and heard the door open. *Maybe she won’t know about the lights*, he thought. *Please don’t let her know about the lights!*

“Jerry!” she called gaily. “Jerry!” She laughed. It was a beautiful and chilling sound, like youth and joy and triumph all melted together and poured into a bell. “Here I come!”

Good God! Jerry thought, horrified. *To her it’s just a game.* The room stayed dark, but she moved confidently among the tubs. *She can see in the dark*, he thought desperately.

Jerry shivered and moved cautiously away from her. He turned the corner of the tubs and tiptoed toward the door. When he was halfway there, he sneezed.

In the silent room the sound was thunderous. The girl laughed in the distance, and Jerry ran to the door, swearing under his breath. He slammed the door behind him, wasted a moment looking for a lock that wasn’t there, and dashed for the stairs leading to the fourth floor. Behind him, the fermenting-room door opened and slammed shut. Bare feet pattered up the stairs.

There was no place to hide except in the adjunct cooker or the mash tub. But now she was too close for anything like that. He turned the corner and raced up to the fifth floor. The burlap sacks of malted barley,

corn grits and spent grains were stacked in neat piles. He ran between them, trying to reach the freight elevator before she caught him.

It was hopeless. It was a classic end to an immemorial chase.

Dion was slow finding them. And, by the time Dion reached the mill room, Jerry had discovered that there are other reasons for wanting a person besides possession.

He tossed her a gunnysack. "Cover yourself up, darling," he said possessively.

"I will not," she said indignantly, tossing it back at him.

"But you'll have to learn to wear clothes," Jerry said weakly.

"I don't see any reason for it."

"It's just — it's just decency."

"Decency. I don't like the sound of that word."

"But everybody wears clothes," Jerry said desperately, "at least in public."

"Well," she said reluctantly, "if I must, I must. But I intend to learn to wear things that are soft or slippery or fluffy — like silk and furs."

Jerry groaned. "I can see already that you're going to be expensive."

"That is the way it's always been," Dion said sadly. "But what can we poor men do? It's the oldest monopoly."

"You'll need a name," Jerry said, "and a birth certificate. Oh, God! You'll need so many things."

"To love," Dion said, "all things are possible."

"Love?" Jerry echoed. "Love?" He looked at her wide-eyed. "Well, I'll be — !" Suddenly his expression changed. "Darling, don't you feel well?"

Her face was pale. "Why? What's the matter?"

"You seem to be sagging."

"I'm standing up straight."

She was. "Then you're shrinking," Jerry exclaimed. "You're not five feet tall."

She looked up into his face. "You do seem bigger."

Jerry turned fiercely toward Dion. "Can't you do something?"

Dion spread his hands helplessly. "The gods give and the gods take away."

"No!" Jerry said violently. "I won't let it happen! She can't leave me. I've just found her!"

A single tear ran down the girl's cheek. She brushed it away with a slender arm. "Don't stand there talking," she said, tugging at Jerry's hand. "If we've only got a little while, let's not waste any of it."

He brushed her hand away almost angrily. “No!” he shouted. “I’m not giving up. There’s no reason she has to shrink away, is there? There’s no law, natural or supernatural?”

“No,” Dion said. “No.”

“Then there’s a reason for this. We’re going to find it. Fast! And when we find it, we’re going to do something about it. She’s shrinking. Why?”

“Loss of fluid?” Dion suggested helplessly. “After all, the human body is almost seventy percent water.”

“I’m thirsty,” she said.

“The question is: Does she have a human body?”

Dion glanced at her sideways. “So it would seem.”

“But human bodies don’t shrink. Not so fast, anyway. Beer,” he said thoughtfully, “is ninety-one percent water.”

“I’m thirsty,” the girl complained.

“That’s it!” Jerry and Dion said simultaneously.

“She’s human,” Jerry said excitedly, “but she still has some of the characteristics of foam. Unless I kept putting beer into the schooner, the head would dry up and disintegrate. Unless I keep putting beer in her, she’ll shrink away to nothing!”

“I’m thirsty,” she moaned.

Jerry looked at her quickly. She was only four feet tall. “We’ve got to hurry,” he said. “Damn it! I drank up all the bottled beer, and she might not last to the racking room.”

Faced by this practical problem, Dion looked helpless again. “Isn’t there any more, anywhere?”

Jerry snapped his fingers. “I’ve got it!” he shouted. He dived for the elevator and started it down. When he turned, Dion was beside him.

“Look, Jerry, old man,” Dion said in a low, confidential voice. “Are you sure you want to save her? I know you’re excited right now, but women are trouble, you know. And she isn’t really human. Let her shrink away, and all your problems are solved. You’ll have the new beer without the head on it, as beautiful a brew as this world ever saw. You’ll have the brewery. You can have your pick of dozens of girls. Are you sure you want to complicate every — ”

Jerry had been staring blankly at Dion. The jar of the elevator as it stopped seemed to jar him awake. “If I didn’t know you better,” he said, “I’d fire you for that.”

He dashed toward the little pasteurizing tank. The water was steaming. Jerry dipped his hand into it and pulled out a bottle. He gasped at the pain, and tossed the bottle back and forth between his hands, trying to cool it.

“But why?” Dion persisted. He was beside Jerry, holding out a bottle opener he had picked up in his office just around the corner.

“Why, just for fun,” Jerry said, dashing up the stairs because the elevator was too slow. “Just because life wouldn’t be any fun without her.”

“That’s fine,” Dion said softly, slowing to a walk. “That’s the best motive I’ve heard in centuries.”

It was a very happy ending.

The girl got the beer, of course. It was hot beer, but hot beer is better than no beer. She also got a birth certificate — forged — which proves that what is impossible to love is possible to money. And then she got a name: Mrs. Gerald Blitz. It was enough. She seemed to be quite happy with it.

Jerry didn’t get a hangover; it was, after all, the perfect beer. He did get a bride who was beautiful, unspoiled, and single-minded. Although she had to be awakened three times a night for a cold bottle, no one ever heard him complain. And there can’t be much wrong, basically, with a girl who loves beer. His problems were simplified, too, by the fact that he owned a brewery.

Dion kept his job as brewmaster, and Jerry put up with periodic absences. Although Dion never seemed to get drunk on these binges, everyone else did and had wonderful times. Jerry never asked him if his name was short for “Dionysus”; he never hinted that he wouldn’t be surprised if the god who gave wine to the Greeks should give beer to the world. He might get an answer.

Even the public was rewarded. It got to drink the perfect beer without being disconcerted by a lovely head and a lovelier bosom. Although that — if it had only known — was the public’s loss.

AFTERWORD. “Just for fun” was Jerry’s reason, and just for fun is the reason for a lot of stories, including “The Beautiful Brew.” This one was closer to the Thorne Smith model than any of the others, and perhaps the uninhibited character of the Barley-Bride (straight out of *The Golden Bough*) was inspired by the character of Venus in *The Night Life of the Gods*, which was adapted into a Broadway play titled “One Touch of Venus.” I remember seeing it on the stage with Mary Martin (if I remember correctly) as Venus, and one line she remarks about the hero and his fiancée: “If they have remained vertical this long, it’s about time they got horizontal.”

Publication of books depends on unpredictable events, like the brewing of a great beer. In the late 1960s I had heard that Dell Books was going to increase its publication of science fiction and fantasy. I submitted a couple of manuscripts: *The Burning* and *The Witching Hour*. Then over the Labor Day weekend in 1969 I attended the World Science Fiction Convention in St. Louis. Since it was so close, I drove and took my two sons, Kit and Kevin, to whom *The Witching Hour* is dedicated, and a friend of Kit’s named Lance Williams (who later became a computer scientist specializing in computer animations who won an Oscar for technical merit). On the first day of the convention, we noticed a short, attractive young woman on the elevator. She seemed lost in the melee of the convention, and we invited her to accompany us to events, including the Hugo Award dinner. She was, it turned out, Gail Wendroff, the new science-fiction editor at Dell Books, and she told me later that she had felt so out-of-place at her first World Con that she was about to leave when we met. She married agent Henry Morrison and died of cancer, much too young, a couple of decades later.

I don’t know, for sure, that our chance meeting in St. Louis was responsible for the publication of *The Witching Hour* in 1970.

But it couldn’t have hurt.

Three

The Magicians

The white letters on the corrugated black board spelled out:

COVENTION
October 30 and 31
Crystal Room

I chuckled. Hotel bulletin boards are like movie marquee. There always is something misspelled on them.

The smile faded, and I glanced around uneasily, but my man hadn't come in. There was no reason to be uneasy except that I didn't like the job. Not that it promised to be tough. It was too simple, really, and the old lady was paying too much, and I felt as if there were eyes watching me, which was a good switch and enough to give any private detective a neurosis and —

Hell! Why should anyone pay a thousand bucks to find out a guy's name?

I walked across the wide, polished marble floor to the desk. I leaned against it so that I could watch the door, and the clerk looked up. You've seen him. You know the type. Thin, thirtyish, embittered, his bald head gleaming even brighter than the floor, obsequious to his superiors, vindictive toward those placed under him. It was my misfortune that he knew me.

"Hello, Charlie," I said.

"Casey," he said suspiciously. "What are you doing here?"

"Business."

"No trouble, Casey," he snapped. "I'll have you tossed out of here. The management won't have you raiding the rooms, snapping pictures. Our guests pay —"

"No trouble," I said. "Nothing like that."

He subsided, but his eyes were busy on my face. "Since when have you had anything but divorce cases?"

"I've come up in the world, Charlie. Who puts the notices on the board over there?"

"I do," he said. "Why?"

"Can't spell, either, eh?" I said.

He glanced at the board and back at me, his face serious. "Nothing misspelled there."

"You know," I said, "I've always wanted to attend a convention." It started as a joke, but when I got to the key word my voice broke and a shiver ran up my back.

"Now's your chance," Charlie said, "because that's what it is. He insisted on it being spelled that way."

"A nice story," I said, "but it would never stand up in court."

"There he is now, coming through the door," Charlie said.

I turned my head and froze. He was a tall man with dark hair and graying temples, slim and distinguished in evening clothes. And in his lapel, as he passed, was a five-pointed star, small, golden and engraved. The description checked. It was my man.

I started after him.

“Casey — “ Charlie began. He was warning me.

I waved a reassuring hand back at him without looking and followed the dark back that moved straight and purposefully toward the elevator bank.

One car was almost full. He stepped into it and turned around, and the doors started to close in front of my face. He looked directly at me for a shocking moment before the doors slid together.

His eyes were deep and black and shiny. And I had a foolish illusion that they still stared at me through the closed brass doors, seeing, weighing and discarding, contemptuously, before they turned their intensity on something more worthy.

The afterimage vanished. I looked up quickly. The arrow was slowing. It came to a stop on “C” and hesitated and began swinging again.

“Going up?” someone said impatiently.

I jumped and caught myself and stepped through the open doors of the car on my right. The doors closed. “C,” I said.

We slid silently upward. Bricks alternated with painted metal in the frames of the small windows. *M,A,B*. The first stop was mine. The doors parted in front of me and closed behind me, and I was in a carpeted hall facing a cream-colored corridor wall. Painted on the wall in gold was an arrow pointing to my right. Above it were two words. They said: “Crystal Room.”

I looked in that direction. The Crystal Room had double doors, but only one of them was open. A dark back was just going through it. A young man stood beside the door. He nodded respectfully to the man who entered. A doorkeeper. The party was private.

Keeper of the crystal door. Inside was something called a “covention” that sent unreasonable shivers up my back. And inside now was a nameless man — I couldn’t mistake that back — whose name was worth a thousand dollars to me and who had eyes like polished, black obsidian daggers.

I shrugged the flat automatic in the shoulder holster into a more comfortable position and started after the guy who wore evening clothes in the morning. I nodded familiarly to the doorkeeper, who had broad shoulders, a crew cut and a pleasant, sunburned face, and I started through the doorway.

I stopped abruptly, as if I had walked into a glass wall. I rubbed my nose ruefully.

“Where’s your name card?” the doorkeeper asked.

“Name card?” I said. I snapped my fingers. “I knew I forgot something. But you know me. Casey from Kansas City? Met you here last year. Don’t you remember my face?”

He frowned. “How would I remember your face?”

That stopped me. Why couldn’t he remember my face — outside of the fact that he had never seen it before? He didn’t recognize me, but that was all right. He didn’t expect to!

“Maybe I’ve got the card in my pocket,” I said.

I began rummaging hopefully through the pockets of my gray flannel suit. There was only one way to go from here — back the way I came — but I could make it graceful. And then I felt something slick and rectangular in my right-hand coat pocket. Slowly I pulled it out. It was a name card.

The young man looked at it and nodded. “Gabriel,” he said. “Wear it from now on. I can’t let anybody in without a card.”

I nodded mechanically and walked cautiously into the large room, but the invisible wall was gone. Just inside the door I stopped and turned the card over.

In the center of the card was a circular seal. Imprinted blackly over it were two lines of type.

“Call me GABRIEL,” it said, “or pay me five dollars.”

That was funny enough, but it wasn’t the funniest part. The card had no business in my pocket. No one could have put it there. The suit had just come back from the cleaners. I had put it on just before I came out this morning.

“Gabriel,” I muttered to myself. One of the archangels. Carried messages and blew trumpets. That was a hell of a name for a man.

Covention. Brass doors with eyes in them. Invisible walls. Angels. I shivered. It was getting to be a habit.

The Crystal Room was pleasant enough. It wasn’t the biggest meeting room in the hotel, but it was one of the most attractive. A huge crystal chandelier hung from the center of the ceiling. Two smaller ones flanked it on either side. The ceiling and walls were painted a deep rose. The carpet on the floor was burgundy. The hanging crystal picked up rose and red, alternating, blending, flashing as they swayed gently and tinkled together.

A makeshift stage had been put up at the other end of the room. It was draped in black, and a black curtain hung behind it. Several chairs were lined up neatly at the back of the stage. In front of them was a lectern. Between me and the platform were rows of wooden chairs; I counted thirteen rows of thirteen chairs each. A few of the chairs were occupied, but most of the people in the room were standing, clustered into small groups, chatting. I looked them over carefully, but my man wasn’t among them.

The scene was typical of hundreds of professional meetings that take place in hundreds of hotel rooms every day all over the country. Once a year men and women assemble to discuss their single shared interest, to talk shop, to listen to the latest advances, to raise standards. And to indulge in some heavy drinking, character assassination, and idle — and not so idle — flirtations.

The men here were distinguished and well dressed, although none of them were in evening clothes. The women — there were fewer of them — were all young and beautiful. I’d never seen so many beautiful women in one room before, not even when I tailed one wandering spouse backstage at a Broadway musical.

But what was their profession? Doctor, lawyer, college professor? It was a meeting of — what?

If I moved a few steps to the right, I could get a better look at a Junoesque redhead. I moved a few steps to the right. My foot caught. I stumbled. As I pitched forward, my arms reached out for support. They closed around something. It was softly rounded and yielding. It gasped. I looked up into a pair of blue eyes that were crinkled with sudden laughter. I was pressed tightly against one of the most delightful figures it has been my luck to be pressed tightly against.

“You see?” a soft, low voice said. “Redheads are unlucky.”

“For who?” I muttered.

“I don’t think you will fall down now,” she said, “if you let go.”

I straightened and let my arms drop at my sides. “I must have stumbled over something.” I looked down at the red carpet suspiciously. But there was nothing to stumble over.

“It’s better to stumble than to fall,” she said. “Especially for La Voisin. She’s a hag, really. Fifty if she’s a day.”

I took another look at the redhead. “I don’t believe it.”

She shrugged lightly, and I took a good look at her for the first time. She was only pretty; the rest of the women in the room were beautiful. Her blue eyes and dark hair made an interesting contrast, but her features had small imperfections. Her eyes were too large, her nose was too small and turned up a little at the end; her mouth was too generous, her chin, too stubborn. Now that I was straightened up, she reached only to my chin. But her skin was smooth cream, and her figure was — well, I mentioned that before.

She seemed to be in her early twenties, which gave me almost a decade on her. The other women didn’t look much older, it was true, but there was a maturity to them, and a youthfulness in her that revealed itself in an impish grin. She knew she was being inspected, and she didn’t care.

She laughed again. It was a pleasing, girlish sound. “Have a program, Gabriel.”

She handed me a booklet from a stack beside her. I took it, wondering if her eyesight was unusually good. It would have to be to read my name plate. I still had it in my hand.

I leaned forward to read the name on the card attached to the exciting slope of her white, knit dress.

“Call me ARIEL,” it said, “or pay me five dollars.”

“Ariel?” I said. “Where’s Prospero?”

“He’s dead,” she said simply.

“Oh,” I said. That was the trouble with being an uninitiate. You couldn’t say anything for fear of saying the wrong thing. “Thanks for the program, Ariel. And the support.”

“Any time,” she said.

I started to turn away. A large, jovial man with white hair barred my path.

“Ariel,” he said over my head. “It was sad news about your father. The society won’t seem the same.”

She murmured something while I glanced at the card on the broad chest in front of me. It demanded that it be called Samael.

“It’s a disgrace that he’s got you here passing out programs like a neophyte,” Samael said. “You should be up on the platform with the others.”

“Nonsense,” she said. “I volunteered. And in spite of what my father was, I’m just an apprentice.”

“Tut-tut,” he said. I listened with fascination. I didn’t think anyone said “Tut-tut” anymore. “You’re an adept if there ever was one. I’d match you against any of them.”

“Excuse me,” I said, trying to squeeze past.

“Samael,” Ariel said. “This is Gabriel.”

The large, red face swiveled around to inspect me. “Gabriel, eh? I’ve heard fine things about you. Great things are expected. Great things indeed.”

He’d heard about me? “You haven’t heard anything until you hear me blow my trumpet.”

“Exactly,” he said. “Exactly.” He turned back to Ariel. “How did your father die, my dear?”

“Oh,” she said slowly, “he just seemed to wither away.”

“Wither!” the word had connotations to the red face that bleached it white. “Oh, dear. Withered, eh?” He was backing away, shaking his head in distress. “Very sad. Very sad indeed. Ah, well, we all must go. Good-by, my dear.”

I looked at Ariel. She was staring sadly after the rapidly disappearing white hair. “That’s what always happens,” she said.

Just then I saw my man come out of a small door in back of the platform and climb to the top of the stage. “Who’s that?” I asked quickly, incautiously, touching her arm.

“I wish I knew,” she said slowly.

“He’s a stranger?” I said, surprised.

“Of course not.”

“Then who is he?”

“He’s the Magus.”

“The Magus.”

“That’s what we call our chairman.”

“But what’s his name?”

“He calls himself Solomon.”

“Or pays five dollars. I know,” I sighed. “See you around, Ariel.”

The seats had begun to fill up, but the back row was still empty. I wandered over and sat down. Overhead the crystal chandeliers tinkled their eternal music. In spite of the fact that I couldn’t feel a breeze.

I wasn’t playing it smart. I was blundering along, giving myself away at every opportunity. The girl, now — she knew I didn’t belong here. But she didn’t seem to care. How many others knew?

It had all seemed so simple at first. Here’s a thousand bucks. Find out a man’s name.

A name, a name. What’s in a name? Gabriel, Ariel, Prospero, Samael, La Voisin (and how the hell did she sneak in?), and now Solomon, the Magus. I should have told the old lady that. I should have said, “What’s in a name?”

I sat there alone in the office for a long time, talking to myself the way I’d got in a habit of doing. It was a bad habit, but it was better than listening to the spiders spinning their webs in the corners and across the door. I sat there flipping a quarter, because it was my last quarter, and telling myself that, if it turned up

heads, I would walk out of the office for the last time and go down and spend the quarter for a hot dog and a cup of coffee and then start looking for some honest work.

But no matter how many times I flipped it, it always came up tails. Finally I let it lay on the blotter.

Casey, you're a dope.

"You're telling me."

Private detective! Private sucker! You can be talked into anything.

"Don't rub it in."

"Why waste your life teaching? Start living. Get where the money is!" Junior partner! Junior moron!

"I know. I know."

He's gone. The money's gone. Neither one of 'em's coming back. Get out of here. Get a job. Start teaching again.

"In the middle of the semester?"

Get a job, then, where you don't need brains. Because you haven't got any.

And I stared down at the quarter and thought about a joint bank account that was no more and a partner who was in South America or South Africa or south New Jersey, and when I looked up the little old, gray-haired lady was looking lost in the big chair. It was the one respectable piece of furniture in the office, except for the desk and that was somewhat marred by my heels. The chair, of course, was due to be repossessed any day now.

I must have looked startled. I hadn't heard her come in.

"I knocked, but you didn't seem to hear me," she said. Her faded blue eyes twinkled. "Shall we talk business?"

"Business?" I said.

"I want you to find a man."

"Who?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't need a detective, would I?" she asked briskly. "He'll be coming into the lobby of the hotel around the corner between nine-thirty and ten o'clock tomorrow morning. You won't have any trouble recognizing him. I'm sure he'll be tall and slim, with dark hair, graying around the temples, very distinguished-looking. He'll be wearing evening clothes."

"At ten o'clock in the morning?"

"Oh, yes. And he'll have a pentacle in his lapel."

"A what?"

"A five-pointed star, made of gold and engraved with symbols."

I nodded as if I understood. It was a good piece of acting. "What do you mean, you're sure he'll look

like this and that? Haven't you seen him before?"

"Oh, yes. I saw him yesterday. I'm sure he won't trouble to change."

"Change what?" I asked with heavy sarcasm. "His clothes or his face?"

"Either. But I can see I'm confusing you. Oh, dear."

Confusing me. That was the understatement of the year. My head was spinning like the wheels of a slot machine. I should have called the whole thing off right then, but I looked down at the top of the desk and hit the jackpot. Beside the quarter was a rectangular piece of paper printed green. In each corner was a figure "1" followed by three lovely symbols for nothing. One by one the wheels clunked to a stop. This I could understand. I picked up the bill and turned it over. I crinkled it gently. It seemed genuine.

I looked at the little old lady sitting in the chair, her spectacles perched on the end of her nose, and I didn't remember seeing or hearing her get up to approach the table.

"Will that be enough?" she asked anxiously.

"To start on," I said, and I was lost. "Let me get this straight. He'll be coming into the hotel lobby about ten in the morning. I spot him. I tail him —"

"And make very certain he doesn't know you're doing it. Very certain. It could be dangerous."

"Dangerous, eh?" I stared at the bill in my hand. Maybe it wasn't so big after all. Not that I'm afraid of danger. Not in moderate amounts. I just wasn't sure I wanted a thousand bucks' worth. "I tail him, and then what?"

"You find out his name."

"His name?"

"His real name."

"I see, he's going under an alias."

She hesitated. "I guess that's what you call it. But you must remember that he's very skillful at — at disguises. If you see him get in a car and see someone get out later looking much, much different, you mustn't be surprised. His name will be the one I want."

"I get it," I said. I really did. The old lady had a monomania. She had been looking under her bed for so long that she had started seeing things. And now she wanted to know his name. You wouldn't have suspected it, just looking at her, but monomaniacs are usually completely normal except on one subject. Nobody would show up in the lobby. I would charge her for a day's work and expenses and give the rest of the money back to her. Hell, if I turned her down, she might go to someone who wasn't ethical, who would give her a fake name and keep the whole thousand. It was the only thing to do. Also I was hungry. "Where will I get in touch with you, Miss — Miss —?"

"Mrs.," she said. "Mrs. Peabody. You won't." She hopped up spryly. "I'll get in touch with you." I got a final faded-blue flash of twinkling eyes as she swept out the door and was gone.

I leaped to my feet and reached the door in three strides. I tore it open and looked down the corridor both ways. Blankly. The corridor was empty. I had wanted to ask her something. I had wanted to ask the name the man was going under, his alias. Mrs. Peabody had really hired herself a detective.

Casey —

“Shut up!” I snarled.

I went back to the desk and studied the bill for a long time. I almost didn't make it to the bank.

Solomon. That was his name. So what? There were lots of people named Solomon. I knew one myself. Sol the Tailor. But he had a last name. You don't go up to a person and say, “I'm Solomon.” Not unless you want the other person to reply wittily, “And I'm the Queen of Sheba.” It wasn't such a hot alias.

I looked down at the program. It had a shiny black cover. Across the top it said:

THIRTEENTH ANNUAL
COVENTION OF THE MAGI
October 30 and 31

In the middle was a seal, an odd-looking thing of two concentric circles enclosing what looked like the plan of an Egyptian burial pyramid. Not the pyramid itself but the corridors and hidden chambers and transepts, or whatever they're called. In the corridors and between the two circles were printed letters in a foreign alphabet I didn't recognize.

The seal looked familiar. I looked at my name card. The same seal.

I leafed through the program. There were the usual advertisements. I read them with interest. They would give me a clue to the society.

One of them was illustrated with engraved five-pointed stars. “PENTACLES OF GUARANTEED EFFICACY,” it said. “Consecrated. Guaranteed. P. O. Box —”

Pentacles. I didn't know what they were, but if I ever needed one, I'd know where to get it. Guaranteed, too.

Another ad touted a book entitled: *One Hundred Spells for All Occasions. Revised, with Mathematical and Verbal Equivalents Printed Side by Side.* “Satisfaction or Your Money Back.”

Spells? I frowned.

There was a long list of books that could be obtained from the Thaumaturgical Book Shop for prices ranging upward from one hundred dollars. All were listed as manuscript copies. Heading the list were *The Grand Grimoire*, *Constitution of Honorius*, *Magia Naturalis et Innaturalis*, *Black Raven*, *D. Joh. Faust's Geister und Hollenzwang*, *Der Grosse und Gewaltige Hollenzwang*. Farther down, the list shifted into Latin: *Sigillum Salomonis*, *Schemhamphoras Solomonis Regis*, *De Officio Spirituum*, *Lemegeton* ...

At the bottom, all by itself, was *Clavicula Solomonis*. “The true *Key of Solomon*. In his own hand.” That was priced at ten thousand dollars. At that, it was dirt cheap. I shook my head. A manuscript written by Solomon himself!

I skipped over the page of the day's program and continued my inspection of the ads. You never realize the fantastic things you can buy until you chance upon a specialized bulletin like this.

Magic wands (cut from virgin hazel with one blow of a new sword), quill pens (from the third feather of the right wing of a male goose), arthames (tempered in mole blood), black hens and hares, nails (from the coffin of an executed criminal), graveyard dust (guaranteed ...

It was fascinating. Also, it identified the nature of the society. It was a professional organization for stage magicians. The names they used were their stage names. The things advertised were their tools, their props. Still, it was all so serious. "Guaranteed. Satisfaction or Your Money Back," The words and phrases were everywhere. Nothing was labeled as an illusion.

I shrugged. It was some kind of esoteric joke. I turned back to the list of the day's activities and puzzled over it for a moment. It was headed October 30, and it was the only page. Where was the one for October 31? I shrugged again. I decided I had been given a defective program.

I glanced down the page:

OCTOBER 30

10:30	SPE LL and GRE ETI NGS by the MA GUS
10:45	WIT CHC RAF T — A DER IVA TIO N
10:50	SAF ETY IN NU MBE RS — THE COV EN
11:00	THE ELE ME NTS OF THE ART (with exam ples)

11:30	CON TAG ION — WH Y SPE LLS ARE CAT CHI NG
12:00	IMIT ATI ON — THE SIN CER EST FOR M OF SOR CER Y
12:30	CAL CUL US, THE HIG H ROA D TO BET TER FOR MU LAE
1:00	Rece
3:00	ss PRA CTI CAL USE S FOR FAM ILIA RS

4:00 ALE
XAN
DER
HA
MIL
TON
'S
COR
BIE
5:00 LYC
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ION

That stopped me. I was sweating and the sweat was cold. I knew what lycanthropy was. It meant people turning into werewolves, and they were going to demonstrate it. They were crazy, all of them, and the sooner I was out of here, the happier I would be.

“You don’t belong here,” someone said softly.

I looked around quickly. Ariel was sitting beside me, her head close to mine. In other circumstances I would have enjoyed it. Now I drew back a little. “You’re telling me,” I said. “I mean, why do you think that?”

“It’s obvious. You didn’t know Solomon. You act like a stranger. And I happen to know that Gabriel is dead.”

“Did he wither away?” My voice was shaking.

“No, he was hit by a car while he was crossing a street. I don’t think anybody else knows.”

I was wearing a dead man’s card. “That does it,” I said, getting up. “I’m leaving.”

She had hold of my coat. She was yanking it vigorously. “Sit down,” she whispered, looking around anxiously. I sat down. “You can’t leave now,” she said. “They’d get suspicious. And they don’t take any chances. I won’t give you away. Wait until recess, when everybody leaves.”

I pointed a shaky finger at the program. “But this — this —”

She looked at me, and her eyes were wide and blue and innocent. “It’s only magic.”

“Magic!” I squeaked. “Real, honest-to-God magic?”

“Of course,” she said. “What did you think it was?”

I had ideas on the subject, and they didn’t coincide with hers. Magic? Madness was more like it. The only question was who was crazy: she, all of them, or me? *She* didn’t look crazy. The rest of them didn’t look crazy. They looked like handsome, intelligent people gathered together to discuss their profession. Magic? Oh, no! Not today. Not here and now in a big metropolitan hotel with the sun shining and cars in the street outside and airplanes flying overhead and people going about all the little details of their

everyday business.

Spells and magic wands and graveyard dust. Witchcraft and formulae and sorcery.

“Ouch!” I said.

“What’s the matter?” Ariel asked anxiously.

I rubbed my thigh. I was awake all right. It was bad news. If *I* wasn’t asleep and *they* weren’t crazy, *I* was the one who was off his rocker.

The man called Solomon was on his feet, standing behind the lectern. Everybody else was seated, and the place was almost filled. Against the black drapes, Solomon’s face floated whitely above a triangular expanse of shirt front, and his disembodied white hands hovered in the air for silence. They got it.

He began to speak. His voice was low and resonant and clear, and I couldn’t understand a word he said. His fluttering hands gestured a strange accompaniment. He finished, smiled, and launched into a general welcoming speech to the society that could have been repeated word for word to any professional meeting in the country.

Ariel leaned toward me. “The first thing was an Egyptian spell,” she whispered. “Asking that we be blessed every day.”

“Damned decent of him,” I growled, but it was to hide the fact that I did feel happier. Well, not happier exactly. There was a word for it, but I didn’t want to use it. Blessed.

The first five speakers on the program were as dry as only the learned can be when they are discussing their specialties. Even the audience of initiates grew restless as they expounded their technicalities and quibbled over minutiae.

And I sat in a state of shock. They were being dull about magic. They were being pedantic about sorcery. And a pragmatic belief in its existence as a practical, usable force lay behind everything they said.

One of them demonstrated, etymologically, that witchcraft is the art or craft of the wise. Another pointed out the significance of the medieval satanist groups of thirteen, which were called “covens,” and why their annual meeting had been named as it was this year, and the thirteen rows of chairs in the room, each with thirteen chairs in it, and the number of people in attendance — exactly one hundred and sixty-nine.

The audience murmured. Ariel stirred beside me. “I don’t like it,” she said. “I was afraid of this.”

If I had not been dazed by a continual bombardment of the impossible, I might have come out of the meeting with a liberal education in the theory and practice of magic. The next three speakers went into it thoroughly.

Terms swirled around me. Demonstrations went on in front of my eyes. Spells, rites, the condition of the performer. Faith and works. Sir James Frazer. The reservoir of psychic power. Twisting columns of smoke assumed subhuman, leering faces; a beautiful girl in a bathing suit materialized out of the air and posed prettily for the audience; a tall, cool drink appeared in a speaker’s hand and was drained thirstily.

Contagion. The association of ideas by contiguity in space or time. The part is equal to the whole. Hair. Nail clippings. The law of contact.

Imitation. The association of ideas by similarity. An effect can be produced by imitating it. Wax images.

Homeopathy. The law of similarity.

Demonstrations. I held onto my seat.

The final speaker of the morning climbed slowly to the stage from the floor. For some reason, he had not been given a seat with the rest of the speakers. He was a little man, rosy-cheeked, with a fringe of white hair encircling a bald spot that gleamed pinkly from the stage as he bent over a thick, bound manuscript.

He looked out over the audience hopefully and read a few introductory paragraphs in a high, sprightly voice. His thesis was that developments in higher mathematics had made psychic phenomena truly controllable for the first time in history. He implied that the society had been founded on this theory, that its purpose had been to develop the theory into a workable science, and he suggested that these things had been allowed to slip overboard — if they had not been purposefully jettisoned for something darker and less significant.

The audience murmured. There was a note of uneasiness in it. The speaker peered over the lectern benignly.

“Who’s that?” I whispered to Ariel.

She was sitting up very straight, her eyes roaming over the audience. “Uriel,” she said, and sighed.

In spite of this, Uriel said, he had been going ahead with the research as originally planned, and he now proposed to give the society a summary of the results.

He asked for a blackboard, and, like every other lecturer I’ve ever seen, he had trouble getting it on the stage. Two young men struggled with it, stumbling, juggling, catching the feet on unsuspected projections. When it was finally in place, it effectively barred Solomon and the previous speakers from the view of the audience, but the board seemed to have a life of its own. It kept jiggling and jumping while Uriel was trying to write on it.

The audience tittered.

Uriel stepped back and turned his head to scan the upturned faces below him. He sighed as if he were accustomed to this sort of thing. “We have practical jokers,” he observed. “That is quickly remedied. You are all familiar with the usual verbal formula, which sometimes works and more often does not. Mathematically it is done like this.”

He drew two crude arrows on the blackboard. They pointed down at the floor. Above them he scribbled a formula that looked vaguely familiar to me, filled with elongated “f’s” and little triangles which were, I supposed, the Greek letter delta. The moment Uriel wrote down the last symbol the board stopped jiggling.

“Now,” he said, like a patient professor with a backward class, “let us proceed.”

And then he launched, unfortunately, into a history of calculus, beginning with Newton and Leibnitz, which bored everyone in the audience except a few who may have been professional mathematicians. And me. A little of my college mathematics came back, and the idea fascinated me. This was the first thing I could really understand. Magic as a science and mathematics as the key to it.

“The merit of calculus,” Uriel concluded, “is that it expresses concisely and accurately what verbal equivalents only approximate. Accuracy is what is needed, accuracy and limitation. How many times have you summoned something, a glass, say, from the kitchen, only to have your table littered with glasses? Accuracy. Accuracy and limitation. If you want to improve your formulae, know your calculus.”

And he turned to the blackboard, scribbled a formula on it and the blackboard disappeared. Just like that. Without smoke, curtains or prestidigitation. I blinked. There was a smattering of applause. He nodded and trotted off the stage.

Ariel was clapping beside me.

“They didn’t seem to like that very much,” I whispered.

“Oh, they’re too lazy to learn anything that complicated. It’s a wonderful help, really, and Uriel’s a dear, getting up every year and trying to help them. And they just laugh at him behind his back.”

Those who had not sneaked out during Uriel’s talk were getting up to leave. The morning session was over. We got up, too. I walked, dazed, into the corridor with Ariel. I didn’t believe it. I tried to convince myself that I didn’t believe it. But I had heard it and seen it. It was true. These weren’t stage magicians with their illusions and distracting patter. They were the real thing. In the middle of the twentieth century. They practiced magic, and it worked, and they held conventions, just like veterans and dentists and lawyers and a thousand other groups and professions.

And they were less suspected than if they had met atop Brocken on Walpurgis Night.

“Ariel!” I said. “Ariel!” She was getting away from me, and she was my one bridge to reality. “I’ve got to talk with you.”

“My company comes high,” she said.

I frowned. “How much?”

“A steak,” she said. “About that thick.” She held out her fingers two inches apart.

“Sold.”

There were fifty people waiting for the elevators. “Let’s walk,” Ariel suggested.

We started down the stairs.

“What’s to stop me from telling the world?” I asked abruptly.

“Who’d believe you?”

“Nobody,” I said gloomily. It was obvious what would happen. *Magicians? Sure, Casey. I know just the person who should hear all about it. Come along. Come along quietly. Don’t get violent.* “It works,” I said. “It would be worth millions if it were brought out into the open.”

“If you had a mint,” Ariel asked, “would you rent it out?”

“But some of the things that are useless to most people are invaluable to others. Like rain. Nobody normally has much use for rain except a farmer or a city with an empty reservoir.”

“All today’s rainmakers don’t use silver iodide or dry ice,” she said, smiling. “The most successful sprinkle water on the dust. Secretly, of course.”

I awoke to the fact that we had been walking down these steps for a long time, and I saw that they continued downward without turning until they vanished in the murk of the distance. I looked back the way we had come. The steps went up and up, unending. The walls were smooth and unbroken.

Panicky, I turned to Ariel. "Where the hell are we?"

"Oh, dear," she said, looking around. "It looks very much like a trap."

"A trap?" I shouted.

"A maze." She caught my hand and patted it. "There's really nothing to be alarmed about. It's very simple. We'll just have to sit down until I can get my bearings. People have starved in these, of course, but there's really no danger as long as you keep your head."

She sank down on a step. I collapsed beside her. She took some bobby pins out of her hair and began to bend them.

"You can talk if you wish," she said, her hands busy. "It won't disturb me."

"How long have people been able to do things like this?" I asked shakily.

"Not long. Unless you count the Chaldeans and the Minoans, and we can't be certain about them. In recorded history, it has been a haphazard business. Someone might stumble on the right formula and procedure, but he wouldn't tell, and the knowledge would die with him. The groundwork wasn't laid until my father and Uriel began experimenting with mathematical expressions of old spells."

"How did the rest of them get into the act?"

"Uriel wanted to give it to the world, publish it in a mathematical journal, you know. That sort of thing. But Father said they would be laughed at and locked up. He wanted everything investigated and documented before they disclosed anything. So he and Uriel recruited a few trusted friends and formed the society to compare results and present papers and decide policy."

I looked far down the steps and shivered. "Nice friends."

"It grew," she said ruefully. "One member would present a friend of his for consideration. And then there have always been a certain number of practicing magicians and witches, in any period. Not adepts, you understand, but getting results occasionally. They found out about the society. It couldn't be hidden from them. They demanded admittance, and Father decided it would be better to have them where they could be watched and where they would have to obey the rules. But —"

She stopped. I looked up. Her eyes were filled with tears. As I watched, one spilled over and ran down her cheek. I handed her my handkerchief. She wiped her eyes and smiled at me as she handed it back.

"That was silly," she said.

"Go on."

"But it didn't work out that way. Gradually the others took control and turned the society in other directions. Now it's just a social group without any real power, and the Art is used for all sorts of personal gratifications. So last year Father, as Magus, proposed that it was time to make the Art public. Private research had done its part. The Art could best be furthered by general participation and discussion. He was voted down. He gave them an ultimatum. He would give them a year to think about it. If they didn't agree in that time, he and Uriel would reveal it."

"And then?" I prompted with a shiver of premonition.

"A month later he died."

“Murder?” I exclaimed.

“He just seemed to wither away,” she said. “Come on.” She got up. In her hands was a V-shaped wire made of bobby pins twisted together. She held the two ends, muttered something under her breath and walked up a few steps holding the wire stiffly out in front of her. Or maybe it was pulling her.

She stopped and turned toward one blank wall. I scrambled up after her, just in time to see her step through the wall. I stared at the wall with startled eyes. I was alone.

A white hand reached out from the wall, like the Lady in the Lake reaching up for Excalibur. It took my hand and led me forward. I closed my eyes as the wall approached. When I opened them, I was in the hotel lobby.

I looked back. The open stairs went up to a landing, turned and ascended toward the mezzanine. I faced Ariel. My knees were trembling but I managed to keep my voice steady.

“What would have happened if we had kept going down?”

But that was one question she refused to answer.

Ariel got her steak. It was broiled, medium-rare, and she ate with an appetite that was a pleasure to watch. I was growing quite fond of Ariel. She was pretty, talented, natural —

I started talking quickly. I had remembered her talent.

“People don’t just wither away,” I said.

“Just before he died, Father told Uriel that somebody had said a Mass of St. Sécaire for him. But by then his mind was wandering.”

“A what?”

“A Black Mass. He said that he’d been wrong. They should have given the Art to the world as soon as they had proof.”

“Or, better yet, burned it,” I said gloomily.

“They thought of that. But somebody else would have discovered it. Somebody less scrupulous. Like some of the people who wormed their way into the society.”

I returned to her father. The subject had a horrible fascination for me. “Can they do that? Make a man wither away?”

She shrugged. “Father was always so careful. He burned his nail clippings and hair combings. We haven’t dared experiment with things like that, Gabriel, but some —”

“My name isn’t Gabriel,” I said disgustedly. “It’s —”

“Sh-h-h,” she said, looking around fearfully. “You mustn’t speak your real name. Anyone who knows it has power over you. That must have been what happened to Father. Several people knew his name. One of them must have mentioned it.”

“To whom?”

She looked cautiously around the restaurant again. “To Solomon. He’s always been Father’s rival, and

he was the leader of the party that opposed making the Art public. And now that Father is dead, Solomon has made himself Magus. No one will ever again suggest releasing the Art.”

“But couldn’t anybody talk? Couldn’t you and Uriel tell the newspapers or somebody?”

She grew pale. “Oh, *we couldn’t!* You don’t know what Solomon could do! Only Father had a chance of defying him, and Father is dead. Did you notice how feeble Uriel looked today. I’m scared, Gabriel. If Uriel goes, I’ll be all alone.”

“But if you had his name,” I said slowly, “you’d have a weapon against him. He would be helpless.”

“That’s right,” she said eagerly. “Could you do that? Could you find out his name, Gabriel? I’d pay you. I’d —”

I frowned. “What do you think I am?”

She paused as if she were considering the question for the first time. “I don’t know,” she said quietly. “What are you?”

“A private detective,” I said. “And I’ve got a client.”

“It isn’t Solomon, is it?” she asked quickly.

I thought about it for a moment and shook my head. “No, it isn’t Solomon.”

“Then couldn’t you do this, too? What does your other client want?”

“The same as you.”

“Then it wouldn’t hurt to tell me, would it, Gabriel?” she said anxiously. “Please, Gabriel.” Her blue eyes pleaded with me. I looked into them as long as I dared. My eyes fell away.

“I guess not,” I said.

She breathed again. “Who is your other client?”

I shrugged. “A Mrs. Peabody. A little old lady. Know her?”

She shook her head impatiently. “It could be anybody. Don’t you see? We all go under assumed names when we’re together, and most of us change our appearances, too, so that we won’t be recognized.”

I sat up straight. “You mean that you don’t really look like this?”

“Oh, not me,” she said. She smiled innocently. “Everybody knows me.”

“That makes it even tougher to pin down Solomon. No name. No face. If we assume he’s American, male and adult, we only have about sixty million people to choose from.” Suddenly I snapped my fingers and got up.

“What’s the matter?”

“Idea.”

I breezed into the lobby and up to the desk. Charlie looked up respectfully, but his face fell into more familiar lines as he recognized me.

“The fellow who told you how to put that notice on the board,” I said. “Is he registered here?”

Charlie scowled at me. “Tricks?” he said.

“No tricks. Scout’s honor!”

“Penthouse,” he said.

“How’d he register?”

Charlie shuffled through a stack of cards and flipped one out on the desk. I looked at it hopefully. Then my heart sank down in the pit of my stomach. In bold black letters on the card was printed the name: “SOLOMON MAGUS.”

He was bold and confident. He flaunted himself and the society in the face of the world, sure of its blindness. But did his daring approach the foolhardy? Was he getting overbold, overconfident? It was a key to his character. It might be the key to his downfall.

I wondered what he was building himself up to.

“Thanks,” I said, and went back to Ariel. “What was the meaning of that trap?” I asked. “Why did they do it?”

She put down her coffee cup. “That was a warning.”

“To you or to me?”

“I’d thought it was to me,” she said slowly. “But now —”

“Yeah,” I said. “Be good or else.”

“What are you going to do?” Ariel asked, her eyes fixed on me.

“I don’t like warnings,” I said.

Ariel and I parted after agreeing that it would be safer if we weren’t seen together again. I sat through the afternoon program alone. It made a difference.

I was more attentive and more frightened. Magic! It was real and prosaic, and the latter was the worst of the two. It was a casual, everyday thing, done by the light of the sun; they accepted it, like the water that comes out of a pipe when you twist a faucet or the lights that come on when you flick a switch or the voice that comes out of a telephone. It was something you lived with.

A man talked about familiars and their practical uses. An unseen hand turned the pages of his manuscript; a glass raised itself to his mouth. I thought to myself that it could have been done just as easily and with perhaps less effort by hand.

“Proof!” someone shouted from the audience.

Solomon was beside the speaker. He was lean, dark and compelling. “Will the person who spoke stand and make his objection clear?”

Uriel stood up. I saw his pink bald spot gleaming. “What proof does the speaker have of the existence of familiars? Where does this mysterious intelligence come from?”

“You’ve just seen — “ the speaker began, motioning to the glass and the manuscript.

“Telekinesis.” Uriel scoffed. “Anyone here could do that without predicating a familiar.”

The leaves of the manuscript fluttered wildly. The glass rose in the air, spun rapidly and dropped gently to the lectern.

“Child’s play,” Uriel snorted.

“What point do you wish to make?” Solomon asked, frowning.

“I wish to register a protest against the trend of this ‘covention,’ as you insist on calling it. Covens. Familiars. Is this the type of research the society should approve? Is this the kind of investigation the society was set up to consider? It smacks, sir, of rank superstition.”

A murmur ran through the audience.

“Then you do not believe in the spirit world?” Solomon asked with quiet malice.

“No, sir,” Uriel said. “I do not. And I do not believe in slipshod investigations and wild surmises without any scientific basis. I ask a vote of disapproval.”

Solomon looked out over the audience with a dark, cold eye. “Is there a second?”

A moment of silence was broken by a voice I recognized. “I second,” someone said. It was Ariel.

A brief smile twisted Solomon’s lips. “All in favor.”

Two voices were raised. I sat back, silent and afraid.

“It seems,” Solomon said, smiling more broadly, “That the motion has failed.”

Alexander Hamilton’s corbie turned out to be a cat, and Alexander Hamilton an English witch, in Lothian. The speaker used it as a takeoff point for a general summary of divining and augury. Undaunted, Uriel rose to protest against the unwarranted assumption that the future can be known and that these medieval ideas had any validity.

“Proof,” he demanded. “Proof.”

Solomon thanked him for his contribution. The audience chuckled. It was obvious that whatever prestige Uriel had was vanishing under Solomon’s treatment.

“Now,” said Solomon, “perhaps we can give Uriel some of the proof he has been demanding.”

I realized, with a shock, that the next speaker’s subject was “LYCANTHROPY — A DEMONSTRATION.”

He brought props with him: some unusually shaped lights that were plugged in but not turned on and a dark, frightened young man whom he installed in a chair at the back of the stage.

After going through a historical discussion of lycanthropy and the geographical distribution of the supposed myth, he described his research into the possible truth of the phenomena. He had found a subject in one of his own classes who confessed to strange appetites and stranger dreams. One evening, by the light of the full moon, the speaker saw the subject change.

In order to make this demonstration, the speaker had duplicated with these lights the constituent part of the moonlight that stimulated the cell changes. He motioned the young man to the front of the stage. The man came with the gait of a sleepwalker.

“Watch carefully!” the speaker said. And he flicked on the lights.

As the young man was bathed in silver, Uriel was on his feet protesting. The growing murmur of the audience drowned him out. Because the young man was changing.

His dark face grew darker and sharper. His jaw thrust forward horribly. As his arms and legs shriveled and shortened, he dropped to all fours. He was hairy. He shook himself free from the encumbering clothes, and the wide mouth in the pointed muzzle opened to let a long tongue loll out between sharp, white teeth. His eyes gleamed redly in the light. A growl started deep in his throat. He crouched.

A woman screamed.

And he sprang. He sprang straight for Uriel.

There was shouting and scurrying and the crashing sounds of upset chairs as people sprang aside. Uriel stood straight and unafraid, a small, white-haired figure, oddly courageous and alone. He pointed a finger at the leaping wolf and muttered something I couldn't hear.

The animal crashed into an unseen wall. It dropped among the chairs, tried to get up, but failed and lay among the splintered wood snarling at its left hind leg. The leg was obviously broken. The wolf whimpered as it touched the leg with its muzzle. It was a strange, pitiful sound.

Uriel bent over the animal and marked a few symbols on the floor with a piece of chalk. There was no longer a wolf on the floor. In its stead was the young man, naked, his face twisted with pain.

Crouching beside him, Uriel drew a broken line on the floor, marked out a mathematical formula, and joined the broken line with another chalk mark. A look of dazed relief spread over the young man's face. He felt his leg incredulously. It was no longer crooked.

Uriel helped the young man to his feet, whispered a few words in his ear, patted him on the arm and motioned toward the door. The man left, glancing back fearfully. Uriel's face, as he turned it toward the stage, was stern and hard. No one had moved.

“This has summed up the present leadership of the society,” he said grimly. His high-pitched voice had deepened. “A morbid delving into mysteries better left untouched. A wanton disregard for the sacred rights of the individual. A degradation of precious talents and knowledge.

“Lycanthropy! A psychological state associated with hysteria; a pathological condition of depraved appetite. In this case, abetted by hypnosis and sorcery. It is a matter of record that the Malays often induced lycanthropy in such persons of extreme suggestibility, who are known as *latah*. They will torture that boy no more.”

He turned to the audience. “Will you approve this, too?”

They moved uneasily, but no one spoke. A few glanced toward the stage, where Solomon leaned against the lectern, staring down calmly, undisturbed.

Uriel swung back, his lip curling. He pointed a finger at Solomon. The Magus straightened quickly. Uriel laughed.

“You needn’t worry. I won’t use my power against my fellowman except in self-defense.” But Uriel gave the last words peculiar emphasis. “You think you are wise. You are foolish. You think you know everything. You know nothing. As the surviving co-founder of this society, I disavow the leadership. I disavow the society. And I leave you this thought to consider: I will not permit the Art to be used for evil.”

He turned and stalked out of the room, small and defiant. As I watched, uncertain, Ariel followed, calling, “Uriel, Uriel!” At the door she turned. “You cowards!” she said. Before she hurried after the little mathematician, her eyes met mine appealingly.

Appealingly. What did she want of me? That I find out the name of the mysterious Solomon? Or something more?

While I thought about it, the meeting broke up. Some of the audience walked toward the door in little groups, talking excitedly. A few of them gathered around the stage, around Solomon. The redheaded La Voisin was among them. Her figure was magnificent; her hair was striking; her face was exquisite. But they no longer appealed to me. I compared them unfavorably with the figure and face of a girl who was only pretty, but who was real.

I noticed, too late, that I was sitting all alone in the room, except for the group at the stage. It was too late because Solomon’s intense black eyes were fixed on me curiously even as he was talking to the others. He broke off.

“Sir,” he said, not raising his voice but projecting it at me so that it seemed to come from a few feet away, “we would be honored if you would join us.”

Join them. It was the last thing in the world I wanted to do, in either sense, but it would be the most dangerous kind of cowardice to break for the door.

“The honor,” I said, “is mine.”

I walked toward the stage, feeling myself dissected by the gaze of the four men and the one woman. And the woman’s eyes held a kind of personal inquisitiveness that made me colder than the rest.

“Gabriel, eh?” Solomon mused when I was close enough for my badge to be read.

La Voisin looked surprised. “But I thought — “ She stopped abruptly.

I was glancing at her name card. It was difficult to read. Her magnificent bosom tilted the card almost horizontal, but I made out the first name. “Catherine.” Catherine La Voisin. It still meant nothing to me.

“You thought what, my dear?” Solomon asked, beating me to it.

“I thought Gabriel would be much different,” she completed smoothly. Her eyes narrowed excitingly as she looked at me with erotic interest.

But it wasn’t what she had been about to say. We all knew that.

“Well, Gabriel,” Solomon said, “what is your opinion of this afternoon’s activities?”

“Very interesting,” I said.

He smiled with real amusement. Perhaps he enjoyed this verbal swordplay. Or perhaps he was contemplating the fate he had planned for me.

“But not as noncommittal as your answer. The sides have been chosen. The body of the society against an old man and a young girl. The question is: Where do you stand?”

“Where I have always stood.”

“Whom are you for?” Catherine broke in.

I looked at her and smiled. “For myself, of course.”

“Of course,” Solomon said, leaning lazily against the lectern, looking down at me. He gave Catherine a quick, reproving glance. “But in this case, self-interest should ally you with the side that will win. There can’t be any doubt about that. And at the risk of being melodramatic, we must insist that all those who are not for us are against us.”

I shrugged. “Understandable. But in a case of this kind, superior numbers do not always indicate superior forces. It seems to me that the issue is still in doubt.”

Solomon’s eyes glittered. “Your name seems to place you on the side of the angels. But names have ceased to mean anything. My admiration for your independence would torment me if we were forced to strike blindly. But perhaps you could give us some reason to trust you.”

“Like what?”

“Like, say,” he appeared to reflect, “like your real name.”

“Certainly,” I agreed. “Providing you give me the same reason to trust you. Starting with” — I let my eyes roam around the group — “starting with you, Magus.”

Solomon laughed. “You are a clever man, Gabriel — and a bold one. I hope you choose the right side. It would be a shame to — lose you.”

“When the time comes,” I said slowly, “you’ll find me on the winning side.”

I nodded to them all, turned and left. I walked quickly to the door and through it.

“Gabriel,” someone said huskily behind me.

I stopped and turned, shivers running up and down my spine. It was Catherine La Voisin, gliding toward me like the figurehead on a sailing ship.

“Gabriel,” she repeated. She stopped only when she was close to me. Very close. “You interest me, Gabriel. There is something very real and male about you.”

I wanted to say that there was something very unreal and female about her, but they left me speechless.

“Are you — perhaps — undisguised?” she asked. She pressed closer.

“Perhaps,” I said. It came out in a kind of gasp. Two firm cones were trying to bore their way into my chest.

“I like you, Gabriel,” she breathed. Her lips came up toward mine.

I looked at them as they approached me like rippling red snakes, held in a sort of frozen fascination. They blurred. My gaze shifted upward to her eyes. They were bottomless, like dark-blue lakes.

Her lips met mine with an electric tingling. They moved. My arms went around her automatically. I felt her hand work up the back of my neck into my hair. I struggled to breathe.

After an eon, she moved slowly back, her eyes heavy-lidded and sleepy. I drew in a deep, harsh breath.

“What was that?” I gasped.

She was walking away from me down the corridor. Her head turned to look back over her shoulder. “That,” she said, smiling slowly, “was a preview.”

An elevator door opened in front of her, and she stepped in. As the doors closed, she was still looking at me, and her smile was strangely triumphant.

I breathed deeply again, feeling unclean. I reached for my handkerchief and scrubbed my lips with it, and the three men who had been with Solomon passed me, smirking. When I took the handkerchief away, it was stained with orange smears, and the three men were gone.

I waited a few minutes more, but Solomon didn't come out. I glanced quickly into the Crystal Room. It was empty. Very empty. It felt hollow. The chandeliers had stopped tinkling.

I walked uneasily to the only other door in the room, the one back of the stage, hesitated in front of it and finally pulled it open, stiffening myself for a shock. But the little room beyond was empty, too. Opposite me another door opened into a large central kitchen and serving area: naked stairs went up and down.

I stepped into the little room and closed the door slowly behind me. I couldn't see the elegant Solomon trotting up or down the serving stairs. But then he hadn't come out by the main door. He had either gone through here or — speculation like this was futile. It was time I stopped playing someone else's game and started playing my own, such as it was.

I looked around the room. Solomon had been here. Some of the others, too, but Solomon I knew about. Except for an empty coat and hat rack, the room was bare. I moved the rack a few inches and noticed something on the floor. I picked it up. It was a rectangular piece of paper. I turned it over. A return-trip airline ticket to Washington, D.C., dated day before yesterday.

I shrugged. Maybe, maybe not. I slipped it into my coat pocket. I searched the rest of the room carefully, but it was obviously wasted energy. I went back into the Crystal Room and looked on the platform and around it and finally noticed a small yellow corner of something sticking out from under the black drapes at the back. I pulled it out. It was a blank manila binder enclosing a thick manuscript of about seventy-five pages, handwritten in a precise, readable script. It was littered with formulas. The first one was:

I vaguely recognized the formula. It had something to do with what was called the “derivative,” an abstract limit. But it had been a long time since I'd had calculus, and I had never been a star pupil in mathematics. But I knew whose manuscript it was. It belonged to Uriel.

There was nothing else under the platform or in the room, and I went out into the corridor with the manuscript under my arm and waited ten minutes for an elevator. It would be months before I could trust stairs again. I stepped out into the lobby and registered for a room. Solomon had me spotted, and I had a strong suspicion that it wouldn't do me any good to run now, even if I wanted to. I wasn't sure I wanted to. But it was time I learned the rules of the game.

Charlie was off duty, and the clerk at the desk was an obliging young man.

“Say,” I said, turning back to the desk as if on impulse, “have you got a girl registered here? A girl named Ariel?”

“Ariel who?”

I shrugged and put on a sly, man-to-man smile. “Hell, I didn’t catch her last name.”

He shuffled through the recent cards. “Not today,” he said.

“Well,” I ventured, “what about an old boy named Uriel?”

He stopped being so obliging. “Ariel? Uriel? What’s the gag?”

“Well,” I said desperately, “what about a little old lady named Mrs. Peabody?”

But he turned away with a withering look of disgust.

I trudged to the elevator, feeling like a man who sits down to a game of poker and finds that everything is wild except the cards he happens to hold, and I went up to the seventh floor and I walked down the hall to my room. I unlocked the door and opened it and stepped into a bottomless black pit through which I went falling, falling, falling ...

I was spinning, my arms and legs reaching desperately for handholds and footholds in the formless night, cart-wheeling madly through the lightless void.

This isn’t real, I told myself, but the thought was twisted away from me by a cold, rushing wind. *Illusion!* I screamed, and I clung desperately to the thought.

Panic tried to force sounds past the tightening muscles of my throat. Tension was growing into rigidity. Through the gathering block I pushed one sane thought: *If this is illusion, if I am not really falling, I am standing just inside the door and the light switch is to my right against the wall.*

It’s a lie, said my reeling senses. But I hugged the thought to me, and my flailing hand reached out and grabbed frantically and —

The lights came on. I was standing just inside the door looking into an ordinary room, and I wondered if I was going mad.

I stepped forward and looked back. On the floor was a piece of shiny black glass, about two feet square. I leaned over and dug a finger between the glass and the carpet and picked it up. I looked into it.

It wasn’t black glass. It was a mirror, but it wasn’t silvered. Instead, the back was painted a shiny black. My face, square and craggy, looked back at me darkly. It almost seemed like another person. I shuddered and turned it over. Scratched in the paint around the edge was an endless string of cabalistic letters, similar to the ones I had noticed on the seal. I pulled the program out of my pocket and compared the two. The same letters, but not in the same order.

I walked to the far wall and leaned the glass carefully against it with the mirror face turned away from me. After a few minutes I stopped shaking.

I slumped into a chair, suddenly aware that I was tireder than I ever remembered being. Shaking my head incredulously, I let the day’s happenings pass in review. Every time disbelief grew too great, I glanced at the black square leaning against the wall.

I was enmeshed in a crazy, fantastic cobwebbery of magic and witchcraft. Faceless, nameless things

crouched like spiders in hidden corners and waited for unwary flies to twitch the web. Gaily I had buzzed in. I was caught. The only way to pull loose was to find out who the spiders were and where they hid. Maybe then they would find a wasp in their web, with a stinger in his tail, who would tear their flimsy strands into worthless pieces.

Who was Mrs. Peabody, the little old lady who had drawn me into this with a crisp, green lure? Was she working against Solomon? Did Ariel and Uriel have an unknown ally? Was she one of Solomon's own confederates seeking protection or trying to take his place? Or had it only been a trick by Solomon, safe in his anonymity, to use me against an undetermined third party?

Who was the red witch, Catherine La Voisin?

Who was Ariel? Who was Uriel? Could I trust them to be as frank and honest as they seemed? A witch and a sorcerer?

And, above all, who was Solomon?

I was fighting against shadows. I was the blind man in a game of blindman's buff. If I could only tear aside the blinders for a moment and see a face —

What had been the purpose of the black mirror? Another warning? Had it said: *Be careful or something really deadly may happen to you?* Or had it been an attempt that failed? That was hard to believe. I didn't know enough to get out of traps.

I'd had enough of stumbling around in the dark. I needed light. I needed knowledge.

I pulled the bound manuscript out of my pocket, took off my coat and tossed it on the bed, unstrapped my shoulder holster and hung it over the back of the chair, where the butt was within easy reach of my hand, stripped off my tie, and settled back in the chair.

I leafed through the manuscript, glancing at headings: *Introduction; Principles; Equipment; Simple Spells; Counter-spells; Teleportation; Illusions; Disguises; Medical and Other Practical Applications*. The last section was entitled *Ethics*.

I went back to the introduction and began to read carefully. The material had been worked and reworked, simplified, boiled down and fitted into a theoretical framework. Diverse phenomena had been noted, their similarities observed, a hypothesis derived to explain them; the hypothesis had been tested, changed and retested, until the theory was evolved and proved sound. In other words, a scientific mind had been at work and had developed out of discredited phenomena a working science.

Unfortunately the manuscript had not been written as a text book. Most of the connective and explanatory material had been omitted. It was a notebook filled with personal jottings perfectly comprehensible to the author, who supplies the background material and examples automatically, but only half-meaningful to the casual reader. And the examples that were given led inevitably to mathematical formulations, usually in calculus, which were incomprehensible.

But the time was not completely wasted. Uriel's basic theory postulated a store of energy ordinarily unavailable to our world. It existed in a place that was undefinable except in mathematical terms, although it might be inaccurately termed a "coexistent universe," parallel with ours, or some verbal equivalent which was equally descriptive and equally inaccurate.

The idea was not absurd. The theory of continuous creation must assume some such energy store. And the theory worked out in practice.

This energy, then, was available. Not by physical means, which were necessarily limited to this place, this universe, this moment. But the mind was unfettered. It could range anywhere, backward, forward, sideways. It could tap that source of energy and channel it into this world.

Minds had tapped it, inefficiently, haphazardly, in the past. Myths and folklore gave us gods and demons and fairies and the spirit world and all the rest. The appearance of the energy was fitful and uncertain because it lacked two things: theory and discipline. Where there was no theory, there could be no control, and the wrong theory was worse than no theory at all. And a disciplined mind was seldom found among the warped personalities of priests, witches, and magicians.

Occasionally desire or fear might accidentally work in the proper manner and call forth what the mind wanted or dreaded. Because the energy was formless. The mind was the matrix.

Physical or symbolic devices could help discipline the mind. The best of these was mathematics. It expressed relationships exactly without unfortunate connotations or subconscious responses. And modern developments in mathematics had made possible the conversion of a bastard art into a science.

The extramundane energy could be controlled accurately and exactly by use of such mathematical tools as calculus, which took limits; analysis situs (topology), which was concerned with proximity; and tensor analysis (absolute differential calculus), which constructed and discussed relations or laws which are generally covariant, which remained valid, that is, when passing from one to another system of coordinates. By using the proper equations, the mind could be directed toward channeling the desired amount of energy into the desired function.

I looked up from the book, my mind churning with speculations. If this was true, anyone could be a magician. Anyone! Even a novice like me.

A luxury hotel is a self-contained city. Anything can happen in one, from rape and murder to conventions of sorcerers, and the outside world need never know. But it has its advantages. All things are possible, not by magic but by the expenditure of strictly mundane energy on the part of the hotel employees and strictly U. S. money on the part of the guest.

I picked up an interesting little device that is not too far from telepathy and asked for room service. And I gave the girl what was perhaps the oddest order in an interesting history of unusual requests.

“I want a book on the history of magic and witchcraft,” I said. “Also texts on higher mathematics, specifically calculus, analysis situs and tensor analysis.”

“Yes, sir,” the girl said. She didn’t even ask me to spell anything. “Anything else, sir?”

“A fried ham sandwich on white bread and a cup of coffee.”

“Yes, sir,” she said. “Is that all, sir?”

“Oh,” I said, “and a box of chalk.”

The first thing I tackled was the ham sandwich. The second was the history of magic, since it looked to be the easiest of the lot. Hunger appeased, a trifle more alert, I skimmed through the book and came out with some orientation and the answers to a few questions.

The Magus, for instance, had taken his name from the great symbol of medieval magic, Solomon. The Biblical king enjoyed a posthumous reputation as the greatest of wizards. The angel Raphael, it was believed, had brought him a magical ring from God, which wielded control over all demons. Some of them Solomon put to work building the Temple; the more intractable he imprisoned in a brazen vessel

and threw into a deep Babylonian lake.

Solomon was wise and powerful, and there was a certain darkness about his later years. Only magic could account for it. The great search for his secret books was on.

The most important to turn up was the Key of Solomon, which contained detailed descriptions of the preparations and ceremony for summoning demons — and for dismissing them, which might be even more important. The instructions were so detailed and so difficult to follow exactly that it was little wonder the magicians did not succeed. They could try until they died of senile decay without losing hope or faith in “Solomon.”

Christianity brought in other, darker elements. What may have seemed a search for knowledge (and hidden wealth) became a dedication to evil. Magic became witchcraft. The summoning of demons became a pact with Satan.

Ariel and Uriel, like Gabriel, were angels, but Catherine La Voisin was a professional palmist and clairvoyant during the reign of Louis XIV. She secretly sold love and death charms to her clients. Besides being a witch, she was a poisoner and was involved in a lewd, bloody Amatory Mass said over Madame de Montespan, the king’s favorite, and eventually in an attempt to poison the king.

What a lovely namesake, I thought, for the red witch.

They swirled turgidly through my mind: Amatory Masses and Mortuary Masses and Black Masses; Cabalas and Schemhamphoras; covens and Sabbaths and dark rites; obscene ceremonies and violent trials. I turned with relief to the sanity of mathematics.

I plowed my way through differential and integral calculus, and Uriel’s formulas became a little more meaningful. With a briefer perusal of the elements of analysis situs and tensor analysis, I surrendered to a feeling of mastery.

If Uriel’s manuscript was what it pretended to be, I was now qualified to work magic. Was I? I decided to try. What should I start with? I remembered how one of the speakers had summoned a cold drink. I thought thirstily of a nice, cold mint julep, but I pushed the idea back hastily. I wanted nothing so complicated for my first attempt. I settled for an ordinary highball. Bourbon and soda.

I leafed through Uriel’s manuscript until I came to the section headed “Simple Spells,” studied it for a moment and turned to “Equipment.” The only essential, it said, is a piece of chalk, and that is only an aid to concentration in jotting down equations. But it is also helpful to have an element of similarity if the mind is not accustomed to thinking in mathematical terminology.

I got a water glass from the bathroom, ran a few drops of water into the bottom of it and placed it on the desk. Beside it I chalked a small circle and jotted down the prescribed equation.

Would it work? No, that was the wrong attitude. Without belief, the mind cannot function properly. It did work. I had seen it work. I could make it work.

I repeated the equation aloud, linking the unknowns to the object I wanted and the place I wanted it.

“In the beginning,” the manuscript said, “verbal equivalents are sometimes helpful.”

“Highball, highball,” I chanted, feeling more than a little silly, “come to me, come to Casey Kingman, who is in room seven o seven of —”

There was a glass in the circle. An instant before, it had not been there. Now it was. I stared at it,

wide-eyed. I had done it. I had worked magic — or maybe I had practiced a new science.

I picked up the glass with a trembling hand and raised it to my lips and let a little roll over my tongue. Phew-w-w! It sprayed over the room as I spat it out. The bourbon was lousy, and the soda was water, and the water was hot.

I put the glass down feeling greatly chastened. Obviously I was not yet an adept.

I paced the floor restlessly. The speaker had summoned something else. He had summoned a girl. Or maybe he had teleported her.

I needed somebody, somebody to talk to, somebody to answer questions. The only one I knew who would talk to me was Ariel. I had no idea where she was, what room she was in or whether she was staying in the hotel at all. Could I bring her here? I shrugged. I could try.

I had to have a link. I thought about it for a moment before my eyes saw the coat on the bed. Girls always left hairs on flannel coats. Sometimes makeup, too. But always hairs.

I picked it up. There were hairs. One was long and red. I rolled it up between my fingers and was about to throw it away when I had a second thought. I straightened it out carefully, folded it, slipped it into a hotel envelope and put the envelope in my inside coat pocket. There were some short, blonde hairs, but they were mine. Finally I found one that was long and dark.

I held it in my hand thoughtfully. Could I do a better job of it this time? Was there any danger to Ariel if I muffed it again? I decided that there wasn't. The worst that would happen would be the summoning of some other girl, Catherine La Voisin, say. I shivered. That would be bad enough.

This time I wasn't leaving anything to chance. I got a cake of soap from the bathroom and started to work on it with my penknife. In fifteen minutes I had a surprisingly good model of a reclining nude. Not Ariel, of course. But I could take care of that. I moistened the top of the figure's head, coiled the hair by drawing it between two fingernails and stuck it to the damp soap.

I referred to the section on teleportation as I knelt on the floor. I drew a circle on the rug, placed the figurine inside the circle and chalked an equation around it.

I stood up and compared it with the instructions. It checked. "X is for Ariel," I muttered. "Y is this spot in my room." I recited the equation aloud. "Wherever you are, Ariel, come to me. Come to this spot. Appear in this circle. Ariel, come to me ..."

Air fanned my face. My eyes, fixed on the circle, saw a pair of small, bare white feet. Somebody gasped. I looked up quickly. It was Ariel, all right. All of her and not much more. Her eyes were wide and blue and startled. My eyes, no doubt, were startled, too, because it was obvious that Ariel had just stepped out of a shower.

The "not much more" was a towel, which she draped hastily in front of her. She let out her breath, and it sounded like relief. I sank back in the chair speechless and suddenly weak but oddly satisfied by the fact that my earlier impressions of her charming figure had been vindicated.

I wished fervently for a breeze. The wind whistled past my head and whipped the towel aside.

Ariel clutched at it desperately with both hands, looking annoyed. But it was slowly replaced by a wisp of a smile. "Naughty, naughty," she said.

And she stooped, picked up the soap figurine, muttered a few words and disappeared, towel, figurine

and all.

Belatedly I found my voice. “Ariel, Ariel,” I called after her. “Where can I find you? Where —?”

But it was no use. She was gone. And with her she had taken my last hope of getting the answers I needed.

Fifteen minutes later I remembered the handkerchief. I pulled it out, remembering how it had wiped her tears away as we sat on the stairs that led nowhere. I stared at the orange smears. All my ventures into magic had been bungled. It would be just my luck to summon the carnivorous Catherine La Voisin. And this time she might have her poison with her.

But I had summoned Ariel once, I thought with growing determination. I could do it again.

The circle and the equation were still on the floor. They had worked before. I saw no reason they wouldn't serve a second time. I dropped the handkerchief in the center of the circle, took the glass of water that stood on the desk and sprinkled the handkerchief gently.

“Ariel, Ariel,” I said, “by the tears you shed into this handkerchief, come now to claim it, come here to me once more ...”

This time I was not so surprised when Ariel appeared. She was more modestly clad in a nightgown — but not much. Her hair was brushed dark beauty around her shoulders. I took a deep, quick breath. Perfume. She was infinitely desirable. She was almost beautiful.

Did she always wear so flattering and revealing a night-gown? Did she always put on perfume when she went to bed? I chided myself for my suspicions.

Ariel put on a frown. “I don't know how you've become adept so quickly, Gabriel, but this business has got to stop. It's very disconcerting being whisked around, not knowing whether you'll be here or there the next moment. Besides, what will people say? What will the house detective say?”

I began to laugh. I couldn't help it. There was witchcraft in the Crystal Room, witchcraft and werewolves, magic and murder, and she was worried about house detectives and indiscretion.

Her frown twisted as she tried to keep a straight face, but then she was laughing, too. I noticed that she was looking down at her feet, and my laughter died.

I jumped to my feet. “Stop! Don't go away! I've got to talk to you.”

“Well,” she said, “I'm not going to talk standing in the middle of the room. Let me out.”

“Let you out?” I repeated blankly.

She pointed down at her feet. “The circle,” she said impatiently. “I can't get out until it's broken.”

I rubbed out a chalked arc with my shoe, and she brushed past me in a delicate cloud of black lace and fragrance. I breathed deeply and turned toward her, but she was looking back toward the circle, her eyes on the handkerchief. I leaned over quickly, picked it up and started to stuff it in my pocket.

She held out her hand, snapping her fingers meaningfully. Slowly, reluctantly, I pulled the square of linen out and tossed it to her. I shrugged as she spread it flat and stared at the orange smears. She frowned for a moment and then her face crumpled.

“Oh,” she wailed, turning blindly toward the bed. “You've been with that redheaded witch, kissing her,

making love to her. You've gone over to their side!" She fell on the bed, sobbing.

"But — but," I spluttered. "I can explain it. I didn't have anything to do with it. She backed me into a corner —"

"Oh, it's always the woman," she got out between sobs. "The man's never to blame. If you could only see her as she really is, you wouldn't get within ten feet of her."

I sat down on the edge of the bed and patted her shaking shoulder. It was a very nice shoulder. I liked patting it. "I wouldn't get within ten feet of her anyway," I said, shuddering. "Once is too much. Besides, she isn't my type."

She moved away from my hand. "Don't touch me," she said savagely. And then, more softly, "What is your type?"

I thought about it, and it came as a revelation to me. "A girl with dark hair," I said, "and blue eyes, about your size —"

She sat up, brushing her tears away with the back of her hand. If I could have kept my eyes off the nightgown and kept from remembering what the towel had failed to conceal, I would have thought she looked like a little girl. But there was no chance of that.

Her eyes were bright and blue, undimmed by tears. "Am I, really?"

I nodded. "Yes," I said.

There must have been conviction in my voice. She smiled. "Did she really back you into a corner?"

"So help me!" I said, raising my hand. "Tell me. What's happened? What is Uriel going to do?"

"He's staying. He's going to help. He swears that he'll strip Solomon of his powers. The werewolf was a terrible mistake."

"What do you mean?"

"If that attempt to kill Uriel hadn't been so obvious, I don't think he'd ever have done anything about the situation. He's just a mild little man who wouldn't hurt anything. He's always gone out of his way to avoid trouble. As long as he could convince himself that things weren't too bad, he was willing to let them go along any way they would. All he wants to do is to continue his research. But now he's made up his mind, and he's the best of the lot. None of them can touch him."

"But there's just the two of you?" I asked. "Just you and Uriel?"

She nodded.

"That's tough odds," I said slowly.

"And Uriel's not well," she said. "He scoffs at the idea of the Mass of St. Sécaire. 'Superstition!' he says. But he knows that he could do something similar if he wanted to. He's tried to protect himself with counterspells, but they're most effective when he's concentrating on them, and he has to sleep sometime."

"Well," I said, "now there's three of us."

I was rewarded with a glance of pure gratitude. "Thank you — Gabriel," she said. "Did you — did you

have any luck in finding out Solomon's name?"

I shook my head. "All I found was this," I said. I pulled the railroad ticket out of my coat pocket. "And I can't swear it was Solomon's."

She took the ticket, looked at it carefully and shrugged as she handed it back. "That doesn't seem to be much help, but keep it. It might fit in with something else." Suddenly she stiffened. She was staring at something across the room. I turned. She was looking at the back of the mirror I had leaned against the wall.

I walked over to the wall and started to turn the mirror around. "I stepped on it when I came into the room. It gave me the oddest feeling."

"Careful," she said. "That's enough. I've heard of black mirrors, but I never saw one. Someone wants to get rid of you."

"Oh." I shrugged. "I imagine it was just another warning. The sensation stopped when I turned on the light."

"Don't believe it," she said earnestly. "You were either very strong or very lucky. In the black mirror, time is meaningless. A few seconds is like eternity. You could have gone mad. Or some say that if the mirror is broken while you're trapped you'll die."

I shivered. That wasn't my kind of danger. I could have faced a dozen ordinary bullets and not felt half so cold.

"But how did they work it?" she went on, frowning. "Do they know your name?" I shook my head. Ariel snapped her fingers. "That witch! When she kissed you, did she run her fingers through your hair?"

"Why — yes," I said. "I guess she did. So what?"

"You poor unsuspecting males," she said, shaking her head sadly. "Did you think she was overcome with your masculinity?"

"Well, as a matter of fact — " I began, but she was up and coming toward me. I watched her warily.

"This is what she did." She put her face up and raised her arms and pulled my head down to hers. Our lips met. There was nothing electric about it, but it was something much sweeter and more satisfying. I felt my pulse begin to pound. Her hand moved tenderly up my neck into my hair. "M-m-m," she said, her lips half-parted.

Finally she pulled away, her eyes glazed and distant. They snapped back to the present. "Oh, dear," she said. She held out her hand to me. "Look!"

I looked. Several of my blonde hairs had come away in her hand. I winced. The redheaded witch had something that belonged to me. God knew what she was going to do with it, if she hadn't already done it. "We came out even, then," I said. "I have one of hers."

Her eyes narrowed. "Let me have it," she said eagerly.

I got the envelope from my coat and handed it to her. She stepped back into the circle on the rug, bent and picked up the chalk, replaced the arc I had rubbed out, and before I could move or say anything, she waved at me and disappeared.

“Hey, wait!” I yelled. “I still don’t know where to find you —”

That’s me. Always too late.

The insistent —?elephone dragged me up out of a bottomless pool of sleep. I fumbled for the instrument, my eyes still glued shut, knocked the handset out of the cradle, picked it up, got the mouthpiece to my ear, switched it around and mumbled, “Hello? Hello?”

An almost soundless whisper came to my ear. “There is danger. A message is in your box. It would be wise to act on it.”

“Hello?*Hello?*” I said.

The line was silent, but I thought dazedly that I could hear someone breathing.

“Who is this?” I said.

There was no answer.

I dropped the phone back into the cradle and rolled over and went back to sleep. This time I dreamed. I dreamed about magicians in immaculate white robes, surrounded by darkness, brandishing a thunder rod (cut from virgin hazel with one blow of a new knife). There were cackling witches riding through the night sky to wilder and darker Sabbaths than Goethe’s Walpurgis Night. Lewd covens met to worship a gigantic goat at midnight in secret places, and the goat turned into a black man who bore a striking resemblance to Solomon.

But the worst dream was being choked to death by a person who stood behind me and pulled a garrote tighter and tighter around my neck. And the garrote had been woven from my own hair. All I could see was a hand out of the corner of my eye, a woman’s smooth, white hand, but as I watched, the hand changed into a spotted, wrinkled claw.

I woke gasping for breath.

Danger? I thought, massaging my neck. *Danger?*

I looked at the telephone and wondered if that had been a dream, too. I picked up the handset.

“What number please?”

“Could you tell me who called me this morning?” I asked.

“Room seven o seven? Just a moment, I’ll check.” And a few seconds later. “I’m sorry, sir. I haven’t put in a call to your room.”

“What time did you come on duty?”

“TwoA.M., sir.”

“Thanks,” I said, and eased the phone back.

I looked at my watch. It was not quite eight, but I was wide awake. There was no use trying to go back to sleep. I rubbed my neck again. I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

I thought of Ariel and smiled. I felt warm inside when I thought about her. She was a nice kid — well, not a kid, exactly, I amended, as I remembered — caught in a worse mess than I was. She was right in the

middle of it, and there was no way out. She was just a poor, frightened girl, but — by God! — I'd get her out and then — and then —

I caught myself. Poor, frightened girl? Don't kid yourself, Casey. She's a witch, a real, honest-to-god-witch, and she makes it work.. Casey Kingman to the rescue! Watch your step, boy!

But what a witch! I mused.

Come off it, Casey! What's the matter with you? Do you think you're in love with the girl, a girl whose name you don't even know? Old footloose, love-'em-and-leave-'em Casey.

I nodded and sat up straight in bed. Good God! In love. Could that be true? I had to admit that it could.

Well, I thought, worse things could happen to a man. Like being strangled with a rope made from his own hair.

I looked at the telephone again. A note in my box? I picked up the handset and asked for the desk. Charlie answered.

"How did you get registered here?" he asked indignantly.

"Never mind that," I snapped, and I thought of a story I could tell him that would make his few remaining hairs stand on end. Charlie and his precious hotel! "Is there a note for me — room seven o seven?"

"Just a moment," he snapped back.

I waited.

"As a matter of fact, there is. Want me to read it to you?"

"Isn't it sealed?"

"Just a slip of paper. Not even folded."

"All right. What does it say?"

"On one side it says 'seven o seven.'"

"Okay, okay. That's me."

"On the other it says 'eleven eleven.' Are you playing games again?"

"Not me," I protested. "How do you know the message isn't 'seven o seven' for 'eleven eleven.'"

"How should I know? I didn't put it there."

"Who did?"

"The night clerk, I guess."

"You're a big help," I told him, and hung up.

So there was a message, but I hadn't received any phone call, so how did I know it was there? Maybe this magic business had a recoil to it. Maybe my subconscious reached out to gather that information and then put in a call to my conscious mind.

“Hello, Conscious. Are you there?”

“Well, well, Subconscious. Imagine hearing from you. How the hell are things down there?”

“Cluttered, boy. Mite messy. No time for chitchat, though. Just learned there’s a message for you downstairs. Get on your horse, boy!”

And then, of course, the conscious mind rolls back over and goes to sleep. How does that sound? I thought it stank. Maybe it was coincidence. Or maybe somebody had called me. With the wild talents running loose around this hotel, it would be a simple matter to put in a call without going through the switchboard.

I turned it over and over as I let a cold shower bring me fully awake, shaved hurriedly with a razor I had picked up last night in the hotel drugstore, and reluctantly put back on the clothes I had worn yesterday.

Eleven eleven. Obviously a room number. Too obviously. Or was I being too subtle? A room number, then. Whose? Ariel’s? That was logical. It could also be a trap.

I shrugged. There was danger in being overcautious, too. I strapped on the shoulder holster and inspected the clip. I felt a little safer as I slipped the gun back. Maybe I was being foolish, but I had a hunch Betsy might come in handy before the day was over. She wasn’t subtle and she didn’t know the first thing about magic, but when she spoke, people listened.

I taped Uriel’s manuscript under the drawer in the desk, hesitated at the door, and returned for a piece of chalk. I jotted an equation across the inside of the door. I stepped out into the hall, closed the door behind me and heard it latch. That should keep everybody out, including hotel employees.

I waited a few minutes for an elevator. I punched “11” on the control panel. The doors opened in front of me, and I stepped out into a corridor just like my own. Eleven eleven was a corner room. I took a deep breath, grabbed the doorknob and turned it. Something snapped. The door swung open.

I looked at the sun-bright room for a long moment before I understood what was going on.

“My God!” I said, my voice quivering with horror. “Ariel!”

She was still in her nightgown, and the face she turned up to me was twisted with guilt and something else. In her hands, as she sat cross-legged upon the floor, was a little waxen figure. Even if I had not seen the blonde hairs pressed into the head, I would have known whom the figure was supposed to represent. It was me.

Her hands were still busy, winding darker hairs around the chest of the tiny figure. In the window, directly in the sunlight, were two other figures. One was made of a darker material. Around its chest was a red hair. Next to it was a wax image that the sun had half-melted into a puddle.

And the strangest part of the scene was Ariel. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, and my throat ached with loving her, and my arms twitched with the desire to gather her up in them.

“Oh, no!” I said, and turned away, my hands raised to cover my face.

“Wait, Gabriel!” she said urgently, her silence suddenly broken. “Wait! You don’t understand!”

I moved away blindly. She muttered something behind me. I stopped. I couldn’t move. I was fixed to the spot, paralyzed. I took my hands away and I was inside the room, and the door was closed.

Ariel was standing. Her look of guilt had changed to annoyance. “Oh, why did you have to break in here now?”

“Ariel!” I blurted out. “Why? Why are you doing this? I thought we were working together, and now I find you making wax images of me. It’s fantastic. It’s terrible. Why are you doing this to me? My God, Ariel—”

Her annoyance had been replaced by blankness. “What in the name of — what do you think I’m doing?”

“Look!” I said, trying to point to the images in the window, and failing. “You’ve been trying to kill me.”

Slowly, irresistibly, a smile spread over her beautiful face. She started to laugh. It bubbled out of her uncontrollably. She threw herself across the bed and howled. I watched her with growing irritation as my anger and horror faded. I didn’t see anything funny about it.

“Kill you, Gabriel?” she gasped. “Oh, no, Gabriel. Not you. Anybody but you.”

“Well, then,” I snapped, “what’s the meaning of all this?”

She sat up in the bed, suddenly sobered, studying my face. “It’s a love spell,” she said, avoiding my eyes now.

“A love spell!” I repeated. And I recognized instantly that it was true. I loved her madly. She was the most precious thing in the world. It would be ecstasy to die for her. “But all these images —”

“They were part of it. The wax one there, the one melting in the sun, that made your heart soften toward me. The clay image that is hardening hardens your heart against La Voisin. You should have seen me earlier, when I was chanting.”

“But why?” I asked. “You didn’t have to do that to get me to help you.”

“Don’t you see?” she said quickly. “I was trying to protect you from La Voisin. When they found out that their mirror trick didn’t work, she would have tried a love spell, or an Amatory Mass, rather, since that is the way their minds work. I had to protect you.”

I shuddered. In love with Catherine La Voisin. I would rather be in love with a black-widow spider. I wasn’t sure, either, that my feeling was all due to the clay image.

Ariel muttered something. Suddenly I was free to move.

“You can go now,” she said quietly.

I turned toward the door, frowning. I didn’t like the way I was being pushed around, brought here, involved there, trapped, my feelings changed, and —*Not so fast, boy! What are you complaining about? Admit it! Ever since you met this girl you’ve been falling in love with her, long before any spells were said over wax images. Remember last night?*

I remembered and smiled.

Maybe the spell had nothing at all to do with the way you feel. Even if it did, it only intensified something that was already there. So things got hurried up a little. So you’re madly in love with a nice girl. Have you got a kick coming?

Sure, I’ve got a kick, I thought, frowning. Suppose she isn’t in love with me. How about that?

Come now, Casey. You may be in love, but you don't have to be stupid. You didn't swallow that explanation whole, did you? There must have been simpler ways to protect you against La Voisin. If she went around making men fall in love with her all the time, it would be damned inconvenient for her. See the way she looks at you, boy! Look —

I turned back into the room. Ariel was still sitting on the bed, watching me with big, serious eyes. I took three steps toward her and bent down and gathered her in my arms and kissed her passionately.

She stiffened and struggled helplessly, her hands beating a gentle tattoo against my chest. "Stop!" she gasped. "Stop it!"

"I can't," I said. "I can't help myself."

Slowly she relaxed. Her arms curled around me. We sank down onto the bed. I gathered her in close to me, knowing that I would never be closer to paradise.

Finally she drew back and sighed. She opened her eyes. "Then you don't mind?" she whispered.

"Mind?" I said. "Beauty is a witch against whose charms faith melteth into blood."

We sank into another rapturous spell, and I discovered that she was proficient in an older and more powerful witchcraft. Finally she pulled herself away and sat up, straightening her hair. I reached for her again, but she pushed my hands away.

"I can see that I'm going to have trouble with you," she said severely. "The grimoires and the Keys and the Faust-books are so impractical. They never mention this kind of difficulty."

"You have no one to blame but yourself," I pointed out. "You have bewitched me. I am a slave of passion."

"I suppose," she said moodily, "but do I have to lose my honor to prove it?"

"Is there any danger of that?" I asked quickly.

She caught her breath. "Oh, you know," she said softly. "You know."

I controlled myself and rolled over, away from her. "Did you work that spell just to save me from La Voisin and a fate worse than death?"

Her eyes widened innocently. "Why, Gabriel! What other reason would I have?"

I growled and lunged for her, but she jumped off the bed and skipped out of my way, laughing. I was after her instantly, but she was as skittish and elusive as a frightened doe.

"You beautiful witch!" I said, panting as I tried to corner her. "You must have known what would happen when you put your room number in my box."

She stopped. I caught her. I almost ran over her. Only my arms around her kept us both from falling to the floor. Clapsed together, swaying, we stood in the middle of the room, her face upturned to mine, wide-eyed and afraid.

"I didn't put anything in your box," she said.

We were pressed close, but the half-controlled urgency of passion no longer bound us together. Around us the almost-forgotten night was closing in.

“They must have done it,” I said. “At least we have that to thank them for.”

“Maybe,” she said. She was trembling a little in my arms. “If they did it to drive us apart. If they wanted you to find me working spells.”

“Why else?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. But I’m afraid.”

I bent down and kissed her lips gently. Her lips were cold. “The frightened witch,” I chided. “Don’t be afraid. This was their second mistake. They can’t beat us now.”

She raised her head and smiled. I had another reason to be proud of her.

“Listen,” I said. “We need a council of war. Can you get hold of Uriel?” She nodded. “Bring him down to my room, then. Seven o seven. Half an hour. Okay?”

She nodded again. I released her, stepped back and looked at her with fond and possessive eyes. “I love you, Ariel,” I said. “I don’t think the dolls did it, but I don’t care even if they did.”

“I love you,” she whispered, “and there wasn’t any witchcraft about that. I’ll remove the spell.” I shrugged. “No. I want to. Not because of you. For me. I want to be sure it’s real. I want you to love me for myself.”

“Don’t you dare!” I said. I shivered. “Do you think I want to take a chance on losing this — this way I feel. But” — I added wryly — “I’d appreciate it if you’d put those dolls in a safe place. I wouldn’t want them to fall into just anybody’s hands.”

I closed the door gently behind me. I felt too good to wait for the elevator, forgetting my distrust of stairs, and I ran down four flights three steps at a time. I ran out into the hall and slowed to a decorous walk as a well-dressed, elderly couple passed. I could feel them turning to stare at me.

I hummed the tune to “It’s magic.”

The woman sniffed audibly.

I reached the door, inserted the key, and turned it. Nothing happened. I was startled and glanced at the room number to check before I remembered my precautions. I took the piece of chalk out of my coat pocket and scribbled another equation on the front of the door. Added together, the two equations canceled each other out. The sum was zero.

The door swung open. I scrubbed the figures off both sides of the door with the heel of my hand, stepped into the room and closed the door behind me. I fastened the chain latch. I swung around. The room was just as I had left it, down to the smudged circle on the rug.

I stood there for a moment, reliving the morning’s experiences. Things were breaking. We’d win now. I had no doubts about that. All that was left was a little detail work.

Ariel! My face flushed warmly as I remembered the beauty of her face and the warm sweetness of her lips and the fire of her body, a perfect blend of youthful firmness and womanly softness. And the wonder of it all — the abiding wonder — was Ariel herself, an understanding, gentle, delightful —

To the showers, Casey!

“Showers?”

A cold, cold shower is what you need. Icy, in fact.

“Really, now. What’s the harm —?”

Just because you’re in love with a nice girl and you think she’s in love with you —

“What do you mean, ‘think’?”

All right. And a nice girl’s in love with you, don’t forget that you’re not one step closer to finding out Solomon’s identity. And until you’ve found that out, you’re not walking on clouds. You’re walking on quicksand.

The water was icy. I stood it as long as I could, puffing and blowing and gasping, and then reached blindly for the towel. And as I reached I remembered the feeling of uneasiness that had met me as I entered the bathroom. I knew the reason for it now. When I left, the towels had been used and disarranged. When I entered, everything had been straightened up. Someone had been in the room since I had left; someone had been in the bathroom.

But it was too late; the towel had slipped through my fingers. It coiled itself around my neck. It tightened with the irresistible strength of a boa constrictor. I stumbled out of the shower, tugging at it with both hands, struggling for breath.

I staggered and slipped across the tile floor, my eyes beginning to bulge, the room beginning to turn a little red, the need for air a frantic burning in my chest. It was useless to struggle with this bewitched thing, but I could not give up. I had too much to live for.

Fool! Fool! Half an hour, you told her, and it hasn’t been fifteen minutes. And if she should arrive early, the door is locked and chained. Better to be stupid than half-smart!

The redness darkened. I staggered and almost fell.

You can’t fight magic with ordinary strength, Casey! Think, man, think! There has to be a counterspell. Think!

But I couldn’t think. The darkness was invading my mind inexorably, and as it closed in I thought of Ariel, I thought of her sorrow and despair when she saw my body.

And the last light went out.

“Well, young man,” someone said, “are you going to wake up or do I have to drown you?”

I opened my eyes, spluttering, and breathed deeply. The air went into my lungs like live steam. I raised my hands and massaged my throat, wincing. It was wet, like my face.

“Ah,” said the voice, “that’s better.” It was a woman’s voice. I knew that I should recognize it.

I turned my head over. “You!” I said. It came out in a hoarse croak. She was standing beside the bed, an empty water glass in her hand.

It was Mrs. Peabody. Her gray curls bobbed as she nodded vigorously. “And a lucky thing for you that it was. Another minute and you’d have been beyond caring.”

I turned my head back and forth, wondering if it were going to fall off. Apparently it wasn’t. My circumstances began to interest me a little more.

I was lying on the bed. I was cold. I was also naked, except for the deadly towel, which was lying across me, lifeless but strategic.

She chuckled. "Is this the way you greet all your female guests? Well, don't lie there lewd and naked all day. Go get some clothes on."

I sat up, clutching the towel. She turned her back as I slipped shakily back into my clothes.

"How did you get in?" I asked hoarsely. "I'm not complaining, you understand," I added quickly.

"Same way your other visitors got in," she said. "You may have had your door locked, but you left another doorway wide open." She pointed to the center of the rug.

There was the circle I had drawn last night, in which Ariel had appeared and disappeared twice, one arc of it scuffed out by someone's foot.

"You're a very careless young man," the little old lady said, turning around abruptly. I turned my back to her and hastily zipped up my pants. "Carelessness is never profitable," she went on, "but when you get to fooling around with magic and witchcraft, it becomes downright foolhardy. Well, what have you found out?"

The question caught me flatfooted. I blinked. "Nothing," I said.

"Wasted my money, did I?" She nodded as if she had expected it all along.

"Hold on," I objected. "I've only been on the case for a little over twenty-four hours."

"Long enough," she said. She stamped around the room.

I was beginning to be a little annoyed. "I've got a few complaints myself. You threw me into this situation without a word of explanation. You —"

"Would you have believed me if I'd told you?"

"Well, no," I admitted. "But you let me blunder my way around, nearly getting killed two or three times, and —"

"Told you there'd be danger."

"Not this kind of danger." I motioned to the towel.

"You didn't think of that when you were looking at that bill." She chuckled. "Want to give it back?"

I hesitated and made up my mind. "All right. Deducting a day's work and expenses." I pulled out my billfold.

She held up a pale, thin hand. "Now, wait a minute. I haven't said I wanted it back. You can't quit a job that easy. What have you found out?"

"I told you," I said. "Nothing." I started taking out the remains of a thousand dollars. Luckily I hadn't used too much of it.

"Didn't find out his name?"

"Solomon," I said. "Solomon Magus." I kept counting.

“Nonsense,” she said impatiently. “I mean his real name.”

“No.” I counted out nine hundred and seventy-six dollars on the bureau top, extracted one-hundred and twenty-six dollars to make it one hundred dollars for the day and fifty dollars expenses, and I shoved the rest toward her.

“No clues?” she asked. “Is that all I get for my money?”

“Well,” I said reluctantly, “I found a return-trip ticket to Washington, D.C.”

“Ah,” she said significantly.

“But I’m not even sure it belongs to him. There’s your money. Take it”

Her faded blue eyes looked me over shrewdly. “You’re too eager. Why? Got another client, have you?”

“Maybe,” I admitted.

“Who is it?”

“That,” I said pointedly, “is none of your business.”

“Paying you as well as I am?” she asked quizzically. “Bet not. Bet it’s a girl. Paying you in kisses, I bet. You look like the kind of young fool who’d rather have kisses than money.”

I flushed. “Maybe you’re right,” I said. “Good-by.”

“Don’t rush me, young man!” she snapped. “I’ll go when I’m ready. I’m not sure I want to call you off this thing. A bargain’s a bargain.”

“Only when it’s made in good faith,” I said. “You misled me about the case.”

“You’re an ungrateful young man,” she said, shaking her head. “Here I save your life, and now you’re tossing me out of your room without even a thank-you.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, and I was. “Thanks.”

“That’s better,” she said. “Now. Tell me. Does this new job conflict with what I paid you to do? Eh?”

“Well — “ I said, hesitating.

“Then,” she said triumphantly, “why not do both jobs at once? I guess you’re not allergic to money.”

I thought about it for a moment and shook my head. “I’m sorry again. I can’t take anybody as a client if I don’t know their real name.”

“Know the girl’s name, eh?” She chuckled as I got red again. “All right, young man. If that’s the way you want it.”

“You won’t tell me your real name?” I asked.

She shook her head decisively, picked up the money from the bureau and walked toward the door. As she unhooked the chain, she turned back. “You can tell that girl for me,” she said, “that she’s a very lucky woman.”

I smiled and looked aside, and was turned to stone. Somehow the black mirror that had been leaning

against the wall had been turned around so that it faced into the room. The little old lady should have been reflected in it, but it wasn't the little old lady I saw.

Darkly, glimmering up at me through the mists of night, was the face of Ariel.

She turned her head, and I looked into the mirrored eyes of a frightened angel. Dark angel. I looked back and forth between the night-ridden image of youth and beauty and the reality of withered age. Angel? Witch. And I loved the one in the black mirror.

"Ariel?" I groaned. "Why? And which one is you?"

She took a step toward me, her hand half-raised, and just then the door swung open. Uriel walked into the room calmly and stopped, glancing quickly around. He grasped the situation almost instantly.

Uriel was only an inch or two taller than the old lady, and his white hair went well with her gray, perky curls. They made a jolly old couple. But where did that leave me? In love with a phantom in a dark glass?

A sob broke from the old lady's throat. It was strangely incongruous. "Don't you know?" she said, and it was Ariel's voice.

"How *can* I?" I groaned. It was getting to be a habit. "Everybody's someone else. Nobody's themselves. How do I know what to believe? Who are you?"

She broke into tears and sank down into a chair, sobbing. "You don't love me," she said brokenly.

"Look in the mirror, son!" Uriel said firmly.

I looked. Uriel was mirrored there. Uriel himself, not someone else. "What is that supposed to tell me?" I asked. "That you're not disguised?"

"Exactly," Uriel said. He walked quickly to the mirror, keeping to one side of it so that he did not see his own reflection, and turned it to the wall. "And that means that the mirror shows people as they are, not as they aren't." He inspected the letters around the edges. "Interesting," he mused and became engrossed.

I turned to Ariel — and it was Ariel. Mrs. Peabody was gone. Ariel's eyes were wet with tears as she looked up at me.

"How old are you?" I asked sternly, unable to keep my doubts from spilling over.

"Twenty-two," she said, her voice breaking.

"Really?"

"Well," she said, "twenty-three."

I sighed. That had the real ring of truth. And, after my experiences of the last couple of days, it had the added flavor of novelty. "Why?" I asked. "Why did you do it?"

"Oh, think, Gabriel!" she said, and a hint of impatience was creeping into her voice. "I didn't want anyone to know that I was investigating Solomon. And I certainly had no way of knowing I could trust you."

"Not at first, maybe," I said doggedly, "but you had plenty of chances to tell me later."

She blushed. "I was going to tell you, Gabriel. I was going to tell you when I came down here. And then

when I knocked and couldn't get an answer, and I had to materialize inside the room and saw you with your face all red — I decided it would be better for Mrs. Peabody to save you. You would never have to know that I had deceived you, and Mrs. Peabody could just fade away."

"And you had to make one last test to be sure you could trust me," I added, scowling.

"If I'd known you were going to act like this, Gabriel, I'd never have bothered," she retorted, her chin up stubbornly, with supreme illogic.

"And for God's sake!" I shouted. "Stop calling me Gabriel! You know my name — "

Her eyes grew big with alarm. "Sh-h-h!" she said. "Don't say it!"

I went toward her with some high-class illogic of my own, my arms outstretched. "Then you do care," I sighed.

The next thing I knew, I was sitting in the chair and she was curled up in my lap, her head on my shoulder, whispering things in my ear, and Uriel was coughing, having spent as much time inspecting the mirror as he could find excuse for.

"Children," he said. "There is work to do. And I must say, Ariel, that you're growing very careless about your spells."

"Goodness," Ariel said, sitting up and looking down at her dress — Mrs. Peabody's dress, that is. "This lavender and lace doesn't do a thing for me, either. You'll have to excuse me for a moment."

She dashed to the circle and disappeared. Uriel and I stared blankly at each other, shaking our heads. Ten minutes later she was back in a sleek black dress that did a great deal for her, but Uriel and I, under a gentleman's agreement, ignored her appearance and continued our discussion of the books he had noticed on the desk. He cleared up a number of my vaguer conceptions about the principles of magic.

Ariel sat down on the edge of a chair, looking hopefully back and forth between us, like a little girl trying not to be heard, but seen. At last she gave up. "I'm back," she said.

I turned to her. "Tell me. Who was Gabriel?"

She sighed heavily. I forced back a smile. "He was Father's protégé, a graduate student who was really quite an adept. Uriel thought that Gabriel was almost as good as he was himself. We were hoping that he could help us with Solomon. And then he was killed in a traffic accident."

"That was no accident," I said, and I told them about La Voisin's slip.

"The murderers!" Ariel said angrily.

"Was he in love with you?" I asked.

Ariel was thoughtful. "Maybe. But I didn't — I mean he was just a nice boy."

"That makes two murders, then. Gabriel and your father."

"If Prospero's death was murder," Uriel said, shaking his head. "I didn't realize anything was wrong until too late — he didn't tell me. But I can't believe that even Solomon would stoop to all the foul, disgusting nonsense involved in the Mass, the ruined church, the black host, the water from the well in which an unbaptized infant has been drowned and all the rest."

“He’s already made two attempts on Gabri — on *his* life,” Ariel said. “That black mirror and an ensorcelled towel that almost strangled him. The only thing Solomon cares about is power, and the only way he can be sure of that is to kill all of us.”

“And I understand that you haven’t been feeling well,” I said, turning to Uriel while I massaged my throat reminiscently.

“Nonsense,” Uriel said stoutly. “Never felt better in my life.” He started coughing. It had a hollow sound. For the first time I noticed that Uriel’s rosy appearance of health was an illusion. His red cheeks were rouged. Ariel and I exchanged worried glances.

“Let’s get to work,” Ariel said. “Tell him about the clue, Gabri —”

She stopped and stared at the expression on my face. Something had just occurred to me.

“You might as well call me ‘Casey,’” I said. “I just remembered. I signed the hotel register with my own name.”

They stared at me aghast.

I shook my head remorsefully. “I’m afraid I’m a bust at this business. Ill never remember all the rules. I suppose they know your name,” I said to Uriel.

“I’m afraid so. Since Professor Reeves and I founded the society, we had little opportunity for deception. Many early members knew us, and our preliminary researches attracted a little publicity. Anyone could have learned our names without much more than asking.”

“Professor Reeves was Prospero?” I asked. “Ariel’s father?”

“Yes,” Ariel said.

“And what about you?” I asked, turning to her. “Do they know now your name?”

“Yes,” she said, “but they don’t know it.”

“Eh?” I said blankly. “Go through that once more. ‘They know it but they don’t know it?’”

She shook her head. “It isn’t a good thing to talk about.”

“But what is this name business?” I asked. “Does it have to be all your names, or just your first name or last name, or what?”

“Your real name,” Uriel said. “The name that is you. In most cases, that is your Christian name, although in many primitive tribes all over the world, the child was given a secret or sacred name which was known only to himself or his parents.”

“That’s me.” I chuckled. “I’m not so bad off after all. Casey isn’t my real name. And I don’t think anyone has used anything else since I was christened.”

“Thank God!” Ariel breathed.

I took her hand and squeezed it.

“You said you had a clue?” Uriel said quickly. Maybe he wanted to forestall another outburst of affection.

I fished out the ticket again. It was getting a little battered. "Maybe. But I don't know what good it can do us."

Uriel looked it over carefully. He balanced it on his fingertips and muttered a few words. The ticket fluttered. "It fits," Uriel said, looking up. "I'm almost sure Solomon held this in his hand at one time. And, now that I think about it, it's natural that he should be from Washington."

"Washington?" I echoed. "Why?"

"That's where the power is," Ariel supplied. "And he's the most ambitious man I've ever known."

"Washington," I mused. "That narrows it down some, but not much. He could be anyone from a public figure to a man behind the throne that nobody knows."

Ariel's face fell.

"But it isn't hopeless," I said. "Hold everything."

I picked up the telephone, asked for long distance and then for Jack Duncan at the Associated Press Washington newsroom. I turned to smile at Ariel. She and Uriel were watching me blankly.

"Jack?" I said. "Casey. Fine, fine. Business. Tell me, who's gone from Washington?"

"Oh, man, you've started drinking early in the morning," Jack said sarcastically.

"You know what I mean. Who important?"

"Everybody, boy. Nobody hangs around here over the weekend but us wage slaves."

I was silent for a moment, thinking just how to phrase the question that had occurred to me. "Answer me this, then. Who's the luckiest man in Washington?"

"Me, boy. I start on my vacation Monday."

"Come on, Jack! Who thinks you're important besides your wife?"

"Listen to the man talk! That just shows you don't know my wife."

"Give, Jack! This is important. Who's the luckiest man in Washington?" I repeated impatiently.

"Don't you even tell me whether it's animal, vegetable, or —?"

"Someone important. Someone you'd know about"

"At cards, love or horses?"

"All of those, maybe, but especially in getting where he wants to be. Top of the heap, maybe."

"Well, well." Jack was thinking now. I could hear wheels starting to spin. "'Tain't the Great White Father. The honeymoon is over, and he don't like it so good. The word is going around that he won't be running again. Hell, man! There's only one boy that fits. Never seems to need money. All of his enemies have bad luck, but he comes up smelling like a rose. And in the last year or so all of his intraparty rivals have died or retired with poor health or something —"

"His name, Jack, his name." I was excited now.

“You know it, boy. Names are dangerous. (“You’re telling me!” I muttered.) Get more people in trouble than any other thing. No telling who might be tapping this line.”

“Give me a clue, Jack!” I said eagerly. “I have to be sure.”

“America’s biggest, bestest, one-man self-help organization. Look in today’s headlines or yesterday’s or tomorrow’s. You’ll see his name. No doubt about it. The party might not like it, and a lot of Americans might feel like cutting their throats, but he’s gonna sweep the convention unless somebody fixes his little red wagon. And probably get elected, too. That’s private stock, boy. Don’t spread it around.”

“Got it,” I said exultantly. “He’s out of town now, isn’t he?”

“Him?” Jack hesitated. “Wait a second.” I could hear him yelling over the teletype clatter to somebody across the room. “Sorry to disillusion you, sonny,” he said. “The great man was seen this morning taking a brisk walk around the block.” He sounded disappointed himself. “For a moment I thought you might be going to do the American people their greatest service.”

“Thanks, Jack,” I said dully. “Can’t think of anybody else in his class, can you?”

“There ain’t nobody in his class, son. They’re all dead or behind bars.”

“Okay, Jack. Let me know if I can do anything for you.”

I lowered the phone gently into the cradle and turned slowly to Ariel and Uriel. I shrugged. “I guess you heard. It was a thought, anyway.”

“Don’t get discouraged so easy, son,” Uriel said, and his eyes were sparkling. “You’ve got him.”

“Maybe you didn’t hear after all,” I said in amazement. “He was seen in Washington this morning.”

“Yes?”

I snapped my fingers. “That’s it. He flew back to shake any possible suspicion.”

“Could be,” Uriel said, “but I don’t think so. Too risky switching back and forth. More chance somebody would spot him.”

“What then?”

“Casey,” Ariel said. “Did you ever hear of a simulacrum?”

“An image?” I said.

Uriel nodded. “That’s the hard way, of course. He could have left somebody in disguise, but there’s nobody he can trust with his real identity. He can assign a few minor jobs, but he has to do all the big things himself. That’s his weak point. That and his lust for power.”

“And overconfidence,” I said, thinking back.

“Maybe,” Uriel said.

“Then we’ve got him!” I said eagerly.

Uriel gave me a reproving glance. “We can’t proceed on guesswork. We must have proof. It might be the wrong man.”

“What loss?” I shrugged.

“Casey!” Ariel said, frowning.

“What do you want him to do? Come up and present his birth certificate?” I said disgustedly. “For magicians and witches, it seems to me that you two are awfully particular. But don’t mind me. I’m just a novice at this thing.”

“You don’t understand,” Ariel said firmly.

“The greater the power, my son,” Uriel said, “the greater the responsibility.”

“That ain’t the way I heard it,” I said. “The greater the power, the greater the corruption.”

Ariel turned her back toward me. I could see from the set of it that I had gone too far.

“Look,” I said. “I’m sorry. But after we’ve got a lead like this, the first break in the case, and you aren’t going to make any use of it — “ I took hold of Ariel’s shoulders and tried to turn her around, but she seemed to be made of stone. “Ariel,” I said softly. “I’m sorry. I’ll go along with whatever you say.”

She looked back over her shoulder. “Well-I-I,” and she turned around to face us.

“You’re jumping to conclusions again,” Uriel said patiently. “We aren’t going to throw this away. There’re some things we can do without harm. This, for instance.”

He rubbed out the circle I had drawn on the rug and chalked in another one. He started inscribing equations around it. After a moment he hesitated and rubbed his forehead. “My memory isn’t as good as it used to be,” he apologized. “I wish I had that book. Must have lost it somewhere.”

I went to the desk, pulled out the drawer, and removed the manuscript from its underside. “This?” I said.

“Yes,” he said happily. “Dear me, yes. *You are* a help. Where did you find it? Never mind.”

He went back to his task, consulting the manuscript occasionally. When he was finished, the rug was almost covered with chalk marks. “There!” he said, getting creakily up off his knees.

I looked at it dubiously.

“It’s an old Chaldean spell. An exorcism,” he explained. “In cases of this kind, it’s helpful to recite the verbal equivalent, too.”

He entered the circle and lifted his face toward the ceiling. Little, white-haired, cherubic, he was not my idea of a magician. He was more like a professor about to expand on some dull minutiae.

He began to chant in a low and surprisingly effective voice.

“He who makes the image, he who enchants, the evil face, the evil eye, the evil mouth, the evil tongue, the evil lip, the evil word ...”

Shivers ran up and down my spine.

“Spirit of the sky, exorcise them! Spirit of the earth, exorcise them!

“The Magician has bewitched me with his magic, he has bewitched us with his magic;

“The witch has bewitched us with magic; she has bewitched us with her magic;

“He who has fashioned images corresponding to our whole appearance has bewitched our appearance;

“He has seized the magic draught prepared for us and has soiled our garments;

“He has torn our garments and has mingled his magic herb with the dust of our feet;

“May the fire god, the hero, turn their magic to nought!”

I let out my breath and realized that I had been holding it for a long time.

“My goodness,” Uriel said. “I feel better already.”

He looked better. The pallor beneath the rouge had changed to a healthier pink. I felt better, too, and I had felt good before. My neck had been sore and stiff. I touched it tentatively. It seemed as good as ever.

“What now?” I asked.

“Now,” said Uriel vigorously, “is the time for the counterattack. We must trick him into showing his true face.”

Silently I pointed toward the back of the mirror leaning against the wall.

“Ideal!” Uriel said. “Now, where would be the best place? I’m afraid the Crystal Room is out.”

“How about his rooms?” I suggested. “He won’t be expecting us to come after him.”

“*His*rooms?” Ariel said, frowning.

“The penthouse,” I said.

“The very thing,” Uriel said. “I don’t know what we’d do without you, son.”

“But will he be there?” Ariel asked, her lower lip trembling a little.

“There’s one good way to find out,” Uriel said. He turned to me. “A program.”

I pulled it out of my coat pocket. “It won’t do you any good. Only October 30 was listed.”

Uriel opened it to the middle. “Oh, no. This is fine.”

I looked over his shoulder. The page that had been headed October 30 had changed completely.

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“Oh, dear,” Uriel said. “That was my lecture. I’m afraid there will be a blank in the program.”

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“No magicians?” I said.

“All priests. It was the state religion.”

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“Oh, dear,” Uriel moaned softly. “Darker and darker.”

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“I thought the invocation always came at the beginning,” I said.

“Not this kind of invocation,” Ariel said.

“Oh, me,” Uriel said. “Do you suppose —?”

Ariel nodded her head grimly. “I’m afraid so.”

“We’ll have to stop them,” Uriel said with determination.

“What’s this all about?” I asked, but they were looking at each other in distress. I shrugged and glanced at my watch. Five minutes after ten. Only five after ten? I shook it, but it was still running. “According to this, then,” I said, “he should still be in the Crystal Room. For several hours yet.”

“But how can we be sure?” Ariel asked.

I picked up the telephone and asked for the Crystal Room. I listened to the phone ring at the other end, and then someone picked it up and said, “Hello,” very softly. Someone was speaking in the background.

“The Magus, please,” I said.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the voice replied. “He’s on the stage now. Can I have him call you when he’s free?”

“Never mind,” I said quickly. “I’ll get in touch with him later.” I turned to Ariel and Uriel. Uriel was chalking equations on the back of the mirror. Ariel was looking at me expectantly.

“Let’s go,” I said bravely. “Let’s go beard the magician in his penthouse.”

But my knees were shaking.

Uriel stepped back, inspected his work and turned to us. “You two will have to go ahead. There are some preparations I must attend to. Take the mirror and put it where he won’t see it until too late. Then search his rooms for some clue to his identity. Failing that, try to get some hairs or nail clippings. Even Homer nods. Why not Solomon?”

I pulled the automatic out from under my arm and inspected it again before I replaced it.

Ariel watched me, and she was frowning. “That won’t do you any good.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I said. “Maybe it won’t do Solomon any damage, but it sure makes *me* feel a lot better.”

I got a towel out of the bathroom, wrapped the mirror in it and turned toward the door. “Ready?”

We took an elevator to the thirty-fifth floor. The elevator boy glanced curiously at the towel-wrapped square under my arm, but he didn’t say anything. We climbed a flight of fire stairs to the penthouse floor. I cracked the door an inch and peered out. The hall was empty and dark. We crept along it toward the door that faced the elevator. I watched the shadows suspiciously, ready to jump — for the stairs — if anything moved. I wasn’t cut out for this kind of work.

I put my hand on the cold, smooth doorknob and tried to turn it. The door was locked. I looked at Ariel inquiringly.

She muttered something under her breath and reached out with one finger to touch the knob. Nothing happened. She frowned and bit her lip.

“There’s a spell on it,” she said.

I racked my memory for the section of Uriel’s manuscript called “Counterspells.” I reached in my pocket for the piece of chalk that had become standard equipment, drew a circle around the knob and an “X” across the keyhole in the knob, and hesitantly jotted down an equation. As I finished writing the last figure, the door clicked. It swung gently open.

I turned to smile proudly at Ariel. She smiled back and said, “You continue to surprise —”

She stopped, and her eyes got big. There was fear mirrored in them. They looked over my shoulder. I spun around and stopped, unable to move.

In the doorway, facing us, green eyes glinting, tail lashing wickedly back and forth, was a tiger.

And as I identified it, I knew it wasn’t a tiger at all.

There never was a tiger with a black face, ears and paws and fur the color of cream. It was a Siamese cat, but it was as big as a tiger, and its crossed eyes studied us hungrily as it crouched a little closer to the floor.

“A familiar!” Ariel breathed.

The paralysis left me. I made the fastest draw of my life. The .38 was pointed and my finger was squeezing the trigger when Ariel put her hand past my arm, her finger aimed at the cat, and muttered a few words. Suddenly I was aiming two feet over the cat's head. It had shrunk to normal size. I eased my finger off the trigger and put the gun away, feeling foolish.

Ariel moved past me and bent down to pet the cat, but it stared at her haughtily, sniffed toward me and moved aloofly away on business of its own. I was just as happy to see it go. I let out a sigh and discovered that I was still hugging the mirror under one arm.

"I don't think I'm ever going to get used to this," I said. "Let's get it over with."

Ariel nodded quickly, uneasily, and started across the lush living room toward two doors that opened off it. I looked around for a place to spot the mirror. Finally I got an idea. The windows were fitted with Venetian blinds, but one of them was partly raised. I unwrapped the mirror carefully and propped it in the window frame. The bottom of the blind kept it from falling out. I stepped back and admired it — from an angle. If the man who called himself Solomon didn't return until night — and there was a good chance that he wouldn't — he would never suspect that one window was a mirror until too late.

I hoped that he would get trapped in it as I had.

Ariel came out of one room empty-handed. I pointed out the mirror so that she would be careful. She nodded.

"Find anything?" I whispered. There wasn't any reason to whisper, but that was the way I felt.

She shook her head. "No papers. Nothing," she whispered back. "I've never seen a place so clean."

She vanished into the other room. I poked around the living room, lifting cushions, peering under furniture, searching desk drawers. There wasn't even any dust or lint. Ariel came back.

"The rooms are spotless," she whispered. "Even the sheets have been changed."

"It's impossible," I said. "Nobody could live here even a few hours without leaving some trace. I'd think we were in the wrong rooms if it weren't for that cat. Come to think about it, where is the cat?"

Ariel shook her head. "I haven't seen it."

My nerves were beginning to quiver. I was ready to admit defeat and try something else, but there was one more door. We walked toward it together.

"Those were bedrooms?" I asked.

She nodded. "And a bath."

"No personal things?" I said. "No razor? No tooth-brush?"

"Just unused glasses and towels and unwrapped soap."

We went through the door and into a kitchen. It was all enamel and glass and stainless steel. Everything glistened and gleamed. There weren't even any dirty glasses. The place was fantastically, implausibly clean.

I snooped through the cabinets and drawers without much hope. Dishes were stacked neatly, glasses were turned top down, silverware was perfectly aligned.

“Where’s that damned cat?” I muttered.

It wasn’t in the kitchen, either. There was nothing in the kitchen that didn’t belong there except Ariel and me.

The cat meowed loudly from the living room. We stiffened and turned toward the door. I pushed it open. The cat was sitting in front of the hall door, looking up at it expectantly. I held Ariel back, feeling suddenly chilled.

There was a noise from the hall, distant and uncertain, like doors sliding. The cat looked at us and back at the door, and I looked at the cat, and Ariel peered over my shoulder.

We all heard it then: a key slipping into the doorknob and turning.

“*Meow-w!*” the cat said. “*R-r-reow!*” it warned.

The door swung open. I pressed Ariel back into the kitchen and let the door close to a slit. I pulled the .38 out of the shoulder holster and held it ready in my hand. Maybe it was useless, but it felt good there.

And Solomon stepped into the room cautiously, looking to both sides of the door and at the floor. The cat jumped at him, clawing his black pants and talking angrily about strangers who had broken into the penthouse, in a voice that was almost understandable.

Solomon ignored it. His head, slowly turning, swept his gaze around the room. He half-turned, his left arm straightening out suddenly in a savage arc that sent something in his hand hurtling away. Involuntarily my eyes followed it. It struck. Glass tinkled. A square of night shivered itself into black fragments.

But just before the black mirror broke, shattered by the heavy key, I saw Solomon as he really was. That momentary glimpse was enough. I knew him. There could be no mistake. I prayed that the information did not come too late.

I looked back toward Solomon. He was gone. My heart missed a beat. It started again, strongly, hopefully. Had he been trapped in the mirror before it broke? Had the key he threw shattered Solomon himself into a million shards? For a moment I let myself believe it.

In back of me, Ariel shattered my illusion. She gasped. I swung around, my gun ready.

We faced Solomon. He leaned, dark-faced and smiling, against the stainless-steel sink. The cat rubbed against his dark leg, her crossed eyes fixed on us malevolently.

“So,” he said urbanely, “the beautiful witch and the intrepid detective.” Cream-colored fur lifted on the cat’s back; she growled deep in her throat. “Baal!” Solomon said. “You mustn’t be inhospitable to our guests, even if they did get here a little early.” He looked back at us. “So nice of you to come to see me. You saved me endless trouble in searching you out. I did want to invite you to my little party this evening. Especially you, my dear” — he bowed mockingly to Ariel. “There is a special place in the ceremony for a virgin, and virgins are so hard to find these days.”

“Don’t move!” I said, shoving the automatic toward him, my finger tightening on the trigger. “Don’t lift a finger! I won’t have any remorse about shooting you.”

He frowned. “I don’t think you would. That isn’t very friendly of you.” His face cleared. “But you must realize that, if Ariel’s spells are useless, that thing you’re holding is a mere toy.” He looked at Ariel. “You can stop muttering now. Nothing will work here. I put in too many hours of preparation.” He smiled broadly.

Anger was a red tide rising in my throat. My finger got white. The hammer clicked futilely against the cartridge. It clicked again and again. I stared down at the automatic in dazed disbelief.

“There, now,” Solomon said gently. “You can relax. In fact, you can’t move at all.”

It was true. As I looked up, I froze into place, unable even to twitch an eyelash. Only my chest expanded shallowly, automatically, to draw in air, and my eyes could move from side to side. I looked at Ariel out of the corners. She was rigid, too.

“Now,” he said, “I’ll have to put you away until tonight. I must get back to the meeting” — he turned to me — “but thank you for calling and letting me know you were on your way up.”

I cursed my eternal stupidity. When would I learn? Never. It was too late to learn. *But why*, I groaned inwardly, *did I have to involve Ariel as well?*

Night came like blindness. I had a moment to wonder if it was permanent before the light came back. I was in a bedroom. Ariel was nowhere in sight. She could have been behind me. I would never have known, since I could not move my head, but I had a feeling that she wasn’t in the room.

The room was large and well furnished. I remembered that the penthouse had two of them.

Somewhere a door opened and closed. I could still hear. But after that there was silence.

I stood it as long as I could. It wasn’t very long. I struggled against the invisible bonds that held me so tightly, but it was useless. I sagged, worn out.

Ariel, Ariel! I moaned silently. *Where are you?*

Here. It was a cool, quiet voice inside my head. And it was Ariel.

Telepathy! Have you always had it?

Not until just now, when you called.

Where are you? I’m in a bedroom.

In the other bedroom.

Are you all right? He didn’t hurt you?

Oh, no.

Can he hear us?

No. He’s gone.

The calmness of her voice surprised me. She wasn’t frightened anymore. The worst had happened, and now she wasn’t afraid. I was the one who was scared.

Can you do anything? I asked.

No. I’ve been trying.

We’re trapped then.

Yes, she said. But she didn’t sound hopeless.

Uriel! I said.

Yes.

But Solomon will be watching for him.

Uriel knows it. In spite of his appearance, he's very clever.

Let him be clever now, I prayed. *Ariel.*

Yes.

What is your real name? I want to know. You said that Solomon knew it, but he didn't know that he knew.

It's Ariel, she said. Father said they'd never suspect the completely obvious. They'd keep looking for something hidden.

My name's Kirk, I said. Kirk Cullen. K.C. Casey. I love you, Ariel.

I love you, Casey. The sweetness of it poured through me like wine. I longed to take her in my arms and hold her there forever, but I could only stand stiffly like a statue — a statue of ice with a melting heart.

Ariel, I thought wildly, we've gotta get out of here.

Yes! she said, and I knew that she had felt the wonder of it, too. Now that we had found it, it would be the wildest waste to let it be taken away.

Uriel, I said. Uriel will rescue us.

We stood there sharing our thoughts and watched the shadows creep across the floor. And finally we heard a door open.

Uriel! It was an explosion of relief, and I thought I heard Ariel echo, *Uriel!*

And then we heard the bland voice we hated.

"Put him down here," Solomon said.

Our hopes plummeted together. The door closed.

"Still silent, old man?" Solomon said. "Well, we'll put you away now, and put you away for good a little later. You've caused me more trouble than all the rest put together."

A moment later, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something flicker into being. It was Uriel, small and pale and stiff. The door opened and closed again. Uriel didn't stir. Even his eyes were motionless.

Is he there with you? Ariel asked.

Yes, I answered hopelessly.

I can't reach him, Ariel said, and there was panic in the thought. *What has Solomon done to him?*

What did Solomon mean, I asked suddenly, *when he was talking about virgins?*

I don't know. But she knew. She didn't want to tell me, and I knew now that I didn't want to know.

We stood and watched the shadows creep across the floor and waited for the night.

The darkness was almost complete. Clouds must have covered the sky as the night came, because not even starlight entered the room. I could just barely make out the faint glimmer of Uriel's face.

We had been listening to voices in the living room for some time now. We had heard furniture being moved around. But the bedroom doors were closed, and we couldn't see what was happening.

A brilliant stroke of lightning lit up the room for a moment with awful clarity. I saw Uriel standing as stiffly as before. He hadn't moved. He might be dead. The thunder rolled. If I could have moved, I would have shuddered.

Ariel! What's going to happen?

Something bad. Something evil. Solomon's been building up to it for a long time. With the covens and the black magic. And now it's November eve. We should have suspected why he picked this date.

Why! Why November eve?

It's Allhallow Eve. Oh, Casey! The door is opening. They're coming for me.

A scream rang through my mind, and I struggled desperately against the terrible paralysis. Futilely. I couldn't stir a finger. I listened helplessly as Ariel's broken thoughts transmitted to me a scene of horror made vivid.

The living room was changed. Ariel scarcely recognized it as two men carried her into the dark room, lit only by tall tapers and the intermittent flickering of lightning. The penthouse was a new Brocken, a modern "exceeding high mountain" from which to see the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them.

They carried her through the room toward a black altar at the other end, where Solomon waited. There were others in the room. Their dark faces slipped past Ariel on either side. She recognized only one, the magnificent Catherine La Voisin, who smiled at Ariel and winked.

Ariel's overwrought senses felt other things in the room. She could not see them, but they crowded around. They pressed in close.

On a tripod in front of the altar was a copper dish. In it charcoal burned fitfully. Solomon stood behind the altar. He was dressed in a long, white tunic.

The men ripped off Ariel's clothes. They placed her face-up on the altar.

Casey! she moaned. Her voice was terror.

The room was silent except for the thunder that came at intervals like a roll of giant drums. Solomon began to speak in a low voice. Ariel could not make out the words at first, and then his voice grew louder.

"... gathered here in the required numbers, we summon Thee, Prince, Ruler of Darkness, Lord of Evil; your worshippers summon Thee to receive our sacrifice. We summon Thee by our allegiance. We summon Thee by the great Names of the God of gods and Lord of lords, ADONAY, TETRAGRAMMATON, JEHOVA, TETRAGRAMMATON, ADONAY, JEHOVA, OTHEOS, ATHANATOS, ISCHYROS, AGLA, PENTAGRAMMATON, SADAY, SADAY, SADAY, JEHOVA, OTHEOS, ATHANATOS, a *Liciat* TETRAGRAMMATON, ADONAY, ISCHYROS,

ATHANATOS, SADY, SADY, SADY, CADOS, CADOS, CADOS, ELOY, AGLA, AGLA, ADONAY, ADONAY ... ”

Casey! He's got a sword! And there's something coming. I can feel it. It's getting closer!

Her silent screams echoed and reechoed through my mind. I made one last, convulsive effort that broke my unseen bonds like rotten ropes and sent me hurtling to the door. I tore it open.

Far across the room was the altar with Ariel's white body outlined against its blackness. Behind her was Solomon, white-robed, his face lit redly by the fire in front of the altar. But the face glowed from within, with a darker light. Behind him, cast like a shadow against the wall, was a towering shape of darkness that appeared to draw in upon him as I watched. His hands lifted the sword high.

“Stop!”

The shout froze the room into a fantastic tableau. But it hadn't been my shout.

Someone else was moving in the room. Someone came close to the altar, into the flickering light. It was Catherine La Voisin, her hair gleaming brighter than the fire. And then it was no longer the red witch. Uriel stood there, where she had been. Small, old, shabby, he defied the room.

“Begone, shadows!” he said, pointing one long finger toward Solomon and the altar. A spear of light shot out from his finger. “Flee, shadows! As you must always flee before the light.” His body seemed to glow in the darkness. “Twisted projections of a twisted mind, vanish into the nothingness you came from!”

He rattled off a series of equations, filled with functions and derivatives, faster than I could follow. I felt a fresh, clean wind blow through the room, sweeping cobwebs away before it. Ariel stirred.

The shadow behind Solomon had shrunk when Uriel's finger of light struck it. Now it dwindled further. It crouched behind Solomon.

“Go!” Uriel commanded sternly.

Solomon woke from a daze. “Night conquers the day,” he thundered. “Darkness conquers the light. Power makes all men bow before it. *Bow*, then!”

The sword over Ariel trembled in Solomon's hands as he fought to bring it down. His Satanic face and white robe towered over Uriel's white-haired, shabby insignificance. They battled for the sword, the two of them, straining against invisible forces.

Slowly the sword started down.

“Senator!” I shouted.

Solomon looked up. He peered across the room at me, his face contorted and beaded with sweat.

“This time the gun will not fail. Senator!” I yelled. “The bullets are silver, and your name is written on them!”

I pulled the trigger of the gun that had rested in my hand for over twelve hours. My hand recoiled again and again. I saw his robe twitch. He staggered. The sword drooped in his hands. And then it lifted again.

The hammer clicked empty.

“Lights!” Uriel shouted. “Let the light chase away the darkness!”

Blindingly the lights came on. The young man who had been doorkeeper of the Crystal Room was blinking dazedly beside the switch. The others in the room seemed just as dazed.

Uriel's finger was outstretched toward Solomon, his lips moving rapidly. Energy flashed through the room, brilliantly, electrically. Thunder crashed.

The lightning seemed to pour down the blade of the uprighted sword. The sword fell. There were no hands to hold it. The white robe crumpled emptily to the floor. There was no one inside them.

Solomon was gone.

I heard a door opened and the sound of running feet, but I didn't look to see what was happening. I was racing toward the altar. I gathered Ariel into my arms and kissed her and held her tight. She was crying shakily, but in a moment her arms went around me. She stopped shaking.

"Casey!" she said softly. "I knew you would save me."

"It wasn't me," I said. "It was Uriel."

I half-turned. Uriel was standing beside us, smiling mildly, looking pleased. Otherwise, the room was empty; the others had fled.

"It was mainly trickery," he said, grinning sheepishly. "To confuse Solomon." He opened his hand. There was a pencil flashlight in it. "That was the beam of light. I used a phosphorescent dye on the clothes, and by hypnosis induced the young man by the light switch to smuggle in an ultraviolet projector. The most difficult job was immobilizing La Voisin." He shuddered. "A most violent woman."

"What about Solomon?" Ariel asked, shivering as she turned to the crumpled white robe.

"Oh, he's gone," Uriel said cheerfully. "Where, I haven't the slightest idea. But he won't be back. I hated to do it, but he would insist on forcing his warped ideas onto formless energy. Now that he's gone, his simulacrum in Washington will die in a few days. A very neat ending for public consumption, although something of a puzzle to the doctors, I'm afraid." He looked at me approvingly. "Those bullets were very helpful. They distracted him at a crucial moment."

"They didn't seem to do much damage," I said puzzledly. "Of course, they weren't silver, and they didn't have his name on them."

"Wouldn't have helped if they were," Uriel said. "In those clothes I think you'll find what was called in my day a bulletproof vest. He always liked to play both sides."

"You gave us a scare, though," Ariel said. "We thought you were captured."

I turned quickly and raced to the bedroom door. "My God, yes!" Uriel was still standing there in the darkness. I looked back and forth between the two. "But, what —?"

"Solomon wasn't the only one who could manufacture simulacra. I let him take this one, and he didn't even wonder why it was so easy. He had a bad habit of underestimating his opposition. But, I'd better get rid of this."

He muttered something under his breath. The image disappeared.

I sighed. "Now we can forget the whole thing."

"Forget!" Uriel exclaimed. "Dear me, no. The Art is still valid. It must be given to the world."

“But — but,” I spluttered, “that would be like telling everybody how to make atom bombs in their basement!”

“Knowledge can never be suppressed, young man,” Uriel said sternly. “Common understanding is the finest safeguard. Of course, there are some finishing touches that are necessary. Oh, dear me, yes. I must be going. There is so much to be done.”

He nodded happily at us and trotted out of the room.

I turned to Ariel in bewilderment. She had slipped back into her torn clothing. She fumbled behind her back, looking at me over her shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Casey,” she said. “He’ll be putting finishing touches on his theory for years. Fasten this, will you?”

I fastened it, and it seemed very commonplace and marital, but it sent shivers running up and down my arms, and this time it wasn’t terror.

“I wonder what my life will be like,” I said, bending down to kiss the soft hollow between her throat and her shoulder, “when I’m married to a witch.”

She took a deep breath and leaned her head against mine. “It’s a good thing you said that. Because you haven’t any choice. From now on you’re going to be a faithful, submissive husband.”

“Why?” I asked uneasily.

“Because,” she said, twisting around to press herself against me, “I know your real name.”

I sighed and resigned myself to my fate. After all, every man marries a witch, whether he knows it or not.

And one kind of witchcraft is pretty much like another.

AFTERWORD. I hadn’t noticed until now the similarity between the endings of *The Magicians* and “*The Reluctant Witch*,” but maybe it’s understandable: romantic comedies have only one ending.

Only a couple of years ago, Eugene Gold, Horace’s son, published an illustrated edition of “*Sine of the Magus*.”

Back in 1976 I published a novel-length expansion of the story. It was the third installment of my four-book contract with Scribner’s. My relationship with Scribner’s had begun back in 1972 with *The Listeners*. A new editor at Scribner’s, Norbert Slepyan, had launched a new science-fiction line there. Slepyan made a good beginning, with a substantial group of novels that included Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Lathe of Heaven*, but left after a couple of years, and the science-fiction program died before it got well started.

I was fond of my association with Scribner’s, not only because its old-line tradition but its fine old offices above its Fifth Avenue bookstore, before Scribner’s was sold like so many other traditional firms. In those days (no more) its offices, up an old elevator to the fifth floor into oak-paneled rooms, looked the way book-struck authors always thought editorial offices ought to look. There was even an elderly secretary at a desk just outside the elevator to take the names of guests, and a library in the center of the offices, with easy chairs and shelves lined with books by Scribner’s authors such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. That was good company.

I went back after Slepyan left and met with Burroughs Mitchell, who had been the replacement for the

legendary Maxwell Perkins. Mitchell was in his later years then but he listened well, and I persuaded him of my thesis that science fiction was at its best in the shorter lengths. Scribner's signed me to a four-book contract, which included *Some Dreams Are Nightmares* (the novelettes and short novels that had begun *Station in Space*, *The Joy Makers*, and *The Immortals*) and *The End of the Dreams* (the short novels that had concluded those novels). *The Magicians* was the third novel in the contract. The fourth book, a collection of stories, I canceled. Mitchell had retired and support at Scribner's for my writing had retired with him.

My only regret about the publications of *The Witching Hour* and *The Magicians* was that the publishers of all the editions involved never understood that these were romantic comedies. All of them played up the satanic aspects rather than the Thorne Smith romps that I intended.

Maybe it was the influence of *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary's Baby*, the two best-selling books I had tried to satirize in the expansion of *The Magicians* into a novel!

Biography

James Gunn

James Gunn has worked as an editor of paperback reprints, as managing editor of Kansas University alumni publications, as director of K.U. public relations, as a professor of English, and now is professor emeritus of English and director of the Center for the Study of Science Fiction. He won national awards for his work as an editor and a director of public relations. He was awarded the Byron Caldwell Smith Award in recognition of literary achievement and the Edward Grier Award for excellence in teaching, was president of the Science Fiction Writers of America for 1971-72 and president of the Science Fiction Research Association from 1980-82, was guest of honor at many regional SF conventions, including SFeracon in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, and Polcon, the Polish National SF convention, in Katowice; was presented the Pilgrim Award of SFRA in 1976, a special award from the 1976 World SF Convention for Alternate Worlds; a Science Fiction Achievement Award (Hugo) by the 1983 World SF Convention for Isaac Asimov: *The Foundations of Science Fiction*; and the Eaton Award in 1992 for lifetime achievement; was a K.U. Mellon Fellow in 1981 and 1984; and served from 1978-80 and 1985-present as chairman of the Campbell Award jury to select the best science-fiction novel of the year. He has lectured in Denmark, China, Iceland, Japan, Poland, Romania, Singapore, Sweden, Taiwan, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union for the U.S. Information Agency.